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Letters

On the Arts and Judaism

Unlocking the Latent Voice of Our Culture

To the Editor:

I write with great appreciation for the Fall 1995 *Reconstructionist*, "Kaplan and Us." It has been a while since I have read a periodical that contained so many compelling, well-argued, and, at times, gutsy articles in one issue. *Yasher koah*.

As a rabbi and musical composer who is interested in the place of the arts in Judaism, I appreciated the inclusion of Jo Milgrom's fine article. She correctly represents the rabbinic attitude towards representation of images as ambivalent rather than definitively negative (as the Torah appears to be). This reflects the real dilemma of a tradition that calls upon people not to create plastic forms, when being human means that we must and will.

Milgrom supports her point with an allusion to Arnold Schoenberg's opera, "Moses und Aron." In the opera, the two brothers serve as metaphors for each side of the ambivalence about creating plastic forms. Milgrom's message that the arts are crucial to Jewish life would be underscored by a reading of the final act of the opera, for which Schoenberg never created music to set his libretto!

In this act, since there is no music, every character seems to become implicitly like Moses, champions of the

abstract idea. But here Schoenberg injects his critique. In the midst of a struggle between Moses and Aaron, Aaron rebukes his brother, calling Moses's fixation on abstraction the ultimate idolatry.

As I read it, Schoenberg is telling us that while abstraction may be a theoretical ideal, it fails to address human reality. To express oneself in concrete and expressive forms is a part of what makes us human. Just as individuals thrive best when expressive, so too the arts can unlock the latent voice of our culture, opening its embedded richness for all to explore.

Robert Gluck
Sheffield, MA.

Letters to the Editor should be sent in both hard copy and on 3.5" diskettes. They may be abridged due to considerations of space.

FROM THE EDITOR

There can be no personal salvation so long as injustice and strife exist in the social order; there can be no social salvation so long as the greed for gain and the lust for domination are permitted to inhibit the hunger for human fellowship and sympathy in the hearts of men

— Mordecai M. Kaplan (1936)

At the 1995 Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association convention, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum led a workshop on how synagogues can take a holistic approach to social and political action. She proposed that any issue that a synagogue or havurah community wants to address be approached in four complementary ways: through ritual, education, direct service, and political advocacy. Take, for example, the scourge of breast cancer. How to respond most effectively? Synagogues could include, she proposed, a healing circle in every service, where prayers for healing might be recited. A complementary educational program could teach Jewish practices about visiting and blessing the sick. A caring committee can be organized to make sure the needs of the sufferers and their family members are met. All of this prayer, teaching, and caring will be incomplete, she argued, if the social action committee of the congregation does not also organize letter-writing campaigns to make sure that public monies are spent on research into the causes of breast cancer and into new ways to prevent and cure the disease.

Her model provides the paradigm for this issue of *The Reconstructionist: "Tikkun Nefesh/Tikkun Olam: Toward Healing and Justice."* Said another way, what ails us as individuals is also what ails our society. Social justice has long been a prominent concern of the Jewish community; more recently, development of resources for spiritual healing has begun. The Reconstructionist movement is eager to promote a dialogue between those involved in the work of healing and those involved in the pursuit of justice. In the words of the prophet Malachi, "To you who fear My Name, the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in its wings" (3:19).

A full essay could be written about each of the two Hebrew phrases we have chosen for the title of this issue. *Tikkun olam* is the more common, though its current connotation of acts promoting social justice is of quite recent vintage. In the "*Tikkun Olam* Guidelines" of Reconstructionist congregation Adat Shalom, the *mitzvah* of *tikkun olam*, it is said,

obliges us to help alleviate hunger, homelessness, disease, ignorance, abuse, and political oppression among all people. In addition, we have a responsibility to preserve the health of the global eco-system upon which all life depends.

In early rabbinic usage, *tikkun olam* is used in the Mishnah to provide a justification for a class of legislative innovations (concerning divorce, lending

money at interest, negotiating with pirates, liability of physicians) undertaken for the sake of *tikkun ha-olam*, that is, “for the common good.” In our liturgy, in the *Aleynu*, the phrase is used to refer to a world swept free of idolatry, united under the rule of the Almighty (*letaken olam bemalkhut Shaddai*). Reconstructing the idea in our time, we testify to our continuing Jewish search for what constitutes the common good and our commitment to bringing that good to pass.

Several authors in this collection refer to the Kabbalistic reworking of the idea of *tikkun* in the hands of sixteenth-century Rabbi Isaac Luria and his students. It signifies an act, usually in the realm of ritual observance, whose intended effect is to repair the brokenness of the cosmos on a metaphysical level. Several centuries after Luria in hasidic literature, this led to the idea of *tikkun ha-nefesh*, an individual act of penance, which could repair the cosmic consequences of sin and personal brokenness. Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav uses the phrase *tikkun nefesh* for acts that bring psychological health. Just as *tikkun olam* has taken on new life in the Jewish community, so we offer the term *tikkun nefesh* as a candidate for broader reconstruction. By juxtaposing the two terms, we mean to highlight the work of repair in which Jews are engaged on all levels and to give a framework that can unify our diverse energies for *tikkun* in common purpose.

About Future Issues

On February 14, 1996, our beloved teacher Judith Kaplan Eisenstein passed away. Though lovingly known in our movement as daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and wife of Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, she will be most significantly remembered by the Jewish people as a noted musicologist, whose teaching over a span of fifty years at JTS, HUC, and RRC helped to shape generations of Jewish professionals’ knowledge of Jewish music, both as teachers and performers. We plan to dedicate an issue on Jewish arts and Jewish creativity to her memory.

The fall 1996 issue of *The Reconstructionist* will be devoted to “New Intellectual Currents.” In this issue, the journal will feature new developments in the areas of science, social science and humanities, which we feel can be applied to our understanding of religion in general and of Judaism in particular. It promises to be an extraordinary gathering of significant ideas.

Finally, we want to let you know that a discussion guide is available for each issue of *The Reconstructionist*, beginning with Volume 60, no. 2, “Kaplan and Us.” Write to the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation for a copy and let us know in what ways you (and your study partners) find it useful.

From Healing to Justice

BY SIDNEY H. SCHWARZ

Most of my professional life I have alternated between directing institutions whose main objective was the work of *tikkun olam* and working as a rabbi in congregations in which personal healing has been an overriding theme. Today, I juggle twin commitments. I head a national educational foundation whose main objective is to bring a Jewish values perspective to the conduct of public policy. I also serve as the rabbi of a fast-growing Reconstructionist congregation. In large measure, this unorthodox job-sharing arrangement grows out of my own sense that important work needs to be done in both spheres of Jewish life. While I used to feel that these two worlds were far apart, sharing little but their Jewish character, I now see that they are part of an organic whole that we need to work hard at integrating.

The Communal Perspective

In the contemporary Jewish community, both the healing and justice agendas have their own distinct set of agencies and organizations whose primary task it is to advance those con-

cerns. In the realm of healing, the Jewish community has established and maintained hospitals for the sick, old age homes for the infirm and social service agencies for the troubled. One can also point to a universe of secular Jewish organizations whose primary agenda is to make an impact on public policy or to provide some kind of direct relief to those suffering from lack of food, clothing or shelter. While the healing agencies generally target local populations, the justice agencies are active both on the local front and with governmental and non-governmental agencies whose reach is global.

All these agencies are currently facing a threat to their long term viability. As community after community completes internal long range planning, the interest in Jewish continuity tends to put the highest priority on agencies that promote Jewish learning and education. Because of flat or declining community campaigns, this means that we are faced with an unfortunate triage between promoting learning or promoting doing. In the Talmud when Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiba argued about the relative

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importance of learning or doing, Akiba favored learning because it was likely to lead to doing. But who could criticize Tarfon's call to action? We know that we must be Jews committed to learning without turning our backs on the real needs of people.

The trend in the American Jewish community over the past twenty years has been to cut free the hospitals, old age homes and social service agencies from the federated campaign, leaving them to move toward a fee-for-service arrangement. With government sources of funding about to dry up, these agencies are facing tremendous challenges. The social justice and community relations agencies have not done that much better at making a case for themselves, especially in light of the fact that there appears to be a fair amount of duplication among local and national agencies.

One can learn a great deal about a given community's priorities by following the trail of dollars. And so it is ironic that in the face of these downward funding trends, we have seen several significant new organizations burst onto the communal scene from the ground up, signaling a tenacity of commitment to healing and justice from the Jewish grassroots, which is nothing short of spectacular. While Federation campaigns are stagnant, organizations such as Mazon, Jewish Fund for Justice, American Jewish World Service and New Israel Fund report steadily rising revenues for their respective missions. Recently, the community has witnessed the emergence of yet another new organi-

zation—The National Center for Jewish Healing. It will be interesting to see if this new group will be able to identify a market sector of Jews as committed to the healing agenda as the above mentioned organizations have done with Jews committed to social justice.

It is important to note that major financial support has been provided to many of these newer groups by the Jewish Life program of The Nathan Cummings Foundation, headed by Rabbi Rachel Cowan. Rabbi Cowan's progressive vision of Jewish life, supported by Foundation president, Charles Halpern, understands that major pockets of Jews, overlooked by the mega-agencies that run Jewish life, can find pathways into Judaism through the channels of healing, social justice and spirituality. Those who are even minimally active in any of these new groups know how true this is.

The Synagogue Orbit

Anyone who cares about Jewish life should applaud these emerging pockets of Jewish energy. At the same time, I think that we need to be alert to the danger of creating large groups of Jews who mobilize around one agenda item and who, potentially, miss the forest for the trees. Today we have "Healing Jews" and "Justice Jews," "Federation Jews" and "Zionist Jews," "Eco-Jews," "Buddhist Jews," "Gay and Lesbian Jews" and "Feminist Jews." The list could go on.

I know these pockets of Jews. I spend time with many of them. I

admire their passion and their commitment to their issues. I also find the ideological tests within each sector suffocating. Many of the Jews most active in these realms are (to use the Hebrew expression) *meshugah ladavar*, obsessed with their issue. I view the phenomenon (to pirate a recent book title) as a kind of “tribalization of the Jewish people.”

My concern stems from the perception that there is all too little interaction between these various sectors of Jewish life. Because I think each has something valuable to contribute to the complex mosaic that makes up contemporary Jewish civilization, I think that we must accept the challenge to try to weave each of these “tribes” into the fabric of the Jewish community. I believe that only the synagogue can accomplish this, but it is an extraordinarily difficult task. Let me illustrate.

I have pockets of each of the above named Jewish tribes in my congregation. It is very hard to satisfy each tribe that the synagogue is sufficiently sympathetic to its agenda. The “Zionist Jews” have complained that I don’t spend enough time talking about Israel. But after a recent UJA Shabbat at which I invited a speaker to speak about Israel and the Federation campaign, one of my “Justice Jews” shared with me the feeling that the entire presentation was politically reactionary. My “Political Jews” would be happy if I spent every Shabbat on a new cause that had an organization to be joined or a rally to attend. But they roll their eyes when we invite all those

people who want a blessing (*misheberakh*) for themselves or a loved one who is sick in body or spirit to come to the bimah, join arms and sing a healing prayer.

Creating Whole Jews

I believe that it is the task of every rabbi and congregation to create whole Jews. To do so requires that the synagogue be inclusive enough to attract Jews who have one particular interest. An effective synagogue and rabbi will then help such a person fill in the gaps in their Jewishness and understand the other agendas. To entice Jews to embrace new dimensions of Jewish experience requires that we present such new agendas as complementary to, not competitive with their initial concerns.

There is a lot of work to be done to get our various tribal Jews into synagogues. Most of the Jews I meet in secular Jewish organizations find something missing in their Jewish lives, but their various attempts to find synagogues are invariably disappointing. For such Jews to make the jump from secular Jewish involvement to a religious lifestyle is not easy. It requires meeting these Jews “where they are,” even though we should not be content to let them just stay there. Unfortunately, most synagogues do not offer enough familiar touchstones to draw in such Jews.

I was recently at a social gathering with about fifteen other rabbis, mostly affiliated with the Conservative movement. I had just finished reading Rodger Kamenetz’s, *The Jew in the*

Lotus and was talking about the Buddhist-Jews in my congregation. Not one of the rabbis was familiar with the phenomenon! On the same evening, one rabbi of a thousand family synagogue said that he was unaware of any gay Jews in his congregation. Needless to say, not many Jews who have explored alternate religious paths will find themselves comfortable in such synagogues. Nor is it likely that a homosexual Jew will feel welcomed in a place where there is little sensitivity to his/her concerns or life choices.

A Personal (Rabbinic) Perspective

Over the years of my rabbinate, I have come to appreciate the extent to which people's lack of physical, mental and spiritual wholeness can serve as barriers to the larger agenda of Judaism and the Jewish people that I would like to represent. However much I might want to balance out the interests of Jews who come to my congregation, if they are in pain, they will not hear my message about Shabbat, or Israel, or the homeless.

The educational foundation that I head, The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, recently published along with the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, a curriculum entitled, *Jewish Civics: A Tikkun Olam/World Repair Manual*. Because we are piloting it in several communities, I monitored the classroom reaction to the book. One of the teachers told me that he could not get the class the least bit interested in *tikkun olam*, when most of them

had personal issues that were so emotionally taxing that they were literally driven to distraction. Some were from divorced or divorcing families, and some were substance abusers; others were depressed and/or suicidal. Welcome to the world of the new Jewish teen!

How do we address the concerns that lie so heavily on the hearts and souls of so many Jews? As with many rabbis, I am in constant agony over the many people in my congregation who are in great pain and in need of pastoral support. While we have gone to great lengths to mobilize the community to respond to people in need, the rabbi's presence or non-presence often becomes an issue. Some rabbis are committed to being there for every and any member that needs pastoral attention. Other rabbis find that impossible to undertake, and they find other ways to deal with the needs of their congregants, which can be so all-consuming.

The community itself can provide a significant source of support. I am often awed at the healing power of community. There are people who come into our community with a great sense of spiritual emptiness and emotional need. It is wondrous to see how such people are embraced and taken in by the protective care of a community that has, as one of its objectives, just such acts of *gemilut hesed*. There are also times when such people do not connect with anyone and within a short period of time, they vanish. We have not been able to fill their need. Maybe it's the commu-

nity's fault; maybe it's mine; maybe it's nobody's fault.

The Rabbi as Healer

But beyond the healing power of community, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the rabbinic office does not continue to hold a mysterious power in the psyche of many people. Despite the Reconstructionist line that rabbis are (only!) teachers, I have found that there is a need and role for the rabbi as holy person and healer.

I have seen congregants convinced that my visit to their mother on her deathbed brought her out of her coma long enough to say good-bye. I have known parents convinced that my visit brought their son out of two days of delirium and dangerously high body temperatures. Similarly, a woman was convinced that my personal *mishbeberakh* with her allowed her to get pregnant after a decade of failed attempts. I don't fully understand these incidents and I hesitate to share them, because they conjure up the holy roller charlatans that give religion such a bad name. Yet they happened.

I think that such experiences point to a connection between the spiritual and physical realm of life, a connection difficult to articulate, but which has been experienced by people of all faiths for millennia. As I get older, it is becoming a much larger part of my own understanding of God.

Beyond Self

Still, I have concerns about the emerging fascination with healing.

Some years ago Rabbi Harold Schulweis coined the term the "psychological Jew." We are becoming the most analyzed generation in history and the result is a level of self-absorption that strikes me as un-Jewish. While everyone is busy getting in touch with their pain—past, present and future, both real and imagined—the world is falling apart. As much as our synagogues must be places where people in pain can be heard and comforted, they must also be places that challenge people to confront and respond to the suffering in our societies.

We live in a world in which 20 million people are refugees, victims of their own governments. Every day 40,000 children die from starvation-related illnesses. Thousands of champions of human rights are currently in prison, many subject to torture. The Cold War has given way to ethnic wars that kill myriads. The most affluent society in history turns its back on over half a million people who live in the streets of our cities. These are realities of the world we live in. It doesn't make the personal pain of individuals any easier to bear. It does however, put it into a perspective that we ignore at our own peril.

We must begin to make a connection between *tikkun olam* and *tikkun ishi*, the healing of the world and the healing of ourselves. There are people who will start their spiritual journey at either side of the continuum and may find it difficult to appreciate other equally real needs. The social activist can be so busy healing the world that s/he is unaware that his/her life and/or

family is falling apart. The person who is being helped to deal with pain can be so obsessed with personal healing that the cries of others in pain cannot be heard. Our synagogues should be places that both provide sanctuary to those sick in body and spirit and champion the causes for social justice. If we can help the one-dimensional Jew to see another dimension to Jewishness, we will be both responsive to their needs, and, simultaneously, helping to make them better, more whole Jews.

If a person can come to experience some healing in body, mind and spirit through relationship with holy community and holy people, might not it be possible to apply the same

“therapy” to our society? Could we not hold out as an ideal that, after a person has experienced some *tikkun ishi*, personal healing, we challenge them to work to effect *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world?

The Jewish mystical tradition suggests that the human being is a microcosm of the universe. If that is so, then it just may be possible that these two processes may be one and the same. If synagogues can become places that embrace Jews and provide them sustenance for all manner of healing, then there is also the possibility that communities of the healed can effect healing of their societies and, ultimately, the world.

Making a Difference

BY DAVID SULOMM STEIN

By graduation day, the Scottsdale (Arizona) High School class of 1974 had witnessed manifold options for social change—civil-rights marches and antiwar rallies, lettuce boycotts and Wounded Knee, Roe v. Wade and the Watergate hearings, and even “space-age” electronics. The spirit of the times inclined us toward careers based on social impact rather than on ability to make us rich. Out of this earnest, middle-class milieu, I too chose to “make a difference.” I enrolled in engineering school to improve society via technology.

Today, after being engaged with solar-energy engineering testing, national and local energy-policy analysis, anti-nuclear power organizing, research on alternatives to building power plants, tutoring, teaching “emotionally disturbed” youth, and managing a food co-op, I am working as a rabbi with a Reconstructionist congregation. The intervening two decades have taught me that “making a difference” means attending to three needs: *to heal myself, to lead others, and to practice empathy, even in the face of oppression and abuse.*

Healing Myself

“If I am Not for Myself”

To begin with, my making a difference in the world has required that *I heal myself*—the kind of spiritual and emotional healing that makes my presence bigger, bolder, and more serene.

Shortly after college, the momentum of seventeen years in a row of intensive schooling brought me, by virtue of ideology and curiosity, to dwelling in a small, soggy, borrowed tent in a rural area. There, where all my scholastic achievements meant practically nothing, I saw how rigid and stiff my behavior had become. Here was a highly trained activist who spoke in a monotone, with little idea as to who he really was or what he wanted to do. I felt so awfully empty and I longed to weep, but I literally could not remember how.

Then I came across a method of peer counseling known as co-counseling (or more formally, Re-evaluation Counseling). I was drawn to an organic elegance in its theory and practice, which included three appealing aspects: its promise of safety, its

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perspective on emotion, and its potential for healing. First, during my turn to be counseled, I could say or feel whatever came to my mind and heart; words and emotions were not judged as right or wrong. I could therefore safely begin to explore my own thoughts and feelings. (Like many people, I was raised to be a “well-behaved” child—to say only what my elders and leaders were willing to hear. But living for others’ sake had a high cost; I was no longer within hollering distance of my inner voice.)

Second, my introduction to co-counseling reassured me that the weight given to feelings—along with crying, laughing, trembling, and so on—was not meant as a surrender to emotionality. Feelings were to be felt, as a natural part of being human, and not as the basis for decisions. The point was not to feel *better*, nor to feel *good*, but rather to feel what was *really there*. The structured co-counseling setting was needed simply to counter society’s general disapproval of emotion.

Third, I was attracted by the prediction that from such opportunities to emote and to reflect, I would become less rigid, controlled, and confused. The point of expressing honest emotion, together with the resulting re-evaluation of distressing situations, was that it would lead to becoming a more integrated, self-possessed person. Growth would occur by planting oneself in the *present* and disengaging the often-painful, determined *past* from the wide-open *future*—to coin a phrase, learning to

give one’s past a vote and not a veto.

Thus began an earnest and systematic reconstruction of my authentic self, which still continues after sixteen years, using co-counseling as the main tool. During this repair effort, I have long gleefully identified with Lennon & McCartney’s lyric: “I’m fixing a hole / Where the rain gets in / And stops my mind from wandering / Where it will go.”

Unity of Purpose

So where does “making a difference” come in? Co-counseling is not a therapy that helps me “cope with” daily living; rather, it presumes that the more I recover my full humanness via the healing process, the more I act to end injustice in the world. One monthly co-counseling group that I attend asks its (white) members to notice how racism is spoiling their lives, and then we take turns challenging ourselves, “So what’s getting in the way of my eliminating racism from the world?” From facing such potent questions, I become more clear-thinking, engaged, vigorous, and adaptable. Although I used to worry that spending time on personal growth was a selfish endeavor, in fact, I have learned that “healing myself” and “fixing the world” are two sides of the same coin.

For example, the act of *being attentive* has proven as satisfying to me as *being listened to*. My decision to be empathetic coaxes me out of normal preoccupations and my chronic sense of limits and isolation. Co-counseling turns out to be a profound experience—of all my ritual practices, it is the one with the most consistent spir-

itual reward. With a kind of “instant Shabbat-mind,” I view the other person not in terms of what I need but simply as s/he really is, inherently connected to all things and beloved by the universe. The resulting connection is deeply meaningful in and of itself. To me, it serves as a model for how *tikkun olam* can be a spiritual activity. Within a few months of starting to co-counsel, I began to feel an abundant fullness: Love boiled up from within me and flowed outward, bearing acceptance, approval, and honest concern for others. This artesian spring had been stopped up for years; it was a great relief to feel loving again.

This pure spring not only refreshes me, it waters others as well. That is, my reassuring presence and caring attention seem to go far in nourishing the blossoming lives of people around me. My co-counselors especially have been able to revive from the parching effect of horrible past indignities, and then grow outward, extending their own life-giving moisture and healing shade to others.

Furthermore, the tone of my activism has shifted; I still move out into the world to make it better—but less because I think I “should,” and more because it seems the most natural thing to do. Rather than urgently saving the world, I am being my insistent and caring self.

Leading Others

The Engineering of Leverage

Since the commencement exercises on the Scottsdale High football

field—where I stood determined to “make a difference,” not only have I discovered the importance of healing myself, I have also learned about the potency of *leadership*.

After looking at how human beings organize themselves in groups, and at how things actually get done, it seems to me that the essence of leadership is *taking responsibility to see to it that some aspect of a group functions well*. It doesn't mean doing all of the work, or even all of the thinking. Leadership is a decision to be thoughtful about the progress of the group and the welfare of its members, and engaged with others so as to keep things moving in the right direction.¹

To the extent that “repairing the world” involves working with people in groups, leadership is vital to *tikkun olam*. At the same time, with regard to healing on an individual level, it is both means and end. To lead means to set aside temptation to submit to despair or lethargy. To lead means to reorganize oneself around a commitment to help in some way to make the world right.

Nothing has propelled me to be at my best, even to transcend myself, as have my various decisions to lead. Human beings were created to lead: to think holistically, to exercise judgment, to engage, to inspire. What can be more fulfilling or meaningful than being “a force to be reckoned with”?

Judicious Application

I have tried to make my leadership commitments while keeping in mind that the best leadership settings are those that accelerate my personal heal-

ing. They propel me a few steps beyond the limits imposed by fear or despair from my past.

For example, I have been a volunteer mediator for a community dispute-settlement program. Mediation, which has a vital role to play in resolving social conflict, works by calmly presuming that conflict is natural and that each party can—and should—express his/her own viewpoint and emotions. In other words, mediation works in contrast to the lessons of my childhood domestication—in which conflict was bad, my wishes were often discounted, and key expressions of autonomy were punished.

As a mediator, my very presence has made a difference. With me around, a symbol of the hope of reconciliation, folks who haven't been on speaking terms find the courage to begin talking again; people who had been brawling dare to sit around a table with civility. Meanwhile, after affirming that each party will be heard—and then watching parents and their grown children lower their defenses enough to actually listen to each other—I come to accept that my own opinions have a rightful place in the cosmos. And after pointing out a divorcing couple's areas of agreement, to keep things moving as they iron out a property settlement, I now feel less of a pull to force my own will on others.

My inner *tikkun* continues while I work as a rabbi. Currently I help congregants to develop an authentic Judaism by uncovering their inner voices; as I dare to talk out loud with

them about spirituality, my own authentic voice grows clearer, and I trust it increasingly. And even now, as I write this article about “making a difference,” I get to confront my own sense of despair (which lingers from those times in early childhood when nothing I said or did seemed to matter).

Just as personal growth is an ingredient in “making a difference,” so too is being a leader part of my recipe for growth. How so? Soon after I am called to stretch myself in the heat of leadership, a co-counseling session often provides the pot in which I can bubble (stirring as needed), until some of the lingering pain from the past evaporates—leaving me ready to extend myself still further.

Practicing Empathy

Redemption From Bondage

This stretching calls to mind the third aspect of what I've learned about “making a difference:” how to handle abuses of power. In this realm, we must take a harmonizing God's eye view and venture beyond the dichotomies of blame and vindication, guilt and innocence, perpetrator and victim. In our Talmud, it is the famous insight of Berurya bat Hananiah: root for the sinner, while condemning the sin.²

Conventional wisdom holds that it's better to be a victim than a perpetrator. (In a true Talmudic spirit, I must also report that “some say it's better to be a perpetrator than a victim.”) But it's a false choice; ultimately, in the bigger picture, we are on the

same side. When abuse or oppression takes place, everyone suffers.

At times we all feel protective of our status as victims. (Just think of how jealously Jews guard the “uniqueness” of the Holocaust.) I myself have often found it darned uncomfortable to give up the treasured perception that Jews are surrounded by enemies ready to either attack or abandon us. Ironically, when I do so, feelings surface — feelings that bear the pain of my own victimization as a child, at the hands of my devoted *Jewish* parents.

In my case, it appears that my well-meaning father, who at age nine had left Vienna as a refugee from Hitler, unknowingly helped me to embark on my own internal exile at the same age. I know many other Jews who as children were less respected at times by Jews than by Gentiles. (I think this was true even for my father.) Often the adults’ intent is to train children to succeed in an unforgiving world that periodically targets Jews; what the young person learns is to see her/himself as an undeserving outsider—amidst deep despair.

Young children rarely get to acknowledge the sad and terrifying aspects of their upbringing—it makes grown-ups feel too uneasy. They are trained to store away the lingering hurt, hiding it even from their conscious selves. And the older they get, the harder it is to grieve, for society labels as “crazy” any intense feelings that seem unconnected to the present.

As adult Jews, to project evil outward onto Gentiles (right-wing Chris-

tians, skinheads, the Nation of Islam, Arabs, etc.) is therefore tempting; it brings relief from hidden pain—but no true healing. To actually begin the *tikkun* means to take responsibility for *feeling* the pain, and stop blaming others for it. It means daring to believe—in the face of what we thought we learned as desperate victims—that the childhood hurt was real and that other people actually care. And until we move beyond a victim identity, we remain prisoners of our past.

Encoded Messages

When I manage to give up being a victim, I come to see that abuses of power and privilege in our society occur for the very same reason that people assert victimhood: because we cannot yet face how we ourselves were once deeply hurt. That is, to the extent that human beings cause pain to others, it is the re-enactment of an earlier experience of abuse, from which healing was never allowed. It is an unconscious way of saying, “An outrage was done to me; I had nowhere to turn for comfort, and I am still seeking affirmation of the damage that was done!”

One implication of this view is that abuse or oppression³ is not really “about” the declared target at all. Spousal battering, for instance, has nothing whatsoever to do with what the victim said or did. In sexism—as in other “isms”—simple differences among human beings (appearance, culture, or status) are a symbolic pretext, merely a lightning rod for the stored-up abuse.

Antisemitism, looked at in this way, implies revealing things about those who espouse it. For example, people who claim that “Jews are rich and powerful” are probably telling us how *little* hope or power they were once granted as children. People who hate Jews have a painful story to tell, but they don’t relate it directly—even to themselves—because they’ve learned that nobody cares. However, if they couch their discontent in terms of antisemitism, they gain a bit of temporary relief: some people will at last relate to and validate their suffering. As Adolf Hitler once said, “If the Jews didn’t exist they would have to be invented.”⁴

When it comes to mistreatment, my advice is, *don’t take it personally*. Then, when confronted with an “abuser” or “oppressor,” it becomes possible for one to marshal the resources needed to move closer and directly address his/her personal pain. That is what opens hearts and changes minds. And we might even make a friend.⁵

No Enemy But Winter And Rough Weather

Being able to affirm the human struggle underneath an act of abuse or oppression appears to be a prerequisite for real *tikkun olam*. If we assume that every abuser is a person somehow trying to shake off some long-ago hurt, then our task is to assist in uncovering that struggle and in moving toward reconciliation (which means not excusing the current hurtful act).

Now if it’s true (as Judaism posits)

that human beings are innately loving and cooperative, then the *oppressor* role is a miserable part to play. But in the general rush to cast blame and shame, this gets overlooked, and can be spotted only indirectly. It’s revealed in rigid faces, constricted lives, and fantasies of escape—as reported, for example, by an American Jew who recently moved to Germany: “Ninety percent of the women I’ve met have told me they dreamed of being Jewish when they were a kid.”⁶

For there to be true *tikkun*—real healing—we must give up the comfort of blaming the privileged for the perpetuation of oppression. As rabbinic tradition teaches, even when people mistreat others, the best response is to *approach* them rather than *reproach* them.⁷ When we who wish to make a difference practice empathy for “oppressors,” then it will be far easier for people who are cast in those roles (all of us, in some fashion) to give them up.

Empathetic Intervention

Let’s say that your state legislature is weighing a bill to increase legal protections for victims of domestic violence. The women promoting the bill resent that the judiciary committee (mostly male) would even question the need for such measures. Legislators react by digging in their heels; the bill appears to lack a majority to get it out of committee. If you then happen on the scene, how do you go about promoting *tikkun olam*?

Once, I found myself in that situation. I am pleased to report that I asked the women’s-coalition lobbyist

which committee member would be the most important one to win over. With the lobbyist's assent, I met with the legislator, explaining to him that: "I support this bill. I am interested in hearing your concerns about it. Perhaps I can also address them to your satisfaction." We met and spoke intensely for an hour. As I got up to leave, he said, "You know, I appreciate your coming in. I want the laws we pass to be fair to all parties, yet the atmosphere around this bill has been such that it's been hard to raise questions about it without my being made to feel like I'm the enemy." Not only did he then support the bill's main provisions, but he also proposed a friendly amendment.*

In conclusion, "making a difference" is like a rope made of three intertwined strands: healing myself so as to be authentic, leading groups that effect *tikkun olam*, and treating "enemies" as potential allies. Although each strand is brittle and prickly, the twisted rope can be strong and smooth.

More than twenty years after high school, I suspect that *tikkun olam* comes only indirectly from what made headlines during my formative years—whether protests or prosecutors or patents. *No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it* (Deut. 30:14). A world of social justice and lasting peace is ultimately a matter of attending to ourselves and each other, in a very personal way—together.

1. I thank Harvey Jackins, founder of co-counseling, for this definition and for insights into its importance.

2. B. *Berakhot* 10a. In this section, I am indebted to: the prejudice-reduction approaches of Cherie Brown (National Coalition Building Institute) and of Ricky Sherover-Marcuse of blessed memory; Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1984); and my many teachers of nonviolence and Aikido.

3. *Oppression* is what happens whenever society excuses the targeting of a certain group. For example, sexism is what results when men are not called to account for disrespecting women. (If mistreatment is noticed at all, it is dismissed as "she deserved it" or as "teaching a lesson.") Given the reservoir of pent-up and unacknowledged hurt in every human being, the aftermath of making excuses will be repeated: systematic mistreatment—and a distorted portrayal of what members of that group are actually like. Oppression functions as a "relief valve" that leaves in place the underlying hurt that fuels it.

4. Quoted in Miller, op. cit., 166.

5. For a dramatic case study in Nebraska in 1991–2, see Kathryn Watterson, *Not By the Sword: How the Love of a Cantor and His Family Transformed A Klansman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

6. Eve Schaefer, as quoted in Dan Fesperman, "Germany Begins Effort to Shed Nazi Past, End National Preoccupation," *Baltimore Sun* (January 22, 1995), 16A.

7. *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* § 54.3; B. *Yevamot* 65b; B. *'Arakhin* 16b; Moses Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah* at Lev. 19:17. Cf. Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Judges, Laws of Courts § 22.4.

8. After the efforts of many people to promote the legislation, the committee unanimously passed the bill's key provisions, which were eventually signed into law.

Jewish Models of Self and Other: *Tzedakah* and *Gemilut Hasadim*

BY BARBARA EVE BREITMAN

I had an experience when I was twenty-two that I rarely tell anyone about. It was the year my father died. I'd moved to a strange, new city where I had neither friends nor relatives, to begin a graduate program in a Department of Religion, where I hoped to study Jewish mysticism. I was isolated and alone, cut off from significant relationships after suffering a major loss, deeply depressed and sometimes troubled by suicidal thoughts. At night I'd crawl up like a snail, and lie in the center of a mattress, on the floor of the bedroom in which I had painted a wall black.

In the spring semester, after racking up several incompletes, I signed up for a seminar on Buber and Tillich. I was grateful to be able to immerse myself in this class and to discover, finally, some meaning in my studies. For weeks I sat in the window-lined library reading room, in an encounter

with Buber and desperate to find Tillich's "Courage to Be." One warm afternoon, as I paused to raise my eyes from the page and gaze outdoors, the world dropped the veil of its corporeality and for an instant I was no longer looking at a green campus full of trees, flowers, grass, and people. The world revealed itself in gold, flickering light. Every living creature retained its shape, but appeared outlined by sparkling threads and veined by light. In that instant, a knowing entered my heart, speaking this wisdom: 'I am connected with every living creature, and every creature is connected with every other creature, all made of the same glowing stuff of life, precious and sacred, all One. All life is Holy.' A moment later, the world clothed itself once more in materiality, and the scene resumed its familiar outlines.

Somehow, at this moment of intense isolation when my connection

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with the father who had participated in giving me life was ruptured, when I was separated by emotional and physical distance from my mother and all others I had been close to, I was given a gift that reconnected me in a deep and profound way with life. I don't try to explain it. I just know the experience was as real, in fact, more real, than anything else that has ever happened to me. My sense of self was transformed and expanded; my depression significantly abated; and my interest in the relationship between religious experience and moral development quickened. Since then it has seemed self-evident to me that a deep experience of the interconnectedness of all life could only lead to a morality rooted in an acute consciousness of the sacredness of the other, from which one would naturally derive injunctions against hurting or endangering other living beings.

After two and a half years, I dropped out of graduate school. Eventually I became a psychotherapist and my study of Judaism continued as a serious avocation through my involvement in havurah and feminist Judaism. In communities grounded in Jewish tradition that took both Jewish learning and women's experiences seriously, I underwent profound changes in my experience of self, moving from a state of psychic fragmentation, spiritual alienation, and communal dislocation to a life of greater inner coherence, spiritual aliveness and communal connection. As I experienced my sense of self transformed through participation in lived com-

munity, I become increasingly interested in how cultures and genders image and shape the 'self' and how they conceptualize and transmit the values of moral behavior that guide human relationships.

The field of modern Western psychology, until recently reflecting a mostly male, white and Christian cultural ethos of 'rugged individualism,' has viewed the 'healthy and mature' self as autonomous and independent. Western psychology has defined a moral person as one who can apply concepts of abstract justice and rights in situations of human choice. Thus, an individual's capacity for detachment, objectivity and rationality is often seen as the height of moral development. Judaism, by contrast, offers concepts for moral behavior and social justice that both reflect and derive from the experience of living in face-to-face organic communities. Life in such pre-modern Jewish communities developed a vision of the self-as-connected. Mature moral agency meant responsibility in relationships, rather than independent and rationally detached behavior. While Jewish tradition certainly emphasizes and preserves the value of the individual human self, it does so while acknowledging and placing an even higher emphasis on the experience of self-as-connected and embedded in relationship with others.

Two Distinct Paths: *Tzedakah* and *Gemilut Hasadim*

Within Jewish tradition, there are two different but interrelated con-

cepts of moral action and behavior: *tzedakah* (sacred practice of charity) and *gemilut hasadim* (practice of lovingkindness). Jewish tradition distinguishes between them in several ways. One difference is already evident in the roots of the words: *tzedakah* derives from *tzedek* (justice, righteousness) and *gemilut hasadim* derives from *hesed* (steadfast love).

Charity is understood by the sages to be an obligation on the part of the donor, and a right on the part of the poor and needy. *Tzedakah* is neither discretionary nor subjective. It is a *mitzvah* (commandment) regulated by law. *Tzedakah* is an essential component in the creation of social justice. In fact, rabbinic courts could compel someone who refused to give charity, not only to give, but to give according to the court's assessment of that person's means. The rabbis defined the mechanics of this *mitzvah* according to strict and specific rules: who is obligated to give, who may receive, how much should be given, and in what manner.¹

According to the Talmudic sages, the highest form of *tzedakah* is mutually anonymous: "Which is the *tzedakah* that saves from a strange death? That in which the giver does not know to whom he has given, nor the recipient from whom he has received" (*B. Baba Batra* 10a). Anonymous giving is intended to prevent the recipient from feeling undeserved shame and the donor from feeling exaggerated pride. According to Maimonides' famous hierarchy of giving, the penultimate level of giving pre-

serves the identities of donor and recipient as secret. The most virtuous form of *tzedakah*, however, is to promote self-sufficiency, by offering employment or entering into partnership for the purposes of earning a livelihood.

The practice of *gemilut hasadim* traditionally covers a wider range of activities through which people coan embody God's *hesed*, or compassion, in their behavior toward one another.² These typically include visiting the sick, providing shelter and food for the wayfarer or the homeless, being sensitive to the needs of the disabled and caring for them, and accompanying the dead until they are lowered into the grave. *Gemilut hasadim* includes all acts of the heart, deeds flowing from the compassion of one person toward another. So important is *gemilut hasadim* as a value, it has been considered one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Jew. To deny *gemilut hasadim* as a duty is considered by the rabbis of the Talmudic era to be a rejection of Judaism.³

Gemilut hasadim is counted among those virtues for which there is no prescribed limit (*she-eyn lahem shiur*). The practice of lovingkindness is acting beyond the requirements of the law, giving of oneself through deeds without measure. "The following are things for which no definite quantity is prescribed: the corners (of the field left unreaped for the poor to glean), the first fruits (offered as a gift to the Temple), offerings brought to the Temple on the three pilgrim festivals, *gemilut hasadim*, and the study of

Torah.” (*B. Sukkot* 49b).

In the Talmud and according to Rashi, the duty to the dead was regarded as the quintessential act of *hesed* (Rashi on Genesis 47:29) because one is giving with no possibility of the gift ever being returned. During the ritual washing of the dead, members of the *hevra kadisha*, the burial society, are instructed to engage in a deep cleansing of the body of the deceased, to purify all the orifices, even to clean under the nails. There is a sacred and extraordinary intimacy and physical contact that occurs between the living and the dead. The possibility of self-transformation, a deeper understanding of mortality and the fragility of life, of vulnerability and shared humanity emerges from the experience, if this ritual preparation is done with appropriate consciousness and intention.

Complementary Images of Self in Jewish Tradition

Tzedakah and *gemilut hasadim* are related but distinct moral practices, engendering different experiences of self. *Tzedakah* assumes and promotes the existence of a separate, autonomous self, giving aid to another who is known primarily as an object of one’s charity. Maintaining a purposeful distance between donor and recipient, who never touch and never meet, *tzedakah* fosters an exchange of primarily material goods, leaving no opportunity for the donor or the recipient to be changed by the encounter with the other, no opportunity or necessity for empathy. At the

same time, the obligatory nature of *tzedakah* recognizes the necessity for each individual to fulfill the social contract of caring for one another. It demands that each Jew commit to a sacred code of economic and social justice, including regular redistribution of material resources.

Gemilut hasadim, however, involves not only a giving of one’s material wealth; it involves giving oneself. The desired anonymity between donor and recipient, so meticulously prescribed in the giving of *tzedakah*, does not apply at all in this realm. Because the exchange is more than material, the giving can cross over class lines: the poor may have as much to give to the rich, as the rich to the poor. It is an offering of self that also can transcend the boundaries between life and death. The Talmud explains as follows that *gemilut hasadim* can be “superior” to *tzedakah*:

In three ways is *gemilut hasadim* superior to *tzedakah*. Charity can be done only with one’s money; *gemilut hasadim* can be done with one’s person and one’s money. Charity can be given only to the poor; *gemilut hasadim*, both to rich and poor. Charity can be given only to the living; *gemilut hasadim* can be done to the living and to the dead” (*B. Sukkot* 49b).

How are we to understand this passage? The rabbis seem to be saying that while the giving of *tzedakah* is imperative, it is not enough; the empathic meeting between people is essential to the fully ethical life. The

intention of *gemilut hasadim* is precisely for the boundary between self and other to be bridged, for people to meet as subjects, for the experience of self to be enlarged by moral action.

Empathy is essential to gemilut hasadim. It is not necessary for tzedakah.

Both *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* are forms of moral action that derive from the intensely communal experience of Jews. Both repair the world by helping people in need. Both assert and insist upon people taking responsibility for one another in collective life. But they differ in how they affect the experiencing self and alter the relationship between self and other. We are heir to two complementary but different concepts of moral behavior: a concept of moral action based on justice, autonomy and sacred obligation and a concept of moral action grounded in a relational experience of self that requires an ever deepening capacity for empathy.

Jews in North America have developed elaborate mechanisms and institutions for fund-raising and the distribution of charity in ways that have perpetuated the tradition of *tzedakah*, by accommodating it to a Western cultural emphasis on the separate individual who gives and who receives. But *tzedakah* was never meant to be the sole expression of charitable or moral action for the Jew. At our peril, we neglect the opportunity for self-transformation that is possible through the practice of *gemilut hasadim*. We have all but forgotten the centrality of *gemilut hasadim* to

being a Jew.

A Contemporary Vision of *Gemilut Hasadim*

In tight-knit, self-regulating communities, Jews bonded together for survival, creating a network of social welfare institutions to care for one another: societies to collect alms for the poor, to bury the dead, to visit the sick. Both *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* were models of moral action grounded in organic communities. The challenge of our generation is to revive these institutions in Jewish communities and to apply these concepts to diverse groups of people, thereby deepening our empathy for those different than ourselves.

Our definitions of community have changed dramatically since earlier times. In some ways our community, the social matrix in which our lives is embedded, has expanded; in others ways it has contracted. In an open, democratic society, many of us live in neighborhoods with people who are not Jewish, belong to communal and social organizations with non-Jews, and count among our friends, people who are not Jewish. We also participate in the oft-cited global village. On the other hand, living in an excessively privatized culture, in which traditional forms of community have all but broken down, we live "in community" only if we have made concerted efforts with others to consciously and conscientiously reconstitute some form of communal life.

Even in this democratic and diverse society, most of us spend our lives in

groups of people deemed similar to ourselves. Most white people do not visit the homes of black families on the grounds of friendship. Many heterosexual parents are reluctant to allow their children to become close friends with the children of lesbian or gay parents. Most Christians have not set foot in a synagogue, and most suburban dwellers have not walked the streets of the inner city. Most hearing people do not make the effort to include deaf people among their friends. Even young and old are often segregated from one another.

Social observers have written extensively about how the atomized, privatized nature of American social life fragments the self. We suffer from loneliness and depression, existential ennui and political lethargy. In acculturating to the highly individualistic ideology of Protestant Christian culture, we have cut ourselves off from the deeply communal experiences at the core of the Jewish way of life. Both Judaism and feminism share a commitment to life lived in community and understand that the process of becoming whole can only occur in mutual, caring relationship with others.⁴ Taking seriously the practice of *gemilut hasadim* has the power to reclaim and transform the contemporary Jewish self. Restoring *gemilut hasadim* to its proper place as a "pillar of the world" (*M. Avot* 1:2), equal in importance to *Torah* and *avodah* (worship), has the power to transform our communities.

What It Takes, What It Will Bring

As a member of Mishkan Shalom, an activist Reconstructionist congregation in Philadelphia, Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, a rabbi and teacher at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, has organized a web of caring people in the congregation to reawaken "*gemilut hasadim* consciousness." In this endeavor, she had to encourage people to alter their sense of boundaries before even beginning the work of *gemilut hasadim*. Having internalized the value of privacy, members of the congregation had to be convinced they were not being intrusive, that they were not barging into another's home when they visited a grieving family after the death of someone they did not know well. The volunteers experienced a conceptual breakthrough once they understood that they constituted a *minyan*, a quorum for prayer services, necessary to enable the bereaved to say *kaddish* at home instead of in synagogue. At least initially, people needed the *torah* of obligation to lower boundaries and create the possibility for empathy. The human contact Nancy's efforts helped to foster gradually contributed to a change in community consciousness, making acts of *gemilut hesed* an integral part of the communal fabric and enabling members of the congregation to bridge differences of various kinds through empathy and caring.²

Within our Jewish communities, if we were to do only one thing, re-establish the *hevra kadisha*, the society

organized to bury the dead, our experience of self and the fabric of communal life would be profoundly altered. My own experience as a member of a *hevra kadisha* for two women friends has convinced me of this. The experience deeply affected not only my sense of self, but also connected me in a bond of spiritual sisterhood with the other women who prepared the bodies for burial. Sharing the dying process with these friends, holding their hands as the warmth drained away, making skin to skin contact with their bodies after they died, I was brought into direct relationship with the mystery formed by the thin membrane that separates life and death. I had a visceral experience of the extent to which our denial of death in American culture is related to our illusion of separateness.

Applying *gemilut hasadim* to our extended community has other profound moral and political implications. Just as *gemilut hasadim* was traditionally seen to bridge the gulf between rich and poor, so too it can stimulate empathy and an exchange of self between different races, genders, people of differing sexual orientations and abilities. Such interchange should be central to a contemporary reinterpretation of the concept.

For several years, I worked as the white member of a bi-racial team attempting to promote racial understanding between teachers in an urban, desegregated school. I was humbled in the face of how difficult it is for people of different races to develop empathy for each others'

experiences, particularly, how difficult it is for white Americans to understand and empathize with the suffering of African-Americans. In the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict, which showed how many white people were capable of denying what we saw with our own eyes, I was reminded of chilling scenes from the movie "*Shoah*," in which concentration camp guards denied that Jews were murdered in the camps and insisted we were the ones to spread rumors of our own extermination in order to incriminate innocent Germans. In the aftermath of the O. J. Simpson verdict, we are further confronted with how little we really know about each other's experiences of the world.

To have empathy for the pain of others, *especially empathy for pain we have had a part in causing*, we must be capable of facing the evil in ourselves. We must acknowledge our capacity to hurt others, and also be able to forgive ourselves for it. If we are too self-punitive, we cannot allow ourselves to know we have caused harm and take responsibility for the hurting we do. Then we need to split off the 'evil' in ourselves and project it onto others. Empathy leads us to reclaim the split-off parts of ourselves.

Racism, antisemitism, homophobia, sexism are ideologies that so objectify the other as to totally block our capacity to see and experience someone different as a being like ourselves. The practice of *gemilut hasadim* in our extended community requires that we "reconstitute the objectified other as a subject."³ Every time we

expand ourselves to include the experience of someone (seemingly) different, his or her joy as well as pain, we transform and expand ourselves. We do not just add the other to our understanding and experience of self; we reintegrate a fragmented, split-off part of our souls. We break through the denial of our ultimate and inexorable interconnectedness. If all human beings have been created *betzelem elohim* (in God's own image), then, even in the most distant and different other, we must be able to recognize the self.

Preserving the Planet

In transcending the boundaries between living and dead, *gemilut hasadim* embraces concern for generations still to be born, as well as care for those who have died. In this way, empathy expands to include the natural world and her non-human creatures so necessary to the preservation of the earth for future generations. Robert Jay Lifton, the renowned psychiatrist and anti-nuclear activist, has named an emerging image the "species self." Among humans living under the threat of global annihilation and species suicide, Lifton sees a new consciousness emerging, "a self-concept inseparable from other human selves in sharing with them the ultimate questions of life and death" on the planet.

Simeon the Just teaches that the world stands, or implicitly topples, on three pillars: *Torah, avodah, and gemilut hasadim* (*M. Avot* 1:2). I understand this to mean that in no small

measure the continued existence of the world depends on our expanding capacity for empathy, ever broadening, with no prescribed limit, to include wider and wider circles of diverse others within the experience of our own selfhood. The only way to develop that empathy is to have direct experiences with those others. We must bridge social, economic, cultural, psychological distances, enter into relationships with those who are seemingly different and be willing to 'meet' them.

Moral behavior, politics or social action grounded in empathy is different than social action guided by justice. *In an unredeemed world, we need both.** We cannot rely on the achievement of empathy alone to make progress in the arena of social and economic justice. We need a sense of obligation to guide us. It takes time and experience with others until we can begin to feel we might know what it is to stand in their shoes. In a world as large and diverse as the one contemporary experience brings us into, we certainly cannot delay acting justly, or giving *tzedakah*, until we have empathy for everyone's experience. Sadly, it is also true that there are times when our own experiences of hurt can block our capacity to feel empathy for others. These realities do not remove the obligation to engage in *tzedakah*, to participate in sharing our material resources with others, to adhere to a principle of justice that prescribes regular redistribution of wealth and protection of basic human rights. But the survival of the world

may stand or fall on a “pillar” of just action grounded in empathy, a practice that opens our hearts to embrace ever-expanding circles of diverse people and beings in our experience of self.

A contemporary interpretation of Simeon the Just exhorts us to cultivate radical empathy. We need empathy that moves us to reclaim the fragmented parts of our collective ‘Self,’ which have been distanced by objectification: people of different races, gender, cultures, abilities and sexual orientations who were all created *be-tzelem elohim*. We need empathy for the earth and all her creatures. We need to experience the holiness of all beings, the living, the dead, and the generations still to be born.

That sense of interconnectedness was what I first experienced that afternoon in the library many years ago. Since then, I have experienced the sacred in my life primarily in relationship, in community, and in nature, not in private, radiant visions. But I stand always before the mystery of that day.

1. R. Posner, “Charity,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972), V, 343.
2. According to Judah Goldin, until the time of Simeon the Just, *gemilut hasadim* referred to any fulfillment of a divine command. Goldin believes the transformation of *gemilut hasadim* into acts of lovingkindness was Simeon’s great religious innovation. See his *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, eds. Barry Eichler and Jeffrey L. Tigay (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 28.
3. L. I. Rabinowitz, “*Gemilut Hasadim*,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972), VII, 376.
4. For a fuller discussion, see Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 76ff.
5. For a discussion of the role of the rabbi in creating caring community, see Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, “Holiness, Justice, and the Rabbinate,” in *Cross Currents* (Summer, 1992), 68-83.
6. Rachel Adler, “A Question of Boundaries: Toward a Jewish Feminist Theology of Self and Other,” *Tikkun* 6, no. 3, (1991), 44.
7. Robert J. Lifton, *The Future of Immortality and Other Essays for a Nuclear Age* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 133-135.
8. Simeon the Just’s version of the three pillars that uphold the world is paralleled by an alternate and complementary version, in the name of Rabban Simeon b. Gamliel, listing *din* (strict justice or fairness), *emet* (truth) and *shalom* (M. Avot 1:18).

Judaism and the Therapeutic

BY ANDREW R. HEINZE

The winter of 1996 is the half-century anniversary of the book that launched America's therapeutic age. It was a Jewish book, a huge best-seller by Boston's Reform Rabbi Joshua Liebman called *Peace of Mind*. The book's then provocative thesis was that people in search of spiritual meaning and growth would need to draw on both religion and dynamic psychology for the cure of their souls. This was the start of a spiritual movement that would carry Americans beyond their traditional religious doctrine and into the psychotherapeutics of self-awareness. Spiritual healing, or what had long been called the 'cure of souls,' would take old-time pastoral counseling into the new field of pastoral psychology, and it would increasingly involve innovative approaches to the old human dramas of melancholy, malaise, and mourning.

Had Joshua Liebman not died prematurely in 1948 at age 41, he would have been pleased with what his successors have done in the way of apply-

ing Judaism to spiritual healing. He would have been surprised that not only Reform and Conservative but also Orthodox rabbis would enter the stream of ecumenical inspirational writing. He would have recognized the continuing impact of Mordecai Kaplan's thought, which had been so important to his own conception of *Peace of Mind*. He would have applauded the resurgence of traditional Judaism within the modern therapeutic framework, and he would have been impressed by the creativity of those who would merge the old Jewish calendar and idiom with contemporary modes of psychological healing. Finally, he might well have realized that what would come after his time would be, like his own writing, fascinating examples of Jewish assimilation to the American milieu.

The Therapeutic Legacy of Mordecai Kaplan

The seminal connection of Judaism and "the therapeutic" was made by Mordecai Kaplan. In his classic refash-

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ioning of Jewish theology, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, Kaplan articulated a new definition of salvation. Trying to maintain the Jewish balance between individual and communal well-being expressed in Hillel's famous dictum, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?" Kaplan explained salvation as constituted by two elements: 1) "faith in the possibility of achieving an integrated personality," and 2) the ultimate achievement of a social order in which all men shall collaborate... in a manner which shall afford to each the maximum opportunity for creative self-expression."¹

The emphasis on "an integrated personality" was a new departure toward a more explicitly psychological formulation of the spiritual condition. This reflected an important trend in twentieth-century Jewish and American life, increasing concern for the personal, psychological elements of religion. By the 1920s, the immense popularity of Christian Science among Jews (by 1925 there were reportedly at least 50,000 Jews in Christian Science) indicated a profound hunger for the therapeutic aspect of faith. The Jewish Science movement, which emerged to deal with this problem, was the first coherent attempt to assert the centrality of healing within the tradition and to provide a personalized service that was oriented around the need for consolation.² In 1927, the movement's leader, Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, wrote a book titled *Peace of Mind* whose

emphasis on the religious value of psychic health made it an apt precursor to Joshua Liebman's work of the same name.³ The shift away from the social-action focus of Reform Judaism toward something more private, psychological and mysterious was a momentous and difficult one. Joshua Liebman prefaced his *Peace of Mind* with an extended apology for his decision to focus on the individual psyche instead of the collective welfare. "Certainly we must battle for a decent and just economic social order," the rabbi exclaimed, "yet in any kind of society ... men and women will have to learn how to manage ... their psychic needs and conflicts..."⁴

Aside from the formative effect of Kaplan's psychological redefinition of salvation, his rationalist and humanist theology conditioned the century's two most popular Jewish inspirational books (other than the Bible!), Liebman's *Peace of Mind* and Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981). Kaplan was a close friend of Liebman, and the primary reader of the manuscript for *Peace of Mind*, and he was an important influence on Kushner at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Kaplan's view of a God working through nature and bound by the laws of creation stamped the theology of Liebman's and Kushner's books, both of which emphasized the distinction between a mature and an immature understanding of how God works in the world. Liebman criticizes the "childish" view of God as "an Oriental monarch" who would suspend the

laws of nature in order to save people from harm. Adopting Kaplan's conception of God as "the Power for salvation revealing Himself in nature and in human nature," Liebman urges people to realize the divine stirrings within themselves by honestly reckoning with the inner fears, anxieties and morbid traits that can paralyze the spirit. This essential activity must occur within a democratic religious context, in which people view themselves as "responsible co-workers with God" rather than as helpless dependents in a "feudal" theological scheme.⁵

Rabbi Kushner's best-selling theology is an extended meditation on how people can survive spiritually in a Kaplanian universe. Condemning, as did Liebman, an older theology that posits God as the dispenser of rewards and punishments for good and bad behavior, Kushner dismisses petitionary prayer as meaningless and even dangerously conducive to disappointment and rage at God. He assures his readers that fate, not God, is responsible for inexplicable mishaps and tragedies, and he advises them to appeal to God as an empathetic partner in their suffering, so as to be strengthened to find meaning and purposefulness in their lives. Although there is a darker undertone to Kushner's theology of evil than is found in Kaplan's, he shares the view that God works through people's instincts to persevere, to console, to aid, and to maintain religious faith.⁶ In his third national best-seller, *Who Needs God* (1989), Kushner speaks

emphatically about the necessity of God for any meaningful life and draws frequently on some of the most passionately personal evocations of God in the Psalms, yet his theology remains rationalist and humanist in the Kaplan tradition. God is not so much an active presence communicating with each of us, but rather something that is "found in the incredible resiliency of the human soul."⁷

In the past few years, Jewish inspirational writing has taken a sharp turn away from rationalism and conventional expository forms. The most conspicuous departures have taken three directions, toward the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, toward Hasidism and mysticism, and toward a deeper saturation in traditional Jewish texts.

Judaism and the Twelve Steps

The influence of the Twelve Steps on contemporary Jewish inspiration provides a fine example of the complexity of Jewish assimilation in America. The Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous appeared in 1939, just as public interest in psycho-religious healing was on the rise. Alcoholics Anonymous remains an ecumenical movement relying on a firm but flexible religious faith, and it has focused sharply on spiritual healing. At its inception, no one could have imagined that the Twelve Steps concept of recovery from addiction would one day become the most powerful model of psychic healing in American society. Its applicability to Jews signaled three types of assimila-

tion. On the one hand, addiction to alcohol (and later, drugs) only appeared among Jews after they had substantially adopted popular American habits. Secondly, the Twelve Steps were deliberately designed to encompass people of various religious faiths. They emphasize a simple creed in which individuals admit that they have come to a point in their lives where they have turned themselves over to God “*as we understood Him.*”⁸ AA thus became the first explicitly non-denominational religious organization to include Jews without demanding a renunciation of Judaism. Finally, a specifically Jewish version of the AA recovery plan was developed, producing a unique blend of psycho-social therapy and traditional religion.

The highly structured spiritual program of Twelve Steps turned out to be easily compatible with Judaism. Its emphasis on a measured (“one day at a time”) self-examination, an intense accounting of the soul, bears strong resemblance to the Jewish penitential days and to Maimonides’ influential “laws of repentance” (*Hilkhot Teshuvah*). These constitute steps of self-awareness, recognition of sin, and reconciliation with both the victims of one’s transgressions and with oneself. Based on such essential similarities, Rabbi Neil Gillman has answered the question, “Are the Twelve Steps Jewish?” with a definitive *yes*.⁹ Rabbis across the spectrum of modern Judaism have made unique syntheses of the AA recovery program and the traditional Jewish calendar.

These include not only specific religious events but also the *idea* of linking religious insights to particular times of the day, week, month, and year.

The two most prolific inspirational writers to have pioneered this approach are rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky (Reform) and Abraham J. Twerski (Hasidic). Twerski’s unusual personal history illuminates the radical shifts in spiritual healing that have occurred during the past half-century. Inheritor of his father’s Hasidic pulpit in Milwaukee, Twerski was deeply impressed by the rising significance of psychology and psychiatry in the postwar years. He believed that any aspirations he had to be a spiritual guide and healer would be best realized if he mastered these suddenly popular techniques. Consequently, he earned a medical and a psychiatric degree in the 1950s, served as director of psychiatry at St. Francis hospital in Pittsburgh from 1965 to 1985, and in 1972 founded a rehabilitation center for alcoholics and drug addicts. His first exposure to AA left him with the conviction that the organization had managed to achieve an egalitarian and deeply committed communal faith that was often lacking in conventional religious congregations.¹⁰

Some of Twerski’s books, such as *Waking Up Just in Time* (St. Martin’s, 1995) are direct expositions of the Twelve Step program, written in a mass-market style without much reference to Judaism and with Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* cartoons to illustrate the text. Others, such as *Living Each*

Day (1988), published for the Mesorah ArtScroll series, combine the “one day at a time” emphasis of AA with a thoroughly Jewish meditative calendar. Starting with the first day of *Tishrey*, the page for each day of the year includes two quotations, one from traditional prayers and one from either the Scriptures or the rabbis, each one accompanied by a brief commentary of Twerski’s. The popularity of this book among people without addiction problems confirmed Twerski’s suspicion that addicts share with everyone else the same basic spiritual condition: “It is only that in the alcoholic or addict these needs are much more prominent and better defined.”¹¹

Kerry Olitzky teaches at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City and has written several books since 1991 that focus on the Twelve Step recovery program. His *100 Blessings Every Day* (1993) provides a good example of the ways in which the philosophy of AA and traditional Judaism have been combined. Unlike Twerski’s *Living Each Day*, each page of *100 Blessings* explicitly addresses the problem of recovery in the language of AA. The book integrates Judaism into the recovery program in two ways. It orients each day around a quotation from the full array of Jewish sources, as Twerski does. Secondly, it takes a creative leap into the Jewish calendar, introducing each month with a page that links it with both the seasonal cycle and with specifically Jewish historical and spiritual themes. After an

opening page listing the Twelve Steps, Olitzky explains the meaning of *Tishrey*. “The symbol for the month is a scale, reflecting the balance that the month gives our lives. And so with it we begin counting, continuing to keep our lives in balance—one day at a time—from the awe-filled days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.”¹ As each day of *Tishrey* is related to the idea of “A Fresh Start,” so does *Heshvan* suggest “Making Ready,” *Kislev*, “Freedom,” *Tevet*, “Self-Reliance,” *Shevat*, “Rebirth,” *Adar*, “Joy,” *Nisan*, “Liberation,” *Iyar*, “Independence,” *Sivan*, “Revelation,” *Tammuz*, “Living with Hope,” *Av*, “Beginning Again,” and *Elul*, “Introspection.”

Beyond this, Olitzky provides a theme for every day. For example, on 18 *Kislev* one should be mindful of “Singing God’s Song.” A quote from the Zohar is given: “The joy of the heart begets song,” and the reader is told “Everyone has a song to sing.... It is addiction that has been robbing you of your voice.” Olitzky’s suggestion “For Growth and Renewal”: “Don’t worry about what other people think. Sing out loud.... Sing unto God a new song. You’ll be glad you did.”²

Returning to a Traditional God

Although the Twelve Steps movement emerged at the same time and in much the same spirit as Joshua Liebman’s *Peace of Mind*, its emphasis on utter humility and personal surrender to God provided a basis for a very different commonality with the Jewish tradition. The human-centered optimism of Mordecai Kaplan and Joshua

Liebman conflicted with the Orthodox emphasis on God's omnipotence and human dependence. The popularity of Harold Kushner's books in recent years has shown that many Americans continue to favor the Kaplanian view, with its more abstract and limited God and its emphasis on human creativity. Yet, at the same time, one of the most significant shifts in contemporary popular theology has been toward a more traditional "God-concept." Disenchanted with the material and technological achievements of the century, disoriented by the flux, diversity and scale of modern society, and disappointed by the millennialism of the 1960s, Jews as well as other Americans have found themselves attracted by that God Who requires surrender before redemption. As Neil Gillman has pointed out, Judaism has always accommodated both a humility-based and a humanist perspective, the former emphasizing God's power and our weakness and the latter stressing human capability and God's reliance on us. The fact that many Jews have considered the theology of humility in the Twelve Steps to be alien to Jewish thought, Gillman observes, betrays their own ignorance of this dimension of Judaism.³

The recent emergence of a Jewish healing movement epitomizes the trend toward a highly personalized, humility-oriented faith. In some respects a return to the position argued by the Jewish Science Movement many decades ago, Jewish Healing focuses on direct physical cure

through divine power properly channeled, and it also emphasizes the centrality of consolation in religion. Not a fringe phenomenon, a major event of the healing movement in 1995 was a summer retreat called "Jewish Approaches to Healing," which was sponsored by the Conservative movement's Ramah Institute of New England.⁴ The Jewish Healing Centers in New York and San Francisco distribute pamphlets with strongly traditionalist messages about God and our dependence on God, while recognizing that some of the people who visit may be atheists or religiously untraditional. One such inspirational tract, titled "When The Body Hurts The Soul Still Longs to Sing," reintroduces the Jewish reader to some of the most traditional daily prayers, like those on waking, taking the first steps of the day, and going to the bathroom. Newer variations on the old petitionary and thanksgiving themes are also presented: "Please, Hashem, You are the One who heals people ... please heal me, too...." or "Blessed be God, who holds me to Her breast when I am broken and cradles me when my body and spirit ache." While the presence of both masculine and feminine pronouns to denote God reflects a shift in contemporary sensibility, the prayers in this new flowering of inspiration are striking for their almost ancient evocation of God's sovereignty.

Charting the pathways of Jewish therapeutic writing across the twentieth century, we discover at the end of that epoch a startling return to the old

texts for solace, guidance, and inspiration. What distinguished some of the better known Jewish writers of inspirational books in the early part of the century—the founder of Ethical Culture, Felix Adler, Stephen Wise of the Free Synagogue of New York City, psychologist Joseph Jastrow and psychiatrist Abraham Myerson—was the lack of strong Jewish flavor in their books. This absence was partly owing to the excitement of the age over the possibilities of reaching an ecumenical audience and over the putative importance of new philosophical and psychological ideas from outside the Jewish world. Mordecai Kaplan himself inadvertently gives us insight into the disposition of the period in the preface to his 1936 translation of Luzzatto's *Mesillat Yesharim* (*The Path of the Upright*). He described this classic of ethical inspiration as “essentially a medieval book... not likely to be read for purposes of edification,” recommending it rather as a historical document of “the inner life of the Jewish people in the past.”⁵ The 1995 republication of Kaplan's edition of Luzzatto may suggest that his assessment was wrong, as Jewish readers seem once again inclined to glean whatever gems of insight and inspiration they can from the older books.

The renaissance of interest in the traditional texts of Judaism, and this not an academic but a deeply personal and practical interest, can be witnessed in the rise of a new publishing enterprise, Jewish Lights of Vermont. Although other publishers are similarly involved in the Jewish revival, Jew-

ish Lights is specifically devoted to the production of inspirational literature. Its 1994 anthology for the Jewish Healing Center, *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength and Solace in Psalms* epitomizes the “new look” in Jewish inspiration. For so many years, Christians in America seemed more likely than Jews to carry the Book of Psalms, much as Christian inspirational books seized on the easy-to-comprehend format of brief meditations. *Healing of Soul* returns the terse power of the ancient Hebrew verses to modern American Jews. The book possesses an attractive lay-out, short unintimidating commentaries on ten of the psalms by Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis, and up-to-date English translations side-by-side with the Hebrew. Its aim is simple: to encourage suffering people to continue seeking divine sustenance amid their pain. Its theological emphasis is captured by a beautifully composed “modern” psalm by Reform Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, which begins, “O My God/My soul's companion/My heart's precious friend/I turn to You.”⁶

The confluence of modern and traditional modes of expression and of rabbinic insight from all branches of American Judaism suggests the great fertility of Jewish inspirational writing as we approach the last days of the century. Mordecai Kaplan's challenge that we strive for an “integrated personality” would be met in the 1990s differently than it was by Joshua Liebman in the 1940s. Liebman thrilled at

the prospect of psychoanalysis opening up new doors of self-awareness at a time when traditional religion seemed to have exhausted its supply of answers. He held on to basic Judaism but with the hope that it would be rejuvenated with insights from psychology. Fifty years later, psychotherapy had become conventional and even trivialized for Americans seeking a “quick fix” of mental and emotional health. More enduring solutions to spiritual dilemmas once again seemed forthcoming from a rediscovered Judaism, some of which had virtually lain dormant since the rise of Reform in nineteenth-century America.

Jewish Inspiration, American Style

From Liebman to today’s focus on healing, we find a common theme, evinced in the title of Reform Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin’s inspirational book *Being God’s Partner: How to Find the Hidden Link Between Spirituality and Your Work* (1994). Salkin draws heavily on the Hasidic wisdom that “everything is potentially useable in this world” and with this premise he offers an important antidote to Americans consumed rather than inspired by their work.⁷ He encourages people to stop seeing work and spirituality as opposite or antagonistic activities and to learn how to invest the most mundane aspects of our working lives with a sense of divine purpose. To counteract the tendency of people to believe that they have autonomously constructed their own accomplishments and success, Salkin insists that they

need to recognize what prosperous, successful people (like the builders of the Tower of Babel) often forget—that they are in partnership with God. One of Liebman’s chief points in *Peace of Mind* was that Americans needed to free themselves from an excessive feeling of humility before an overpowering Deity and begin to see themselves as “co-workers” with God. Writing after a half-century of unprecedented material expansion and success, Salkin urges the same goal, but as an antidote to the opposite spiritual problem, arrogance. The humility-oriented aspect of Judaism has clearly assumed greater significance in recent inspirational writing, yet the buoyant humanist side, emphasizing the importance of the individual’s activity, has maintained its standing. It might be that the new focus within Jewish inspirational literature reflects two humbling national experiences, the aging of the American population and the realization that the “American Century” was not eternal.

Whether we turn to national best-sellers or to inspirational books with a more well-defined audience, we are studying one of the most evocative aspects of modern society, the solitary struggle of disparate souls to find meaning, purpose, and comfort in what often seems a hopelessly complex and forbidding universe. Judaism has offered up creative solutions to the specific dilemmas of modern life, from the impersonality of work to the gospel of success. Judaism has also responded to eternal problems of grief and malaise and to struggles that had

not previously plagued the Jewish world, such as alcohol and drug addiction. The proliferation of inspirational books in the past few years, only some of which have been cited here, marks an efflorescence of Jewish pastoral thought. If many of the personal dilemmas faced by Jews are products of assimilation, so are the richly cross-fertilized writings of rabbis in the American literary marketplace. If many of those dilemmas are as old as the Torah, so are some of the most essential answers found in these American books today.

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1. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937; rpt. New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 53-54.
 2. Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), 314-15.
 3. Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, *Peace of Mind* (New York: Jewish Science Publishing Company, 1927). "In Jewish Science we know that just as the divine within us is the source of justice and righteousness, just as it gives us the urge toward everything that is good and pure and upright, so also is the divine within us the fountain of health and well-being, of serenity and happiness." (302).
 4. Joshua Liebman, *Peace of Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), xii.
 5. Liebman, 160-75.
 6. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981; rpt. New York: Avon Books, 1983). In an interview with the writer, Rabbi Kushner observed that one of the theological elements he felt he needed to dilute in addressing a mass audience was the

idea that God could be dangerous ("like a high voltage wire") as well as comforting. Harold Kushner interview, April 18, 1995.

7. Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989), 178.
8. [Alcoholics Anonymous], *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1981), 1-9, 17.
9. Neil Gillman, "Are the Twelve Steps Jewish?" Foreword to Kerry M. Olitzky, *100 Blessings Every Day: Daily Twelve Step Recovery Affirmations, Exercises for Personal Growth and Renewal Reflecting Seasons of the Jewish Year* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), xxii-xxiii.
10. Abraham J. Twerski, *I'd Like to Call For Help, But I Don't Know the Number: The Search for Spirituality in Everyday Life* (New York: Pharos Books, 1991), 1-8.
11. *Ibid.*, 7.
12. Olitzky, *100 Blessings*, 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 83.
14. Gillman, in Olitzky, xviii-xix, xxiv.
15. A description of the Camp Ramah retreat is given by Lesley Sussman, "Finding Wellness in Angels, Auras and the Healing Touch," *Forward*, June 30, 1995, p. 12.
16. Mordecai M. Kaplan, ed. and trans., *The Path of the Upright (Mesillat Yesharim)* (1936; rpt. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), xi.
17. Sheldon Zimmerman, "A Prayer for Prayer," in Simkha Y. Weintroub, ed., *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength and Solace in Psalms* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 101.
18. Jeffrey K. Salkin, *Being God's Partner: How to Find the Hidden Link Between Spirituality and Your Work* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 170.

Spiritual Autobiography as a Path of *Tikkun*

BY MARC J. MARGOLIUS

Jewish theology posits a fundamental unity to all existence. Our primary religious myth, embodied in our central faith statement, the *Shema*, holds that the Divine embraces and links every aspect of creation. In this scheme, each person, each experience, each moment, each action is inextricably part of a unitary whole. Nothing stands apart; nothing is disconnected; nothing is out of place. God is One.

At the same time, Jewish tradition acknowledges, even affirms, that reality is fragmented. We experience ourselves as alienated from our selves, from each other, from the world. We live in a fractured, disordered, and unjust reality. Each Jewish worship service concludes with *Aleynu*, a prayer in which we assert that God will be One and God's Name will be One only sometime in a messianic future. Reality as we know it does not reflect the wholeness we affirm in the *Shema*. God's Oneness is a *potential* reality. God is not yet One.

Lurianic Kabbalah's mythic story of

creation seeks to reconcile this paradox of unity and brokenness, of Oneness and not-yet-Oneness. God created the material universe, it says, by pouring light into vessels, cosmic test tubes, the containers of the corporeal world. Because this primordial light was too intense for the vessels, they exploded, sending shards and sparks of light everywhere, creating a cosmic mess of sacred light trapped within the fractured pieces. The scattered sparks of light glow in the darkness, trapped in the shards, yearning to reunite with one another.

The shattered pieces symbolize broken reality. But the glowing sparks and their quasi-gravitational pull towards each other represent a powerful, harmonizing force. Within the debris, according to the myth, lies a counteractive drive towards order and harmony. This integrative energy—the workings of God—makes us conscious of disorder, fuels our discomfort with it, and sparks our instinct to unify what we experience. Jewish religious consciousness and behavior are

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rooted in experiencing and facilitating this process of unification, which informs all Jewish prayer, study, and action.

Order out of Chaos

A primary manifestation of the impulse to integrate the broken pieces—to clean up the mess, so to speak—is our instinct to transform experience into narrative. Memory is our perpetual organizer. It edits our inchoate experiences, selects discrete moments, links them with others, and places them in a sequence, an order revealing our provisional understanding of how the experiences relate to each other. Our psyches are constantly shuffling our memories, testing different plot-lines, weaving apparently unrelated people, places and experiences into a story. By seeking a unifying thread that links our experiences, by seeing them as parts of a greater whole, these stories impute meaning to them. The process resembles assembling a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces, in isolation from each other, appear meaningless, but when fitted together create a picture conveying a message.

Our stories are structures of meaning we assemble out of the scraps of our lived experience. Through our narratives, we search out patterns, discern order, and construct purpose from the pieces of our lives. From a Jewish perspective, this narrative-making process is a profoundly spiritual exercise, perhaps the prototypical Jewish religious act. It shares the fundamental Jewish religious assumption

that order may be discovered beneath the chaotic surface of reality. In becoming conscious of the connections between the fragments of our existence, and in weaving them into a narrative that reveals their coherence, we effect a *tikkun*: we “fix” the brokenness of our reality. The integrative process of narrative brings us into a profound encounter with God.

During each year of my congregational rabbinate, I have led a group of congregants in a “Narrative Theology Workshop,” a seminar in which participants compose and share essays about experiences they consider transformative in their lives. This workshop has revealed not only the healing power of the narrative process for individuals, but also its potential for overcoming the breach between contemporary American Jews and their tradition. Many participants in these workshops have experienced them as effecting a *tikkun*, a “repair,” in at least four distinct ways.

First, the very process of “telling,” transforming important personal experience into a narrative, has fostered a sense of integration on an individual level. Second, sharing this narrative within the context of a supportive peer group has created a sense of social connection. Third, articulating one’s story to fellow Jews and to a rabbi within a synagogue setting has engendered a greater sense of relationship to the Jewish community. Finally, understanding how one’s personal narrative reflects and resonates with the central myths of Judaism has fostered a deeper, more personal connection to Jewish tradition.

Personal Experience as Religious Source

The Narrative Theology Workshop takes place each spring, starting about one month before Pesah. Registration is limited to seven participants in order to optimize group dynamics. We begin the first session with introductions in which participants are invited to share something about their religious and/or Jewish background and discuss what drew them to the workshop. I begin our discussion by pointing out how within Torah, religious insight follows from significant personal experiences, rather than from contemplation or abstract reasoning.

To illustrate, we read carefully Genesis 11: 24-32, the terse description of Avram's family of origin with which *parshat Noah* concludes. The passage speaks of Terah's son and Avram's brother Nahor dying in their native city of Ur, leaving Nahor's wife Milcah and his son Lot. In the same city, Avram married Sarai, who is unable to conceive. Terah takes Avram, Sarai, and Lot from Ur and heads with them towards Canaan. But before they reach their destination, they settle instead in Haran, where Terah dies. Avram finds himself in Haran, a stranger in a new place, with his wife and his orphaned nephew, having experienced the untimely death of his brother and then the loss of his father. Uprooted from his home, severed from his past, apparently unable to have children with Sarai his wife, guardian of his nephew Lot, Avram faces an uncertain future.

In discussing this passage, we imag-

ine how, if he were sitting among us, Avram might tell his life story to this juncture. We discuss how the traumas of death, infertility and migration may have affected him, and how he might attempt to make sense of his painful experience. We observe how the text speaks of Avram hearing the voice of God only *after* having described these experiences in terse, suggestive language. This crucial but often neglected passage, I argue, exemplifies how religious insight and belief stems from the narration and interpretation of lived experience. I explain that the objective of the workshop will be to tell our stories, to "read" our lives, to interpret our experience individually and collectively, so that we might understand better how our most powerful experiences have shaped our fundamental beliefs.

Participants come to the first session having read in advance the first four chapters of *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography*, by Dan Wakefield (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), which serves as the text for the workshop. At our first meeting we read aloud and discuss one of the examples of spiritual autobiography from the book. Frequently, these passages explicitly mention neither God nor religion. In interpreting these pieces of autobiography, we explore in what sense a seemingly secular or profane experience may be described as "spiritual" or religious. In "unpacking" the narrative, we explore what the author experienced as powerful about the experience recounted, whether we have had similar experi-

ences in our own lives and, if so, how we reacted to them. We discuss how such an experience may determine values and beliefs. Inevitably, the members of the group share personal stories relating to the one under discussion, extending the text, exploring the echoes it evokes within the group. Viewed through our collective lens, the story of a stranger becomes, in a sense, our story as well.

For our second session, I usually ask the participants to read one or more short pieces of Jewish autobiography. One of my personal favorites among these is "To Catch a Breath," Arthur Waskow's account of his mother's illness and death (*Moment*, April 1986). Waskow's memoir is a magnificent weaving of universal personal experience—the relationship with and ultimate loss of a parent—with Jewish imagery and symbolism. After reading this piece aloud together, we discuss how the experiences it describes seem to have shaped Waskow's beliefs and values. We explore the similarities and differences in our own experiences dealing with parents, siblings, illness, and death. We also examine the ways in which Waskow frames his personal narrative within the mythic narrative of the Jewish people, particularly with the story of Pesah, and how he uses Jewish vocabulary to express the religious insights and beliefs that flow from his experience. The group discusses how, as they compose their own stories and develop a clearer understanding of their own religious outlook, they might also search for ways in which

that outlook has been shaped by their Jewishness or is reflected in any Jewish stories, rituals or actions with which they are familiar.

Significant Snapshots

After these first sessions, we take a month-long break during which the participants compose their pieces. I ask them to conceive of the assignment as taking one or more "snapshots" of persons, places, or experiences which they consider particularly significant in their lives. Their primary task is to describe those experiences, to capture those moments in words, to tell the story. In their pieces, they may wish to reflect upon how the experiences have affected them, what they learned, how they shaped their beliefs and values. If they are able, I ask them to draw connections between their experiences and Jewish stories, holidays, or history. In similar workshops, I have seen Rabbi Neil Gillman suggest that participants attempt to identify a particular metaphor that might represent the experience they are describing. I request that the participants try to write at least five but no more than fifteen double-spaced typed pages. At the outset of the workshop, we establish the clear expectation that everything written for the group or discussed in our sessions will be kept completely confidential. The establishment and maintenance of trust is essential to the success of the process.

I collect the pieces from each participant, duplicate and distribute them to the group, stressing again the

expectation of confidentiality. I ask them to read each piece carefully, noting their comments, underlining passages they find striking or significant, searching for common motifs, patterns, and contradictions, and looking for themes they recognize from Jewish sources or which might be expressed in Jewish vocabulary. We then meet for four consecutive weekly two-hour sessions, in which we explore the pieces composed and submitted by two group members.

The participant initiates the session by describing how he/she experienced the writing process, reading a passage from the piece, reflecting upon why he/she selected the particular experience the piece describes, or simply sharing anything about the process. Each of the other group members respond with an appreciative comment about the essay, sharing some aspect they found particularly striking, and asking questions to clarify and expand the essay. In the ensuing discussion, we explore the nature of the experience the piece describes, the source of its power for the author, and the emotions it engenders. In sharing personal stories about similar experiences in our own lives, we explore common themes and differences. Aside from facilitating the discussion, my role is to suggest ways in which the piece evokes or reflects Jewish narratives, rituals, holidays or behaviors. Throughout the conversation, we respect the distinctiveness of the author's personal experience and his/her right to interpret it for him/herself. Our goal is to understand

the experience as refracted through the author's lens, explore how it has affected his/her belief system, and discuss how and why the narrative resonates within the group.

The Courage to Share Heals

For those who have participated in these groups, the courageous act of writing and sharing these autobiographical pieces has been moving and healing. Often, participants find the workshops a secure context in which they find themselves able to articulate religious experiences and feelings they previously had not been able to share with others. Their pieces concern relationships, family, infertility, birth, serious illnesses, deaths, divorces, losses, intense moments of connection with and disconnection from other people. People have written deeply personal accounts of abuse, addiction, and trauma. Although the experiences described frequently concern painful episodes, the process of transforming them into a personal narrative to be shared with a supportive group has produced a sense of relief, peace, and healing I have rarely encountered in other rabbinic experiences.

Remembering significant experiences, identifying them as religious encounters, transforming memories of such moments into language, weaving raw experience into narrative is in itself an integrative experience for each participant. The creation of the narrative reveals the writer's interpretation of the experience's meaning, how it has shaped his/her life and beliefs. Participants often reveal to

themselves for the first time the meaning of important episodes in their lives. Even when the narrative describes traumatic events to which no meaning or purpose can be ascribed, the writing process often confers a sense of control. Healing in these circumstances often flows from realizing that while one cannot undo the dark passages of life, by articulating the story one can assert some measure of command over them.

The healing experienced by participants is not simply a consequence of personal reflection and expression; it flows from the dynamic of the group as well. During our conversations about each piece, which demand a high level of empathic listening, the participants begin to recognize themselves in each other's narratives. Although each story is utterly personal and distinctive, there are inevitably points linking them together. Much of our discussion is devoted to revealing these connections, and thereby realizing the previously unseen commonalities that bind the group. The stories of seven individuals, once imagined and told, are translated into a new story, a composite narrative of the group itself. The process of sharing these stories and the birth of a new collective narrative produces a human bond the intimacy and depth of which is not easily explained. In the telling and retelling, in transforming experience into a common tongue, we experience a profound empathy for each other and a rare sense of human intimacy. By the conclusion of the workshop, the group members—who

usually have not known each other well previously—are anxious to seek out ways to continue the group experience, such as forming havurot and sharing Shabbat meals with each other and with families.

Returning to Judaism

An essential element in the integration experienced by participants stems from their sharing personal narratives within a Jewish environment. Many of them have never before expressed their individual spiritual experiences in a Jewish context, and indeed have been alienated from the Jewish community. The process of relating their stories in a synagogue building, to a supportive group of Jews in their community, and to a rabbi, helps heal the breach between the participants and their people.

The healing facilitated by the workshop may be attributed to the ways in which participants are able to conceive a new relationship between their personal experience and Jewish tradition. Many of them begin the process openly estranged from Jewish religious expressive forms, which they see as embodying objectionable, abstract theological concepts. They experience a chasm between their reality and Jewish religious vocabulary. Engagement in the narrative process helps participants view Jewish religious texts as human, symbolic expressions of underlying experiences with which they can identify or empathize. As we draw connections between their stories and traditional Jewish narratives, liturgy or rituals,

they hear echoes of their own experience in these Jewish forms. Consequently, they can imagine employing these forms to evoke or express their personal religious experiences and needs. They begin to understand their story not only as part of the workshop's collective narrative, but also as part of a much larger narrative of the Jewish people, a story with which their personal narrative is inextricably interwoven.

For many participants, the opportunity to articulate and share their significant personal religious experiences has unlocked the door to involvement in Jewish life. A number have maintained their connection with other workshop "alumni" through involvement in our congregation's Jewish spirituality reading group and through Shabbat morning congregational Torah study. Many have come to see Torah study as a logical extension of the process initiated in the workshop. Each Shabbat morning we struggle together to understand how the myths of Torah reflect and are mirrored in our own personal stories. The workshop has helped many of them develop a personal relationship to the process of Torah, and to understand Torah study as a vehicle for personal healing and integration.

Encountering God through Story

We conclude the workshop series with *kaddish d'rabbanan*, the rabbinic *kaddish* recited after Torah study, a prayer which simply praises the name of God. Asserting that God, the inef-

fable, mysterious reality that unifies all of creation, has a name is to contend that language is the nexus of divine-human encounter. Transforming experience into narrative is one way in which human beings encounter God's unifying presence. This belief is symbolized by the kabbalistic tradition that all of Torah is, in essence, one long name of God. By reciting *kaddish* after Torah study, we affirm our belief that Torah's symbolic language is a medium through which we can reach towards God. Our narrative workshop enables us to see the same process at work in the construction and sharing of our personal stories and in our attempts to link them with the story of Torah. By reciting *kaddish* to conclude our workshop, we appreciate the manifold ways in which our struggles have brought us into a sacred, healing encounter.

Many of the stories told in the workshops describe brushes with death. An acute consciousness of mortality frequently hangs over our discussions, invoking the mood of *une-taneh tokef*, the awesome, chilling words of prayer for the Days of Awe in which we ponder who will live and who will die in the year ahead. That prayer goes on to assert that human beings can avert the divine decree and control their own destiny through proper intentions and actions. But in recent years on the Days of Awe I have noticed how the *mahzor* goes on to conclude this passage on a different theme. "Your name is beyond comprehension," we recite. "Your name befits You, as You befit Your name.

And You have linked our name with Yours.”

We cannot hope to know God, to comprehend the ultimate mysteries of life. Human beings cannot know God’s name. But our names—our personal experiences and the narratives we construct from them—all of these are linked together in one enormous, ever-growing chain of stories spelling out the name of God. In remembering and telling our stories, in seeing them reflected in every life,

we remember what in some mysterious way we have always known: we are inseparably part of the One. In those moments, we realize that our story links us to all other stories. We realize that despite the uniqueness of our experience, we are not alone, we are not other. I have seen how, in such moments, human beings can lean over the barriers separating them, reach out to each other, and experience the unifying embrace of God.

One Woman's Journey: *Halakhah* and Healing

BY GAIL DIAMOND

This is a story, my story, about how a Jewish path helped me heal. Like many young adults, I recently found myself immersed in the lengthy process of healing from childhood trauma and dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome. This article is about how Jewish traditional ways of being in the world, the path of *halakhah*, helped me to heal.

I take pride in the fact that as Reconstructionists we consider ourselves to live in a post-halakhic age. Yet the word, *halakhah*, meaning as it does a way of going, a way of walking, conveys to me that sense of being on a path that I have had throughout my healing journey. So please don't be put off by the title as you begin to read this story.

This story is about healing from childhood trauma, but the lessons in it are applicable to many other situations. Many of us are searching for healing and wholeness. This story is about finding such blessings through Judaism.

Kol ḥathalot kashot: All Beginnings are Difficult

This story began of course much earlier in my life, but my healing journey began about a year after I had started to have inklings that I might be an abuse survivor. Like many survivors of childhood trauma, I had no concrete memories, and really no evidence as far as I could tell. My life provided the clues but I could not read them: behavioral difficulties since early childhood, temper tantrums and uncontrollable emotions; attempts to physically hurt myself; drug and alcohol addiction; sexual acting out; unhealthy, frequent, brief relationships; putting myself in dangerous situations on a regular basis; a basic inability to protect myself. At the root was a feeling of a split life; I was a good person and a bad person. I excelled in school and professionally, and at the same time I continued to create chaos in my life. These signs, put together, pointed to the existence of some early trauma. But these signs were unintelligible to me.

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Various events got me going on a healing path: I got some therapy; I got into a supportive relationship; I met some people who were on a healing path; I read some books; most importantly, I stopped using drugs and alcohol. Within six months of giving up all such substances, I was ready to admit that I was suffering from childhood trauma. All the pieces fit. I made a commitment to myself, in front of a circle of women I had been meditating with, that I would do what I needed to do to heal.

Immediately, all hell broke loose inside. Perhaps only other survivors can understand the nature of repressed memory surfacing. The books talk about “body memories” and “feeling memories.” I would be in a room, perhaps in a lecture or seminar. Something would trigger me. The first thing was an English accent. All of a sudden I felt terrified, sick to my stomach, and dizzy. I knew where I was and yet I was experiencing the feelings of another time. I was to have this kind of memory experience hundreds of times in the years to come. It still continues today on a much less frequent basis.

Learning how to deal with such episodes and to grow from them, is the task of the healing survivor. It is a formidable task. For me, the early memories were so overwhelming I felt as if I would die. This is when I really needed God.

I had already, through some miracles, come to believe that God might help me in a healing process. Books I read pointed out that spirituality is

key for survivors in giving us a sense of hope and a sense of something bigger beyond the pain. In the Jewish tradition, I found some concrete assistance.

Ki eshmerah Shabbat: An Anchor

Right at the beginning, after I made a commitment to healing and when these overwhelming memory episodes began, a phrase from the Shabbat *zemirot* (table songs) came into my head, “*Ki eshmerah Shabbat—El yishmeryni*” — If I keep Shabbat, God will keep/protect me. This literal statement of faith became very important to me. Magical or not, I decided to believe that keeping Shabbat would make God keep me, or, leaving a belief in such a supernatural, activist God aside, that keeping Shabbat could save my life.

What this meant for me was that I had to find some way to make Shabbat a delight, to make it different, to enjoy Shabbat pleasures with others. I made Shabbat meals, I sang songs, I attended synagogue. Throughout the time I was healing (and, thank God, beyond) I strove to make Shabbat a time of pleasure.

Since healing from childhood trauma is in many ways going through an extended mourning period, a commitment to Shabbat meant a respite from this. Later on in my healing, I even made a moratorium on talking about abuse during Shabbat, preferring to focus on what was good and positive, or at least different, for one day a week. Shabbat gave me balance,

another perspective, a reason to laugh when all week there had been none. Shabbat gave me a reason to reach out to others, to seek company, even when I felt like isolating.

I recall one example of how Shabbat worked for me from that first summer. I had come to Boston for Shabbat so I would be able to attend shul. I was staying alone in a friend's apartment and I had terrible, awful nightmares. Upon waking, I felt I was in danger of dying, I was that terrified. I told myself if I could make it to services, I would be okay. Somehow I got myself dressed and walked to Havurat Shalom. There I sat and cried through much of the service. After the service, I somehow managed to finagle a lunch invitation from some acquaintances. As we sat and sang *zemirot*, I cheered and was able to break away from my bad dreams. I literally felt that Shabbat, and the community around me, had, as Psalm 30 describes, lifted me from the pit.

Housecleaning as Holy Task: Reclaiming the Physical World

During that same first summer, Rabbi Leah Novick explained to me the importance of cleaning for Shabbat, something I had been practicing off and on. "The *Shekhinah* does not like to come into a dirty temple," she said one Friday afternoon. "I must go clean for Shabbat." Putting my house in order for Shabbat was a simple physical task that I could do. It gave me a sense of setting things right.

At its core, abuse is about the violation of boundaries. Things are not

as they should be; they are out of place. The order and predictability of a world I could trust was ripped out from under me as a child. Adults who were supposed to protect me hurt me. My world was turned upside down.

Housework is a way to put things right, at least in my own small corner, and housecleaning on a spiritual schedule connects me with an overarching order in the universe. Judaism is that for me, a way to make order out of time, or to connect with an order for time that God has made: "You order the cycles of time and vary the seasons, setting the stars in their courses in the sky according to your will."¹ Cleaning for Shabbat and for holidays connected me to a holy order, to a sense of rightness, and to generations of female ancestors who had come before me.

Like many survivors, I developed a chronic illness during my recovery, in my case, chronic fatigue syndrome. For me, this meant that over a period of months I had to spend much of my time at home resting. Having Shabbat and Shabbat-cleaning gave an important order to my life. Even when I was unable to push a vacuum, I made some efforts at ordering my home to prepare for Shabbat each week.

Throughout my healing, many communities and groups were important to me. It was the Jewish community around me that provided the mainstay of my support. It was crucial for me to talk to other survivors in order to heal, but the practical needs I had were only met in Jewish community. There I could turn for help with

household tasks, for a “baby-sitter” when I needed one, for friends to celebrate with. During my illness, many people reached out to me. My classmates in rabbinical school were incredibly supportive: one came and vacuumed, one did my laundry, one couple brought groceries each Friday afternoon for three months. I was living in a rhythm of time and community that carried me when I could not carry myself.

***Niddah*: Holiness in Sexuality**

I can remember sitting in a group of survivors complaining: “I never had a chance to develop sexuality naturally. I will never know what a healthy sexuality looks like. And I’m not going to ask any of *you* to explain it.” They cracked up laughing, but the truth of this was really painful to me: the opportunity for normal sexual development was long ago lost to me. After a time, I began to realize that the Jewish tradition could help me gain a healthy relationship to sexuality.

One of the lies I was raised with had to do with sexual availability in relationship. I thought people got married to have sex, that sex was the most important part of the marriage, and that being married meant having to be constantly sexually available to your partner. The abuse I experienced further taught me that my value existed in my ability to provide a sexual outlet for another person. All of these were terrible lies to have internalized. They helped keep me out of a committed relationship for many years and accounted for many of my

unhealthy patterns in relationships.

During my recovery, I opted for a period of celibacy that was very important to me. At the time, I regretted the fact that Judaism did not have a religious tradition of celibacy, like Catholicism, Buddhism and other traditions. I yearned for this “pure state,” free from what seemed to be the evils of sexuality.

Upon reflection, though, I came to realize that Judaism does value celibacy, but celibacy within relationship. A strict practice of *taharat hamishpaha*, “family purity,” requires marital partners to be non-sexual for 11-15 days each month. This encourages the development of non-sexual intimacy in a relationship, something that is so difficult for many abuse survivors to learn. It also prevents partners from seeing one another merely as means to sexual gratification. Sexual unavailability, dictated by God or by Jewish law, provides a “NO” bigger than my own small voice. It gives permission to my own “no” at a later time. It reminds me that refraining from sex, as well as celebrating sex, is part of the natural order of the universe and the holiness of relationship.

Understanding the practice of *niddah* in this way was a beginning for me to think about holiness in relationship. Judaism has always advocated holiness in relationship through marriage, *kiddushin*. Unfortunately, I had felt quite left out of this model. My unhealthy relationship patterns and lack of a sanctified and sanctioned relationship had made me feel truly estranged from any chance at

holiness in this part of my life. Later, when I discovered my history of abuse, I came to understand that my feelings of estrangement went to my core. Sexuality was connected for me with violence and pain, not with holiness.

The discipline of *niddah* helped me to change this, to bring holiness into this part of my life as well. Taking on the practice of 'family purity' enabled me to say "Yes, God is here in all of my life, in my sexuality too."

Tefilah: Becoming Whole

Healing for me has been about reprogramming the tapes in my head, and tefilah, prayer, has been an essential part of this process. As Laura Davis and Ellen Bass say in *The Courage to Heal*, "Survivors were programmed to self destruct."² The voices in my head when I began this journey told me that I was bad, that nobody loved me and that I wanted to die. I needed the tapes of *tefilah* to be programmed into my head.

It has been noted that Jewish prayer is primarily impressive rather than expressive.³ The goal of Jewish prayer is to impress upon us certain truths that we might believe them. Prayer brings us toward belief. Jewish prayer was able to impress itself upon me and change my thought patterns.

Numerous prayers have helped me in my healing. At a pretty young age, some years before I began the healing journey described here, I memorized the *Ashrey* prayer (Ps. 145) and started using it to help me fall asleep at night when I could not. I would repeat it

over and over again. Many lines in it are crucial to me. "*Somekh Hashem lekhol hanoflim*"—God lifts up all who are falling, and especially, "*Karov Hashem lekhol korav*"—God is close to all who call upon God.

Psalms 30 is a classic survivor's prayer, affirming that our weeping will be turned to dancing. It contains that wonderful song "*Elekha*," describing how we turn to God and ask God to help us.

Two other prayers have been central in my healing. "*Elohai neshamah*," one of the first prayers we say in the morning, affirms that we have been given a pure soul. One of the hardest aspects of abuse is the feeling that pollution has reached to my core and that I will never be whole or okay again. The concept of "returning" to a pure state makes little sense to someone who felt violated and bad so early in life. This prayer asserts and affirms for me that there is a pure place inside me, a pure soul that was polluted neither by what was done to me nor by the ways I acted out my pain. I desperately need this certainty and cling to this prayer.

The second prayer is found in the traditional *selihot* service and in the Sefardic version of the prayer before the bedtime *Shema*:

Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive anyone who has angered or vexed me, or who has sinned against me, whether against my body, my possessions, my honor, or anything that is mine, whether by compulsion, by will, by mistake, or

by evil intention, whether in speech or in deed, whether in this incarnation or another—each individual—and may no person be punished on my account.

May it be your will, my God and God of my ancestors, that I sin no more, that I not repeat my sins, or continue to anger you, that I not do what is bad in your eyes, and that which I have sinned, wipe out in your great mercy, but not by means of suffering or bad disease.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable before you, God, my rock and my redeemer.

This prayer is explosive for survivors. By including it, I in no way want to suggest that forgiveness is essential for healing. But forgiveness is a part of our tradition and has made a difference to me in my spiritual path. For me forgiveness means letting go of my claims for retribution in order to live a full life. From this place, I find the strength to say, “May no one be punished on my account, may all those who hurt me find, rather than the slap of God’s justice, the soft hand of God’s mercy.” [As I write this one part of me, the part that was wronged says, “NO.” I have said this prayer through gritted teeth many times. Sometimes I say, “You forgive them, God; I can’t.”]

This prayer is also about more than forgiveness. It is about legitimizing all

the ways in which I have been hurt. I have been hurt by words and deeds; I have been hurt in my body and in my honor. Abuse took many things from me, and this prayer allows me to list them. Further, the hurt happened no matter what the intention of the abuser was. The abuser may have abused in error, not intending to do what was done, or willfully, just because of a random desire. The abuser may have felt compulsion to act in this way, or may have harbored a genuinely evil intention. But no matter the abuser’s motive, I hurt and suffer nonetheless. This prayer speaks from the viewpoint of the survivor, and this is where I stand. To stand in this place, to name what was done to me and to offer my forgiveness, is to be once again in a position of wholeness, in touch with my own power.

Tzedek/Tzedakah: Giving Back, Reaching Toward Justice

This has been a long hard story to write. But I can write it because I know that I am not the only one with such a story. There are many stories of women and men you know today, who are actively living the pain and joy of healing. There are also the stories of partners, friends, families, therapists and communities who are giving their all to support survivors. And sadly, there are children today who are living with abuse and who, God willing, will become tomorrow’s healing survivors.

There are many others too, who, while perhaps not survivors of childhood trauma, face other difficulties

and situations where there is a need for healing. I have pointed to several openings in Judaism: to Shabbat; to housework; to Jewish community; to sexual restraint; to prayer. Each of these and many more Jewish folkways can become a doorway to a healing journey.

I was only able to live this journey and to write this story because of the women and men who came before me, most especially Laura Davis and Ellen Bass who wrote *The Courage to Heal*. But there is also a backlash in this country right now against those who would tell the truth about childhood sexual abuse. There is a movement to decry the memories of survivors as “false memory syndrome,” a movement which tries to discredit survivors and therapists. We must know and be aware of and support those who are in this struggle and need our affirmation.

Finally, I was only able to live and write this journey because of God and the healing I found in Judaism as a path to the One. Perhaps through reading this story one person will find

one ray of hope, one anchor to grab hold of, one glimpse of healing. My story of healing is a way to praise God and to offer hope to others.

*bafakhta mispedi lemahol li,
pitahta saki veta'azreyini simkha.
lema'an yezamerkha kavod
velo yidom,
Hashem Elohai le'olam odeka.*

You have turned my mourning
into a dance,
you have loosened my garments
of sorrow and girded
me with joy.
That I may sing to you and not
be silent,
my God I will forever
thank you.

(Ps. 30: 12-13)

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1. First blessing in *Ma'ariv*, the evening service.
 2. Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 179.
 3. Lord Immanuel Jacobovits, in Jeffrey M. Cohen, *Prayer and Penitence* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), xv.

Fifty Years After Auschwitz: Let the Healing Begin

BY SHEILA PELTZ WEINBERG

Last year, I spent the eighth night of Hanukkah at the gates of Auschwitz. I was there in an unusual setting. A few weeks before the official fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp, several hundred men and woman from many countries and faiths gathered for a convocation and spiritual dialogue. The convocation opened on the last night of Hanukkah. We marched in silent procession to the infamous gate, emblazoned with that most cynical slogan, "*arbeit macht frei*," "work makes one free." I was one of two rabbis present. It was our task to explain the meaning of Hanukkah and direct the group lighting one hundred hastily crafted menorahs.

It has been difficult to find the words to talk about the details of the experience, but every time I have done so, people have been deeply appreciative. I dare now to go a little further and share my thoughts as they have crystallized in the light of that trip.

I am not at all certain why I went.

I know that I do not regret going. I felt throughout my trip to Poland and in subsequent months that I went as a *shlichah*, an emissary, an envoy of the Jewish living into the land of our dead. I recognize that my mission is not over: this Spring I returned with a group from my congregation, and we journeyed from Auschwitz to Israel. Perhaps there will be other trips yet to come.

The Jewish spiritual year culminates in Yom Kippur and forgiveness. We move in time toward the gate that closes at *neilah*, the gate of acceptance of self and other, the gate of purification of the anxieties and resentments that have sullied our relationships, the gate of reconciliation to those we have shut out of our hearts. The existence of Auschwitz makes Yom Kippur and forgiveness very difficult. Yes, it is fifty years later, but the question for Jews remains: "Has the healing with God begun?"

Where Was God?

During the Convocation we were all racked with intense feelings. I was

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there as a Jew and a religious leader in a place where one could only wonder "Where was God?" How can one believe in God when we see the city of murder with our own eyes? How could I, as a rabbi, chant the memorial prayer that begins *El mole rahamim*—God, "full of compassion?" How could we recite the mourner's kaddish, that begins with the words "magnified and sanctified is your great name?" How could I stand still and listen as someone sang the twenty-third psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?" For many survivors, literal survivors of Nazi Europe, and, in some sense, for all Jews alive today, there is no way back to God after what happened. All prayers are false, all praise mute, all faith extinguished. How many times have I heard the question: "But, Rabbi, where was your God?"

One morning during the convocation, we took the bus from our youth hostel to Birkenau, the main killing center, three kilometers from Auschwitz. We stood on the railway loading platform where the trains arrived crammed with the dead and living Jews brought from the four corners of Europe. Most were sent directly to the gas and the ovens. The young and strong were taken to die a slower death of starvation, cold, beatings and backbreaking, meaningless labor. We gathered on that platform to pray together before touring the site. Rosalie Gerut, child of an Auschwitz and a Dachau survivor, sang a song composed by Abraham Brudno and Abraham Sutskever for the Vilna ghetto

theater. In September 1943, Brudno was deported to a Nazi concentration camp in Estonia where he died. Sutskever survived the war and became a prominent editor and writer in Israel. The song is called "*Unter Dayne Vayse Shtern*"—"Under the Light of Your White Stars." The first stanza in translation reads:

Under the light of your white stars
Let the whiteness of your arms
embrace me;
No more words left, only tears
Longing for refuge in your hand.
You see whiteness will never reach
the blackness of these depths.
Here light can never enter, nor
can it be returned.¹

It is not surprising that as a result of the Holocaust we would abandon faith in a God that has the power to save us, a God who claims to love the people Israel, a God we call the God of salvation. The whiteness of the stars merges with the whiteness of God to invoke a sense of divine impotence, abandonment and betrayal. Rage walked alongside me past the barbed wire, on the grounds of death. A sign on the crumbling stones of Crematorium II, blown up by the Nazis in the hasty retreat from the advancing Russians, reads: "It is dangerous to walk on the ruins." That sign says so much that it does not intend to say. One must indeed step with great care.

Where Was Humanity?

Giving up on God has been one response to our history of trauma. Another response has been giving up on humanity. It was challenging to be

present as a proud Jew, in a minority, among Germans, Japanese, British, French, North American and other Christians. It was hard to feel safe. It was hard to believe that I could trust these people. When one studies the Holocaust, country by country, and sees not only the master plan of the Nazis but the levels of collaboration among the Poles, the French, the Greeks, the Rumanians etc., it is not surprising to draw the conclusion that Jews can never be safe, can never have allies. Yes, there are the rescuers, the righteous Gentiles, but they are few and scattered compared to the numbers and power of the perpetrators.

When one visits the U.S. Holocaust Museum and absorbs the incredible technical sophistication of the Germans, their planning and organizing skills and their psychological effectiveness, one nearly despairs of the capacity of human reason. One is tempted to see the power of evil as insurmountable. One may become cynical and bitter, reclusive, insular, depressed, self-centered and pleasure-seeking, rather than hopeful or idealistic about the possibilities of change, human betterment, liberation, and progress. The triumph of western art, science, philosophy and reason were the soil that nurtured this kingdom of night.

As much as blaming God and giving up on people is an understandable reaction to Auschwitz, that was not my entire experience. As long as Jews remain committed to blaming God or giving up on humanity, I do not believe our healing has fully begun.

Cynicism is a symptom of numbing hatred that either remains frozen or leaks out in fantasies of revenge and seeing the enemy in every face. All trauma isolates, shames, stigmatizes, degrades and dehumanizes the victim. All trauma brings us before the emptiness of evil, the insufficiency of every answer, the absolute limits of human understanding. Fifty years later, we are perhaps preparing to begin the healing process. Similar to other trauma victims, it is only through mourning everything we have lost that we can discover the indestructible human soul. Mourning is very difficult. As a people, we are simultaneously in multiple stages of grief and healing. Some are in denial, some in obsession, others in anger and revenge; we swing from feelings of superiority to inferiority.

Healing is Faith in the God Who Does Exist

Ultimately we need to make peace with the God who does exist. This God is not the one with the white hand extending to save us through the white stars. For me it is the power that allowed me to be present in that place and be a visible Jew, return daily with my white tallit and say the *El mole* and the *kaddish* and light the Hanukah candles and explain the Hanukah story to a German priest and an Austrian Sufi and a Buddhist monk from Cambodia. Julius Lester, who accompanied me on the trip, said he thought God walked with us as we returned to witness, to shine awareness, to remember, to mourn. We human

beings have the power to bring God into the world or to live in the cold shadow of divine absence. It is our choice. We can turn ourselves in the direction of awareness, compassion and be willing to exert effort. Do we choose to become aware of the interconnectedness of all beings, the significance of every hurtful word and act which will return to engender unforeseen suffering? Are we willing to embrace compassion for our limitations, our weaknesses, our mistakes and the limitations, weaknesses and mistakes of others? Are we willing to *change the patterns we identify* as destructive to ourselves and others? Are we willing to take a risk to try something different, to let go of whatever makes us secure when we know it is dangerous?

Our willingness and our choosing indicate our healing. They also indicate our changed status as people with power both in Israel and North America. David Elcott and Irwin Kula in a CLAL paper entitled "Renewing the Covenant in the Face of Unbearable Pain," written in the wake of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, speak cogently to this point:

The most dangerous posthumous victory we could give Hitler is to believe that a Jew at the end of the 20th century is a victim. There is nothing more perilous to a renewed Jewish people, independent in the Land of Israel and politically, economically and culturally potent in North America, than to construct our identity and

determine strategy and public policy based on a Torah of victimization. Victims can only feel impotence and frustration and a resulting rage. Jews who identify as victims, but wield real power, can potentially transform rage not into messianic fantasies of divine justice but into real human acts of violence.

The latter is the approach of unhealed trauma victims who see their victimization ever recreated before their eyes. This scarred vision blinds one to the fact that the Jewish people have a holy task in this world, to uphold the possibility of justice, the hope of peace and the practice of compassion. In Kula and Elcott's words: "The Torah of the *Shoah*, now told out of an unprecedented condition of power, truly challenges us with the awesome responsibility (*mitzvah*) to remember the Holocaust by using our power to constructively and ethically heal the world."

After I screamed the *kaddish* in the crematorium, Julius led us in *Shema Yisrael*. A group of Polish school children walked by. I think I have a glimmer of what that moment represented, although it was far beyond words. It meant that Jews are still able to testify to the possibility of transformation in the world. It meant that Hitler cannot be used to justify an abandonment of God or a belief in the spiritual and ethical capacities of human beings.²

Burning Questions

I am left with still burning ques-

tions: How can we speak of God today in a way that protects us against terror and despair? that helps us restore a sense of belonging? that affirms the positive potential in humanity? How can we exalt God today in a way that encourages us to make choices that foster caring and empathy and dispel the moral callousness that targets the weak in order to camouflage the greed of the strong? The answers, I hope, are part of our healing as a people. In this process, it is important for us to work intimately with the pain, anger and fear raised by antisemitism and especially the Holocaust. Dr. Eva Brown, a member of the Jewish Community of Amherst, has been doing pioneering work with children of Holocaust survivors and is now moving into groups for grandchildren, the third generation. There is little doubt in my mind that many of us would similarly benefit from a safe structure to come to terms with the history of our people and its impact upon our individual psyches.

Some who attended the Convocation at Auschwitz are bringing a series of responses in art, music, film and dialogue to Amherst for several weeks surrounding Yom Hashoah 5756/1996. We are engaging *our* community on a spiritual, moral and political level in this work that is so important for both Jewish renewal and the future of our society. Gathering in interfaith settings, we will be stretching our faith in human potential and human solidarity. One by One, a group of adult children of Holocaust survivors and adult children of the Third Reich,

will share their profound dialogue process with the community, and I will join a panel made up of a German Catholic priest and the Japanese Buddhist monk who inspired and led the pilgrimage from Auschwitz to Hiroshima. Together we will talk about faith after Auschwitz—itsself an act of faith.

In the last several decades, the birth of the State of Israel has often been offered as the redemptive aspect of the genocide of the Jews. The Holocaust and Israel have served for many Diaspora Jews as the central pillars of their Jewish identity, twinned in the metaphor of 'ashes to rebirth' as the essence of being a Jew today. As we contemplate a more active stage in mourning the depth of our losses in the Holocaust, as we dare to think about a true peace between Israel and her neighbors, and as Israel joins more and more the political and economic international mainstream, we are challenged to reenvision our relationship as Jews to both the Holocaust *and* the State of Israel. Even in Israel a rethinking is underway. No longer is every official visitor to Israel automatically taken to Yad Vashem, the memorial to the Holocaust. There is an effort to remember that Israel is not merely *about* the survival of the Jewish people, although Israel has indeed gathered the wounded and broken Jews from every corner of the world from Ethiopia to the former Soviet Union and restored many to wholeness. Israel is about the self-determination of the Jewish people and our vision and mission to be a

light unto the nations. Zionism, let us recall, predates the Holocaust and is independent of it.

Toward a Renewed Judaism

In the last fifty years we have been in the early stages of mourning the Holocaust. We have written histories, poems and fiction; built monuments and museums. We have taken seriously the obligation to remember. Our grief and anger have often felt bottomless. For some of us, Nazis lurked around every corner. For others, we were too paralyzed by the pain to imagine living Jewish lives of dignity, creativity and faith. Many Jewish lives could not emerge from the shadows of the night. In the next stage of mourning the Holocaust, our hope is that it will move from center stage in our waking hours and nightmares. Like other trauma survivors, we will enter ordinary life, never to forget, but, not gripped by terror, as we operate realistically to insure our fundamental security and dignity. Someday, the Holocaust will no longer command the central place in our collective Jewish life. We will remember that the most important things that ever happened to the Jewish people are the Exodus from Egypt and then Sinai—our encounter with the God of liberation and transformation and our commitment to live holy lives, to be a holy nation and bring healing to ourselves and the world.

Historically, about fifty years after every great disaster of our people, a great rebirth happens. About fifty years after the destruction of the Sec-

ond Temple, rabbinic Judaism began to take hold. About fifty years after the great destruction of the Jewish community of Spain and its dispersion, arose Lurianic Kabbalah in Safed. About fifty years after Khmel-nitski's Cossacks decimation and destruction of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, the Hasidic movement arose with the birth of the Baal Shem Tov. Perhaps today, fifty years after the great destruction of our people in Europe, we are experiencing the beginning of a rebirth, the beginning of a healing.

We pray that peace in Israel becomes ever more a reality and that our relations with Israel grow and prosper and mutually nourish each other. We pray that our journey of remembrance and understanding gives us the power to heal ourselves and reawaken our commitment to the sacred tasks of our people. We look forward to moving into the next phase of Jewish civilization, as prophesied by Kaplan and other men and women in our day. We envision a spiritually and intellectually vibrant Judaism, artistically creative, earth-centered, truly egalitarian and not xenophobic. We will be part of creating a Judaism that fosters spiritual community and planetary consciousness, that cultivates and innovates a balance between ethics and power, contemplation and action, compassion and justice.

May we find companions to help us face the pain that change brings.

May we find companions to share the joy that change brings.

May we find a language to speak of

faith that heals and connects.

May we renew our ability to bear witness to God's presence.

May we renew our ability to bear witness to humanity's potential.

May the suffering our people endured lead to the end of our own suffering and that of all who dwell on earth.

1 "Rosalie Gerut and Friends: *We Are Here: Songs of Remembrance, Hope and Celebration*, Tsuzamen Productions/Blue Hill Recordings, 1988; Box 566, Milton, Ma. 02186.

2. Michael Lerner offers an expanded analysis of this idea in *Jewish Renewal: A Path of Healing and Transformation* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1994).

Public Policy and *Tikkun Olam*

BY JEROME A. CHANES

"Nothing endures like change"—Heraclitus
"The times they are a-changin'"—Dylan

For those of us who track the workings of Jewish public-affairs agencies, these are puzzling times. As an unreconstructed liberal working in an increasingly conservative context, I find that the traditional analyses and formulas of democratic pluralism are simply not on the radar screens of many in our communal leadership. The old-time religion of the liberal agenda is under attack. More generally, the contours of the agenda have changed dramatically over the past five years.

And most deeply, at the level of inner angst, a specter haunts the American Jewish community—shrinking organizations, weakened agencies, collapsing funding, irrelevant agendas—all of this at a time when the creative continuity of the community is being called into question. How is the case to be made, dur-

ing a period when these and other dilemmas are regnant, for an agenda rooted in social and economic justice and in constitutional protections as legitimate and indeed central vehicles for Jewish expression and continuity? Is that agenda yet good for the Jews?

The history of what our agenda was in the past is instructive in terms of what constitutes the domestic agenda today. During the 1920s to the early 1950s, the agenda of the Jewish community was antisemitism, at home and abroad, and the corollary of antisemitism, discrimination. From the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, the Jewish communal agenda was the civil-rights movement, to the exclusion of virtually everything else.² Two events occurred in the mid-1960s that radically altered the Jewish agenda: the emergence of the Soviet Jewry movement in the U.S. in 1963, and

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the Six Day War in 1967, with its profound implications for the American Jewish community. The most important results of these two events was that they led the Jewish community to become preoccupied—legitimately preoccupied—with Israel and Soviet Jewry and to move away from the total agenda, the broad range of issues on the domestic plate that encompassed social and economic justice concerns. Almost overnight, the Jewish agenda became a particularistic, parochial “Jewish” agenda.³

Not that the organized Jewish community had abandoned the total agenda. We have always deeply believed that the Jewish community—indeed any minority—exists and flourishes best in a society that is informed by social and economic justice, and especially by the principles and protections that inhere in the Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment and most centrally the separation of church and state. But insofar as issues on the domestic front were yet on the agenda, they were no longer the priority issues of the Jewish community. This had serious implications with respect to our work with other communities, especially the Protestant world and the African-American community. The implications of this shift were profound, and remain so almost thirty years later.

Beginning around 1980, the Jewish community began moving back—or was dragged back—to the total agenda. With the rise of an aggressive “religious right” in 1979—remember the “Christianization of America?”—the

Jewish community began to feel that there was a potential crisis with respect to constitutional protections that were under serious attack. And with the advent of the Reagan Administration in 1981, a developing consensus in the Jewish community feared that economic and social justice could be undermined by that Administration’s regressive policies. The Jewish community began once again to engage in a reordering of its priorities in the broad agenda.

The Remaking of the Agenda Today

What about today? We are once again in a transitional period. How are the issues being played out in the different arenas?

International: With the receding of and changes in the Soviet-Jewry issue, and in other captive-Jewish communities, the contours of the international agenda are very different from what they were a very few years ago. Jews in the former Soviet Union are less a public-affairs—that is, political—matter, and more one of delivery of social services.

Likewise with respect to Israel. The peace process—whatever its pitfalls, and whatever the divisions within the Jewish community surrounding the implications of the events of September 13, 1993—has led to a new way of thinking about Israel, and a different advocacy agenda. And, as we have tragically seen, to a nadir in internal Jewish discourse.

In the domestic arena, the Clinton Administration, which defined its pri-

orities in domestic terms, placed before the Jewish community a range of issues on which the Jewish communal voice has needed to be heard; and the Republican-controlled Congress in 1994 likewise placed its set of challenges before the Jewish community. The evangelical political movement, the “religious right”—this time clothed as the Christian Coalition—would once again make life very uncomfortable for those who believe in fundamental civil rights and civil liberties, including church-state separation and protection against discrimination. In the arena of constitutional protections, in the church-state area, there is a new generation of church-state cases that are being tested by the courts—situations involving tough choices for the Jewish community—and new challenges in the Congress and in state legislatures around the country. Beyond this, although clearly related, there is the growing debate over the role of religion in American society, a debate that was stirred a decade ago by Richard John Neuhaus’s trenchant slogan, “the naked public square,”⁴ but that debate has become much broader and deeper over the past two years. Americans of whatever political and social persuasion acknowledge the reality of a “values crisis” in this country. The Jewish community is called upon to explore serious approaches to this crisis that go beyond the quick fix of school prayer.

In the world of inter-religious relationships, there is a recognition that new priorities mean new opportuni-

ties for coalitional activities, and there have been new initiatives begun with the national Catholic and Protestant bodies on a number of issues. An outstanding example is the National Religious Partnership on the Environment, a coalition involving Jewish, Catholic and Protestant organizations. The contours of the interreligious agenda—Catholic-Jewish and Protestant-Jewish relationships both—have been reshaped by the peace process in Israel, which has removed some long-standing interreligious tensions and has brought into sharper focus the future of Jerusalem, in which all the religions have a stake.

And there is antisemitism, in some ways the most devilish issue on our agenda. While Jewish security in this country remains strong, serious manifestations of antisemitism emerging from fringe elements, including extremists in the African-American community, suggest that some fundamental societal taboos are breaking down, as these extremist views are being introduced into mainstream institutions. Yet, most threats to Jewish security in the United States have little or nothing to do with antisemitism; conversely, most manifestations of antisemitism today do not compromise the security of American Jews, either individually or as a polity.

Curiously enough, this renewed activity on the domestic agenda—looking outward—comes at a time when Jews are once again looking inward to our own values and indeed to our very continuity. Whatever the

“continuity” agenda means—education, family-life programming, renewed Zionist activism, social and economic justice—the challenge for us is to develop a complementarity of the “continuity” agenda and of our broad public-affairs agenda during a time of scarce resources.

Building a Map for Consensus

Which issues are selected for action on the public affairs agenda? Those in which there is a consensus of the community that they affect Jewish security. And here is where the complexity begins. There is a growing debate within the community as to what constitutes Jewish security. I suggest that there is a set of concentric circles that describe how issues on the Jewish agenda are prioritized around the notion of Jewish security.

At the center are those issues that immediately and directly relate to Jewish security. Antisemitism, Israel, the security of Jewish communities abroad. This is the core area for Jewish communal activity.

We then move one concentric circle outward. With some issues, in the penumbra of Jewish concerns, the relationship to Jewish security is less immediately apparent, but is nonetheless absolutely central. The separation of church and state—the central guarantor of Jewish security in this country, in my view—is the most obvious issue in this category. This circle also includes First-Amendment and other questions of political freedom, in which the standards of action are easily defined: what government *cannot*

do to a person, and what one person *cannot* do to another. The disparate issues of gay-rights ballot initiatives, capital punishment, and reproductive choice similarly fall into this category.

In the next concentric circle, the issues seemingly lie at the periphery of “Jewish” concerns, but are clearly important to the health of the society as a whole, and therefore must also be important to us. These are questions not of restraint, as are those concerning political freedom, but rather questions of positive beneficence: what government *can* and *should* do for a person. Ensuring economic justice, protecting the environment.

As the agenda expands during this period of organizational shrinkage, the inevitable question arises, “Why is this issue a priority for the Jews?” And we need to recall that issues are priorities for Jews when they directly implicate Jewish security. The Jewish community became involved in civil rights not out of liberal philosophies—and it pains me to say this—but out of Jewish self-interest. In the early 1940s, to cite one dramatic example, there was a consensus in the community that Jewish security, which was then defined around the issue of employment discrimination, was at stake. And the struggle against employment discrimination, the first goal of what became known as the civil-rights movement, became the point of entry for the organized Jewish community into that movement. But it was not without vigorous debate within the Jewish community over the question as to whether “rela-

tions with Negroes” was central to Jewish security.⁵

A Revolution in Jewish Political Involvement

Jewish involvement in the public-affairs arena—activity in law and social action—is an innovation, indeed a revolution, in the history of how Jews relate to the external world. In earlier times, when it was not within the power of the Jewish community to alter its condition, the norm was quietism. The shift from quietism to activism has marked Jewish activity since the last years of the nineteenth century and characterizes our activity to the present day. Indeed, some of the great debates during the 1930s and 1940s were over whether the use of law and social action—the technique pioneered by the American Jewish Congress—was legitimate activity for the Jewish community to achieve its goals on the domestic agenda.

We hold conflicting visions of Jewish community in America. The classic model of *kehillah*, with its concomitant obligation, *tzedakah*—the model of charitable justice administered by an organic community—has long informed the workings of Jewish society. However, the Jewish community in America is no longer the organic community of Eastern Europe, but rather, a pluralistic community in a pluralistic society. In the organic community, *kehillah* and *tzedakah*, religious obligations both, were accepted as normative. In the pluralistic community, anything that smacks of a mandate from above is

rejected. How then do we make the connection in a pluralistic society between *kehillah*, *tzedakah* and the First Amendment—and, flowing therefrom, the rest of the domestic agenda—as crucial to Jewish security?

The beginning of wisdom for Jewish activism on the domestic agenda is the “separation” principle. Church-state separation—and, by extension, the rest of the First Amendment and the totality of the Bill of Rights—has resulted in a history and tradition of vibrant American voluntarism, which has been very productive in the Jewish community. Voluntarism has emerged as a forceful advocate for individuals, their groups and for the policies put forth by those groups, as means of realizing their visions of what society should be. *Kehillah* and *tzedakah* have, in fact, found fertile soil in the American experience. *Kehillah* and *tzedakah* have been transmuted through democratic pluralism to produce a highly-effective voluntary institutional framework, historically supported by many Jews.

Jewish Security and Democratic Pluralism

The best path to *tikkun olam*—the betterment of society—in a society that is no longer an organic whole, is the enhancement of those conditions in society that ensure and protect democratic pluralism. The surest and most central of these conditions are the protections afforded in the Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment, especially the separation of church and state. In my view, consti-

tutional matters ought not be viewed through the prism of the liberal agenda. Jewish social and political tradition is neither liberal nor conservative; it is Jewish. Church-state separation ought not be supported out of liberalism, but out of self-interest. Anyone who wants to protect Jewish security in this society can find no surer path to salvation than the enhancement of constitutional protections and of social and economic justice.

The domestic agenda—the centerpiece of which is the protection of the Bill of Rights—must be understood as the enabler of all of our other agendas. The connections are clear: Jewish security is enhanced less by countering antisemitism (although antisemitism clearly needs to be monitored and counteracted) than by strengthening democratic pluralism, primarily through strengthening church-state separation and promoting social and economic justice. Individuals within the Jewish community, whatever their affiliations in terms of religious movements, ought to recognize our Jewish activities for what they are: central to Jewish security in this country. Our involvement needs therefore to be viewed at two levels: activism in the issues themselves, and involvement in these issues through established instrumentalities within

our community, be they the religious movement with which we are affiliated or the local Jewish community relations council, the “defense” agency. It is only through such involvement in protecting the democratic process that we can begin to achieve the larger goal of *tikkun olam*.

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1. Portions of this article were delivered at a forum on the organized Jewish community at the 1995 annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston MA. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.
 2. The separation of church and state played a significant, though secondary role during these years, beginning with *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947).
 3. This development coincided with the radicalization of key voices in the black community, which further made it difficult for Jews to continue advocating for civil rights as a first-line priority.
 4. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1984).
 5. Indeed, at a Plenary Session of the National Community Relations Advisory Council (later NJCRAC, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council) in the mid-1940s, a vigorous debate took place on the wisdom of coalition-building with blacks, and it was Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, an American Jewish Congress and NAACP leader, who made the case for continued involvement based on Jewish self-interest. The Wise rationale was a re-articulation of the original reasons for Jewish involvement in the civil-rights struggle.

Waking and Walking

BY TOBA SPITZER

On a recent trip to Israel I visited with a friend whom I had not seen in six years. Since our last visit I had begun my studies at rabbinical school, and she had become involved in a spiritual quest taking her far from Judaism, into a variety of Eastern religions, Goddess traditions, pagan rituals. As I sat enjoying her front yard, my friend challenged me: "Why in the world are you becoming a rabbi?"

Good question. In it I heard all those concerns that I've had to wrestle with since making this decision. Is Judaism spiritually satisfying? What to do with the patriarchy, the invisibility and denigration of gays and lesbians? Does Judaism keep us confined, cut off from other peoples, from global concerns?

I answered that my decision had to do with being a Jew in America. In order to effectively work for social justice, I need to be grounded in a sense of identity and in a real community, and Judaism offers me both. A partial answer; no mention of what in Judaism itself is powerful enough to keep me connected or how my spiri-

tual needs could be met in a Jewish framework. Still groping for a response, I asked my friend about her work, her beliefs. She began describing to me some workshops she had organized for women, workshops using visualization and meditation and chanting and other tools to help the women gain a deeper knowledge of themselves. My friend said, "Basically, what I am doing is helping people wake up."

Of course; because what is any spiritual practice about if not waking up—to who we are, to what is going on inside us and in the world around us, to the potential that lies within and beyond us? But as I thought about my friend's workshops, and then about the whole New Age phenomenon, the hundreds of workshops and seminars and books all ostensibly aimed at spiritual awakening, another question came to me: what happens once we're awake?

And *that*, I realized, is exactly where a great part of Judaism's genius lies. Traditional Jewish practice, in its near-obsessive concern with sanctifying and regulating all aspects of daily

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life, implicitly recognizes the dual imperative of spiritual awakening. When we say one hundred blessings a day we are prodded to become aware of the power within and around us, to awaken to the simple awesome fact of life on this planet. But Judaism also teaches that awareness alone is not enough. With eyes open we can see that things are not as they should be, that fundamental relationships—among people, between human beings and the earth—are in need of repair. Judaism thus offers both opportunities for becoming awake and a whole system of living to channel that awakening. In other words: once I know that there is somewhere to go, I need to start walking. And while there is enormous room for debate over the form such “walking” should take, implicit in all Jewish practice is a journey towards a world transformed.

From the era of the Biblical prophets until the early decades of this century, Jewish life has been maintained by this sense of dedication to a higher purpose, whether the goal has been personal, communal, or universal salvation. But it is precisely this vital aspect of Jewish life that is so often ignored in current discussions about Jewish survival. In all the debate over “Jewish continuity,” in all the hand-wringing over assimilation and intermarriage, barely a word is spoken about why bother to remain Jewish at all. In the wake of the Holocaust, Jewish survival has become a good in and of itself. And at the heart of this single-minded focus on survival for sur-

vival’s sake is a disturbing message: that there is no particular reason for Jewry and Judaism to continue, except that we’re here, we’ve been around a long time, and it would be a shame to see us go.

We are repudiating a fundamental aspect of Jewish tradition if movement towards an ultimate goal is left behind for a narrow pursuit of Jewish continuity for continuity’s sake. Not only is such a stance problematic from a moral perspective: I would argue that our actual survival depends on a reevaluation and re-dedication to this sense of sacred purpose. We need a new understanding of our Jewish role in the task of universal redemption, and a commitment as a community to working towards the fulfillment of that role. Too much of the current debate over Jewish continuity focuses on external reinforcements, on mechanisms for “keeping” people Jewish. But when the center begins to collapse, when the foundation is weak, then all the walls and fences in the world will not maintain the structure. Instead of fretting over “how do we keep people Jewish?” we should be asking: *what are we here for?* How do we rediscover and re-activate the force that propels us as individuals and holds us together as a community?

Revisiting Redemption

Jewish “history” begins with a narrative of redemption: the Israelite liberation from Egypt and its aftermath. The Torah tells and retells the journey from slavery to freedom, from idolatry and oppression to a new kind of

society based on human-divine covenant. In the prophetic literature—in response to exile and the destruction of the Temple—the promise of redemption shifts to an unspecified future time, and encompasses both the restoration of the Jewish people within their land and universal visions of peace and prosperity. Here we find some of the most famous biblical images of a world redeemed, in which the Davidic king of Israel will “judge the poor in righteousness, and decide with equity for the powerless of the earth” (Isaiah 11:4), and all violence, from human society to the realm of nature, will cease.

While the biblical idea of redemption was most often expressed in communal terms, the early rabbis developed two distinct aspects of the hope for a better future. One was personal salvation in “the world to come,” a paradisiacal afterlife for the righteous. The other was communal/universal redemption, descriptions of which range from this-worldly expectations of the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel to eschatological visions of an apocalyptic “end of days,” in which the entire natural order of the world would be turned upside down.¹ In terms of the religious life of the Jewish community, however, the rabbis’ enduring contribution was not their debate over the when and how of the advent of Messiah but the institutionalization—within the central daily prayer—of an ongoing faith in the possibility of a better future. To “hope for Your salva-

tion every day” became the daily liturgical expression of the redemptive theme in Jewish consciousness.

Traditional Jewish notions of messianic redemption were conceived largely—although never exclusively—in terms of a radical break with history initiated not by human beings but by God. But by the early modern period new conceptions of a gradual, human-influenced process of social and spiritual transformation began to appear.² In the mystical realm, Lurianic Kabbalah propounded the notion of *tikkun*, a process whereby the correct performance of *mitzvot* by the adept helped effect a restoration of the cosmic order. Thus personal spiritual practice and communal/universal redemption became joined, albeit in an extremely esoteric framework. A few centuries later, in a decidedly non-mystical context, the Enlightenment brought this-worldly hopes for social perfection into a Jewish context. The notion of the Jewish people as a kind of ethical vanguard, a “light unto the nations” in the historical progression towards a better world, became a significant element in modern Jewish identity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hopes for redemption entered the political-historical realm with the rise of the Zionist movement. The success of this movement in establishing Jewish political sovereignty in the land of Israel fulfilled the conditions for the traditional definition of *geulah* redemption, yet brought in its wake its own set of existential and ethical dilemmas. The development of a reli-

gious-nationalist movement, fueled by messianic expectations, has led to tragic events in Israel in recent years—an ironic legacy of the socialist-Zionist vision of Israel as a beacon to international Jewry and the nations of the world.

Whether one is surveying the political terrain in Israel or America, it seems clear that the late twentieth century is a tough time for visions of redemption. Messianism today is viewed as the province of religious fanatics, and even secular convictions of a radically transformed world are dismissed as naive and/or dangerous. For liberal Jews, observant and not, the word “salvation” is, at best, vague and, at worst, alien, a Christian notion of redemption from personal sin that has little to do with Jewish thought and practice. We do not need—and indeed should beware of—messianic certainty and the fanaticism it breeds; but that does not mean we have to surrender all hope of a world transformed in fundamental ways.

So how do we begin talking about the fundamental Jewish concepts of *yeshuah* and *geulah*—salvation and redemption—in a way that makes sense to late twentieth-century sensibilities?

Putting Salvation Back in the Process

The work of Mordecai Kaplan offers us a starting point. The project of redemption was central to Kaplan’s thinking about Judaism and religion in general. In *The Meaning of God in*

Modern Jewish Religion, Kaplan defines God as “the Power that makes for Salvation.”³ While Kaplan’s innovation in proposing a radically non-supernatural understanding of the divine is generally recognized, the crucial second half of his formulation is often left out of the picture altogether. The point is not just that Kaplan’s God is not Person but Process, but that Kaplan understood the divine as a *dynamic* Power, unceasingly moving towards something as yet unachieved—which Kaplan variously terms “salvation,” “regeneration of human nature,” “cooperation” and “freedom.”⁴

Kaplan was critical of traditional Jewish notions of other-worldly salvation, but he built upon an important element in the tradition in his insistence on the connection between individual salvation and communal redemption at the “end of days.” Kaplan defined “salvation” as each person’s achievement of his or her full potential in the context of social harmony—more specifically, within a cooperative, non-oppressive socio-economic order.⁵ Kaplan’s analysis implies a profound and necessary link between spiritual and socio-economic realities. In this view, my spiritual well-being—that is, my wholeness as a person—is intimately bound up with the creation of a social order that respects the integrity and worth of every human being. I cannot be whole if someone else is degraded; I cannot really be free if someone else is exploited.

With this understanding of the

nature of salvation, Kaplan argued that we cannot separate our God-belief—our spiritual lives—from our commitment to working for a better world. Each aspect is dependent on the other. In *The Meaning of God* he writes:

To believe in God is to reckon with life's creative forces, tendencies and potentialities as forming an organic unity, and as giving meaning to life by virtue of that unity. Life has meaning for us when it elicits from us the best of which we are capable, and fortifies us against the worst that may befall us. Thus in the very process of human self-fulfillment, in the very striving after the achievement of salvation, we identify ourselves with God, and God functions in us.⁶

It is important to understand the two points that Kaplan is making here about the role of God, or Godliness, in achieving personal and socio-political fulfillment. The first is that when we speak of God we are referring to a fundamental aspect of reality, a potential for wholeness and balance inherent in life itself, which expresses itself in human striving for salvation. Secondly, our faith in this Power or reality is that which enables us to engage in the work of salvation. We need God—or perhaps more accurately, we need our faith in a power that moves us toward transformation and liberation—to keep us in the struggle, to keep us from either becoming paralyzed by the enormity of the task or cynically accepting an unequal and

oppressive status quo. Kaplan called this the “religious attitude” to reality, a stance that allows us to understand the extent to which things are horribly askew in our world, without losing faith that one day there can be change. In this way religious/spiritual faith comes to occupy a central place in the work of socio-political redemption.

Salvation and Survival

But the issue is not merely connecting our spirituality with our work for social justice, or revitalizing Jewish practice through a dedication to redemptive purpose. Important as they are, salvation is not only about personal fulfillment or finding new meaning in Jewish ritual. On a material, socio-political level, when we talk about salvation we are talking about *survival*. If the majority of American Jews have achieved a certain level of affluence and comfort, if our short-term interests seem to be supported by the status quo, then no amount of “shoulds,” no amount of admonitions to do for others and seek justice, are going to make us act for change, and certainly not to make choices that may directly affect the particulars of our daily lives. *The Jewish community will join a broader struggle for social transformation only when it understands that its vital interests are at stake, as individuals and as a people.*

Key to this understanding is an awareness of how our self-interest, on both the individual and communal level, is bound up with other people's hurt and other people's power. Vio-

lence can enter my life at any time because of someone else's poverty, despair, rage. I may try to buy myself a modicum of safety by moving to a certain neighborhood and confining my nighttime movements to a car, but then I have become a virtual prisoner of my home and my automobile. Sickness can enter my life at any time because of the degradation of the environment, because politicians and corporations in another city or even another country value profits over human health. Social fragmentation affects me, as anxious and angry people look for targets for their unease and their fear—someone who “took” someone else's job, someone who “doesn't even belong” in this country, someone who “controls things behind the scenes” for their advantage and everyone else's loss. There is always someone to hate—immigrants, gays, Blacks, women, Jews. How long will it be before some of that fear and mistrust comes my way?

On the communal level, we need to be particularly aware how changing economic and political tides can have profound effects on us as Jews. Historically, the fortunes of Jewish communities have turned fairly quickly when broad socio-economic shifts provoked anxiety and hardship among the surrounding population. The cycle of Jewish affluence and stability followed by repression, violence, and flight has repeated itself from the Middle Ages into the twentieth century. To place short-term gain (at least for those of us located in the upper-middle strata of the economy) above a

broader and deeper understanding of individual and social good is a costly, even dangerous mistake. America offers perhaps the first real possibility for Jewish integration into a pluralistic society, yet the reality of anti-semitism and the worsening economic situation must give us pause. Our challenge today is to learn from our past experience, while at the same time recognizing that profound historical changes necessitate new strategies for survival.

Until this past century, Jews had little choice but to buy their security and right to exist. Economic usefulness was the primary reason that European Christian regimes tolerated the presence of Jewish communities. This centuries-old Jewish experience has trained us to believe that our well-being hinges on accumulating wealth. But our history also teaches us that such a solution is temporary, that no matter how economically powerful Jews might become our security is never really guaranteed, and flight will always remain a necessary last resort. And so today we find ourselves in an ironic bind. The disproportionate wealth of the American Jewish community is assumed to be our salvation, the key to political power and communal survival; yet at the same time this wealth constitutes a threat, making us vulnerable to the misdirected anger of all those who have not had similar economic success.

Jewish cultural survival strategies are similarly based in our historical experience and have become equally problematic. Jewish communities

were distinct corporate entities in Europe throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, and the effect of this separation from the larger society was double-edged. On the one hand it created boundaries within which traditional Jewish life could thrive, and on the other it bolstered an image of Jews as intrinsically alien and even hostile to their host society. With political emancipation and the entry of Jews into the wider society a new dynamic emerged, pitting absorption into the surrounding Christian culture against adherence to traditional norms and practices.

The current discourse around Jewish continuity is largely defined by this historical polarity between separatism and assimilation, and is characterized by a seemingly insoluble tension. Our survival instinct makes assimilation an attractive alternative, because it is dangerous to appear “different,” to be a distinct “nation within a nation.” As individuals and as a community, we are often uncomfortable when Jews are disproportionately prominent—whether in liberal/left-wing organizations, in Hollywood, or in the medical and legal professions—with the result that we hide or minimize our identities as Jews. Yet, at the same time, there is a consistent communal outcry against assimilation and the threat it poses to “Jewish continuity.” The antidote to assimilation is generally understood in terms of shoring up boundaries between Jews and the wider, non-Jewish society. Perhaps most indicative of this separatist attitude are the constant, vehe-

ment denunciations of intermarriage as both symptom and cause of cultural decline—an issue that has received far more attention than the profound substantive deficiencies in Jewish communal life that cause so many American Jews to abandon their religious and cultural heritage in the first place.

Towards a New Strategy

Our current economic and cultural survival strategies, even when they conflict with one another, are predicated on an understanding of the Jewish community as essentially embattled and alone, able to rely on no one else and predestined to pass through cycles of prominence and oppression. What is missing in our analysis is an understanding that, while anti-semitism remains a real threat, the world around us has changed in fundamental ways. Our outmoded survival strategies are no longer adequate to provide for Jewish continuity and growth, and moreover they are inimical to a larger project of social change. We urgently need new survival strategies based not on selfishness, separatism, and fear, but on the possibility of a world transformed in fundamental ways.

An assessment of the profound changes that have taken place in the world and how these changes affect us as Jews is the first step in formulating a new salvation strategy. Two basic realities have shifted. First, material scarcity, the source of so much violence and division in the world, is no longer a technological necessity,

though tragically it is still a political reality.⁷ There *is* enough to go around, but we have not yet succeeded in creating economic structures and political institutions that will ensure everyone the basic rights of food and shelter. Centralized command economies have failed, while unfettered capitalism is widening the gap between rich and poor and wreaking havoc on the environment. It is time for new thinking about the just distribution of our material abundance. Technological advancement makes possible the achievement of an economic order based on *tzedek* and *hesed*—justice and compassion—instead of greed and exploitation, while the internationalization of the economy brings with it new arenas for cooperation as well as struggle. In this context, a salvation strategy based on individual or even community-wide accumulation of wealth is both a moral and tactical mistake. A moral mistake—because such a strategy implicates us in the continued impoverishment and oppression of millions of humans beings around the globe. A tactical mistake—because the emergence of a global economy renders obsolete the attempts of any one community to achieve economic self-sufficiency. *Accordingly, a commitment to cooperation and economic justice must replace the accumulation of wealth as a strategy for Jewish security and survival.*

The second fundamental shift is the unprecedented level of contact across cultures and nations. Massive movements of refugees, television and cyberspace, growing regional coopera-

tion in economics and the environment, the fact that America will have no majority ethnic group within a few decades—all of these developments herald a new era in cross-cultural interaction. This new reality brings with it conflict as well as the potential for new forms of cooperation. In American society, the greatest threats to potential cooperation are the voices for cultural uniformity—spearheaded by fundamentalist Christians threatening to delegitimize all other value systems—and those of right-wing nationalism and separatism—found in groups ranging from Aryan extremists to the Nation of Islam. It is no coincidence that the same forces that oppose multi-cultural cooperation are also among the strongest exponents of antisemitism.

There is a way beyond both uniformity and separatism, a model of holding onto one's own cultural and religious identity while positively interacting with the other cultures around (what Kaplan characterized as "living in two civilizations"). It is a particular Jewish talent, learned over centuries, that has allowed us to maintain and strengthen our culture while absorbing the best in the cultures around us, from medieval Arab philosophy to Yemenite music and cuisine to Western feminism. Using this centuries-old expertise in cultural survival, American Jews have a key role to play within the small but growing movement of multi-cultural coalition-building. From our own experience in the Holocaust, we know that Jews are not safe in a world in which anti-

semitism and racism fester, where no amount of money or assimilation will save us. We also know that one hatred breeds another, and so the Jewish experience of oppression links us to gays and lesbians, people of color, indeed anyone who is deemed somehow "different." The issue is no longer simply assimilation versus maintaining Jewish culture. Rather, *we need to understand Jewish cultural survival as an integral aspect of the wider task of creating a truly pluralistic society*, in which no group is subjugated or oppressed by another, and every community is free to preserve and create its own cultural expression.

Waking and Walking

In leaving slavery behind and trying to create a free and covenanted society, the newly redeemed Israelites learn the difficulties that liberation entails. Between Egypt and the promised land is trepidation, nostalgia for slavery, weakness, division, grumbling and moaning. It is terrifying to enter uncharted territory; often it seems more sensible to cling to present reality, no matter how painful, than risk the unknown. In our own march towards a better place, we will learn that achieving economic justice is neither easy nor without costs. For the many American Jews who are among the wealthiest 10-20% of the population, attaining a better balance of material resources is going to mean real changes in our own standards of living. For all of us—no matter how much money we make—working to create an economy that combines

tzedek and hesed, fairness and compassion, is going to entail actually talking about money—a subject more taboo than sex and God in our society! We will need to discuss and challenge ourselves about how we make our money and how we spend it; how our class background affects how we think and act around money; how as individuals and families and communities we can make the greatest impact in changing the local economies of which we are a part. These economic issues go beyond our identity as Jews, yet given the particular Jewish experience of wealth, the stereotypes and the hidden fears, our Jewish communities are an essential place to begin these difficult discussions. Jewish tradition also has an important role to play in our work to articulate new visions of economic responsibility and cooperation, as we wrestle with our texts and our history for insight and guidance.

Finding and building bridges to allies will be as difficult as creating a new economic ethos. As the Simpson case reminded all of America, the gap between white and black perceptions of social reality is as wide as the mythic Red Sea. Economic divisions exacerbate the antisemitism and racism found within the various ethnic communities. To reach across barriers of race and of class means that we have to be strong in who we are, but also open to understanding other realities. We need a critical understanding of antisemitism, an analysis of how it has developed and the toll it has taken on us as individuals and as a people. With a clearer understanding of what

the threat to Jews has been and how it continues to function today, we can make better choices about who our true allies are (or might become). With greater awareness of the burdens of antisemitism that we carry around within us—the hidden terrors of expulsion and extermination that lie behind our lives of relative privilege—we will be able to articulate for others what we fear and what we need from our partners in change.

Where are we going? It's time to begin the discussion. And as we set our sights on a mended world, we need to remember that our "walking" as Jews informs all aspects of this journey towards salvation. Our tradition teaches us that redemption is in the daily acts, the mundane aspects of covenant—in eating, creating relationships, raising children, reciting a blessing, spending money, mourning the dead. Thus creating our own Jewish paths, as individuals and as communities, is an integral part of the work of social change. We need our tradition and our community to give us guidance and support to keep our spirits up and our analysis sharp. We need to bring all of our Jewish selves—our spirits and our minds, our prayers and our organizing skills, our money and our time—to this journey. As Hillel urged us, "If not now, when?" Let's get walking.

1. See Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 1987), Ch. 17, for the opinions of the rabbis of the Talmudic period on the themes of redemption, the "world to come," and the "end of days."

2. Gershom Scholem surveys the development of the messianic idea in Ch. 1 of *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), Ch. 1.
3. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1936; rpt. New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1962), Ch. 2. On Kaplan's thinking about social justice, see Rebecca Alpert, "Kaplan's Challenge to Us," in *The Reconstructionist*, Vol. 60, no. 2, Fall 1995, and her "The Quest for Economic Justice: Kaplan's Response to the Challenge of Communism, 1929-1940," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, eds. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert Seltzer (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1990), 385-400.
4. Each chapter in *The Meaning of God* revalues a Jewish holiday in light of a particular aspect of God or Godliness; Rosh Hashanah becomes an expression of "God as the Power that Makes for Social Regeneration" (Ch. 3), Sukkot the expression of "God as the Power that Makes for Cooperation" (Ch. 6), etc.
5. This idea runs throughout *The Meaning of God*, especially chapters 1-3. There are interesting parallels between Kaplan's ideas and Maimonides' conception of the Messianic age, which was decidedly this-worldly and explicitly linked the attainment of a just political order with individual spiritual fulfillment. See Aviezer Ravitsky, "'To the Utmost Human Capacity': Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah," in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 221-256.
6. *Meaning of God*, 26.
7. Maimonides noted this connection between scarcity and social conflict in his conception of the messianic era, where he envisaged a time in which "there will be neither famine nor war, nor envy nor strife, for there will be an abundance of worldly goods" [*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 12:5]. Nearly one thousand years later we know that material abundance alone is necessary but not sufficient for the creation of a peaceful and just society.

“Speak Of It”: Jewish Activism and Jewish Identity

BY MICHELLE CLARK

My parents weren't politically active or sophisticated; they weren't Socialists or Zionists or Bundists. They both grew up to inherit small family businesses. They voted, and still vote Democratic; they are grateful to their country. If they have a politics it consists of asking: "Is it good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?" Despite this, as children, my brother, my sister and I developed a series of ideas which, in retrospect, came right out of the non-Zionist, socialist position of the late nineteenth century. Our assumptions were: 1) All Jews know what it's like to be persecuted; 2) Jews support all other persecuted people (which meant, in our country, when I was a child, "Negroes"); 3) Jews know that if one person is persecuted it can easily be our turn next, so Jews fight for the rights of others.

We also assumed that the Conservative synagogue we attended held

these beliefs. However, I can't remember ever hearing the solidarity analysis articulated by anyone in the Conservative congregation in which we grew up. In retrospect, I think some people held this view and others did not. Once, in 1959, when I was fourteen, at a United Synagogue Youth Encampment, a busload of African-American teen-agers from Georgia came to stay with us overnight. Politely, warmly, we got to know each other a little. This was the only specific program in which I participated that turned into action the assumption that Jews had a primary identification with other oppressed groups.

I now see that, for me, a fourth premise of my childhood was that Jews expect that by working for social justice for all, we will be included even if we don't say a word about ourselves—don't make a peep about self-interest. So, in the early 1960s when I joined the civil rights picket lines at

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the local Woolworth's I did so as a Jew. I worked on campaigns for reform-minded Democrats, as a Jew. When I went to folk sings in Greenwich Village or talks given by African-American leaders like Bayard Rustin and Conrad Linn, I went as a Jew. I never said that I did these things because my Jewish heritage had taught me the importance of fighting for justice. I assumed it, and I assumed others assumed it of me. In fact, I would have been ashamed to say it explicitly.

I tell this personal story because for me, as for many people, I believe it is not easy to speak publicly about Jewishness. Like all Americans, I am a product of what the psychologist Gershen Kaufman calls our "shame-based culture." I fear dependence and need, I want to appear strong and in control at every moment. Kaufman describes shame as a feeling of being "seen in a painfully diminished sense. The self feels exposed to itself and to anyone else present."¹ For me to say that I supported civil rights, at least in part, because I needed protection myself, would have made me feel seen, in Kaufman's sense as vulnerable and needy, instead of strong enough to extend my protection to others. In addition, there was a belief or a hope that Jews were safe in the United States: 'Jews have nothing to worry about here.' Asking for something for myself would be to admit I was not safe. In short, I was ashamed of being ashamed.

Jewish Ideological Struggles

My struggles were a personalized

version of the many ideological questions that have surrounded the Jewish people since the eighteenth century when the Enlightenment began to promise more tolerance and wider opportunities for all minorities. The price of Jewish entry into this wider world has always been controversial. Steven M. Cohen, a sociologist of American Jewry, writes, "in Europe, the Jewish question divided liberals who favored Emancipation from conservatives who demanded prior Jewish acculturation, if not religious conversion, as the price of admission to the larger society."² Historically, the number of activists in progressive causes has been disproportionately Jewish, I believe, because many Jews took the strong ethical tradition in Judaism and created a bridge between this tradition and the Enlightenment ethic of tolerance and pluralism.

There are several themes in traditional Jewish teaching that point toward an ethic of identification and solidarity with the oppressed. One is the imperative to charity and empathy as exemplified in the Torah's injunction to love your neighbor as yourself; this is the statement that opens each morning's prayers. Another traditional theme, honored especially at Passover, is the directive to be hospitable to the stranger because "you were a stranger in a strange land." Third, there is the vision of Zion as a "light unto the nations," that teaches chosenness is an imperative to reach out to others. Even Jews who are minimally observant will identify the meaning of being Jewish as carrying

an ethical imperative to be a good, moral person.³

In my extended family this theme is articulated in the memories and stories about my two grandfathers. My maternal grandfather, a prosperous businessman, went out searching for people in need and brought the hungry in for the Sabbath meal; he is remembered by his children primarily for this goodness rather than for his material successes. Stories of my paternal grandfather also emphasize charity. He was a garment worker who opened his small synagogue for the early prayers, every morning before work. One day he found a twenty dollar bill there; when no one claimed it, he contributed it to charity. Righteous living was the life goal of both of these men.

At the turn of the century, various socialist movements were in ongoing disagreement over whether Jewish particularity was desirable and whether antisemitism would disappear with the coming of worker equality. Jewish difference was seen in part, as a form of nationalism, and all nationalism, theoretically, was the enemy of the class struggle. Some socialist groups felt upholding Jewish identity and particular Jewish needs was important, while others dismissed these particularities or defined them as dangerous to working-class identification.

Without discussion or dialogue, the New Left took the latter position. This meant that in the 1960s and 70s, it was only mainstream liberal organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation

League, which were concerned with protecting Jewish rights along with the rights of other minorities. However, over the past fifteen years, groups like Jews for Urban Justice, New Jewish Agenda, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), and TIKKUN magazine, among others, have stressed the importance of asserting Jewish needs as well as taking progressive stands in other causes. Included in the progressive agenda is the fight against antisemitism as a distinct form of the larger struggle against racism. During this same fifteen years, because of the advent of an articulated and vocal multi-culturalism, another need has arisen. That need is to articulate, in public, the progressive aspects of the Jewish tradition.

Jewish Activism No Longer Assumed

To understand why this articulation is important, it is necessary to understand that other oppressed groups no longer assume Jews, because they are Jews, will be part of their coalition. Activists in their forties or older seem to have a hard time accepting this, because they feel that it is self-evident that Jews are disproportionately involved in progressive causes. Younger activists, however, no longer make this assumption for the following reasons: 1) because of the well-publicized polarization between portions of the African-American community and portions of the Jewish community; 2) because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which Jews have superior economic, political

and military strength; 3) because one form of antisemitism is to see Jews as part of a secret, wealthy, ruling elite; 4) because of recent, vocal involvement by Jews in more conservative causes; and 5) because of silence among progressive Jews about their own progressive Jewish tradition.

Progressive activists who have not thought and felt their way through their ideas and feelings about being Jewish seem to find it impossible to think of anything good and compassionate about the Jewish tradition, although they are usually ardent multi-culturalists, open to and interested in every other cultural group on earth. In *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (1989), Thomas Friedman says that both Jews and Gentiles generally hold Jews to a higher ethical standard. Consequently, Jewish transgressions, when they occur, are viewed by both Jews and Gentiles as more morally shocking and shameful. At the same time, it's sometimes difficult for Jews to take credit for the good things that they do, as Jews, because the assumption of a higher ethical standard means that these good things are assumed.

Jewish progressive activists sometimes speak and act as if they are stuck between the Scylla and Charybdis of this dilemma. If one mentions something positive in the Jewish tradition, an activist who has not thought through issues of his or her Jewish identity may remark, 'It's not just Jews who have that positive tradition,' as if to praise is to boast. Or, the activist may counter by describing something

negative in the Jewish tradition: one dislikes something about her mother; another makes a derogatory remark about some policy of the Israeli government. This, I believe, comes from: 1) a deep and unexamined disappointment in the Jews and Jewishness for being imperfect; 2) an unwillingness to face one's own possible vulnerability as a Jew; 3) the fear that if Jews offer an interpersonal bridge and expect what Gershen Kaufman calls mutuality of response, no one will be waiting on the other side.

The Cost of What Jews Hide

In my work as a psychotherapist I use a competency-based model. I work with my client's strengths, and I believe that change is not possible from a position of feeling inadequate or hopeless. I have no list of pathologies that occur if Jewish identity issues go unexplored. Nor do I think such a list exists.

It's been my observation that many American Jews are mildly depressed much of the time. I believe that minimizing the importance of one's Jewishness contributes to the chronically self-critical thoughts that constitute this very low-level depression in Jewish adults.⁴ Whether or not one is mildly depressed, however, it is my experience that, like all identity struggles, exploring unexamined feelings about Judaism and Jewishness leads to a more authentic and positive encounter with Judaism and, therefore, with the self. It is, invariably, an expansive and enhancing activity.

Damage occurs to the way we per-

ceive ourselves, to the way others perceive us and to the Jewish community when activists hide or don't mention their Jewish tradition. If progressive people don't allude to their Judaism, and conservative and reactionary Jews always allude to their Judaism, the public conclusion is obvious: Jewish equals conservative. This conclusion then makes progressive activists who have not thought through their Jewish identity issues more anxious and more ashamed of being Jewish, and the silence about progressive Jews deepens. The general public and the Jewish community all continue, then, to perceive the Jewish community as a conservative or reactionary one, rather than the diverse one that it is.

This perception is unfortunate for several reasons. First, it is not accurate. Second, silence about vibrant progressive traditions in the United States is the norm in the schools and in the media, and the silence of Jewish progressives adds to this tendency. Third, this perception contributes to insuring that each young generation of progressive Americans will have to reinvent the wheel of theory and action. Fourth, it limits the growth of creative, progressive Jewish activities. Fifth, it leaves young Jewish activists ignorant of their antecedents, which weakens them and makes them more vulnerable to attacks of guilt and shame. This gap was evident at a 1992 JFREJ conference in New York City in which many "twenty-something" Jewish activists learned, for seemingly the first time, the depth of the Jewish progressive tradition. Finally, some

day Jews may need a mutuality of response in the face of a new persecution, and we will have no acknowledged friends among other oppressed peoples. I know that antisemitism has a life of its own, and all the coalition-building in the world may not save us in a dire political or economic crisis, though it can't hurt us either.

Discuss Your Jewishness

When I say that I think activists who are Jews should act as Jews I mean something both very simple and very difficult. I mean, "Say it." Not constantly (unless you're in the mood), but occasionally. Discuss your Jewishness when anyone is interested in talking about it. If you're a public figure in your organization, find a way to put something about your Jewish tradition into your public pronouncements.

A close friend of mine works with Central American refugees and when I was helping her with a family, the issue of Jewishness arose. The adults in this family were surprised that Jews still existed, for they had been taught that Jews lived only in the days of the Bible. An interesting discussion followed. This was an easy moment for me to talk about Judaism because the adults, who had endured many horrors, were uninformed rather than antisemitic. And I was the person bountiful; I was offering my hospitality to them. I was not in need and not a threat.

It can be more difficult to say something about Jewishness in a speech or at a meeting about, say, anti-

mal rights, or the protection of the rainforest, or in agitation for equality of health resources. Here you might anger other members of your organization who may see mentioning the Jewish tradition as the beginning of fragmentation in the organization. They might not understand why this seemingly extra piece of information is important. Speaking out can be used as an opening to dialogue about why this issue is important. Even if you and your group decide against a public pronouncement, you have begun an important discussion within your organization.

I know this isn't always easy to do. I have written elsewhere about my own movement, as an adult, toward an active Jewish identification.⁵ For someone who has not done this ever, or for a long time, it requires a commitment of time and energy for feeling, thinking, talking, and reading. It requires finding a way to engage actively with Jewishness, whatever this means to you.

For myself, after reading and talking, I joined and became active in a synagogue and participated in the peace organization, "Women in Black." A friend of mine, after reading and talking, did a series of paintings, first, about the Holocaust, then about other, joyous aspects of Judaism, and then, although she "can't relate to religion," enrolled her daughter in the local Hebrew School. She would rather, she says, enroll her daughter in a secular institution that stresses Jewish culture, without the religion, but there are none in central Vermont.

Her daughter, by the way, is happy to attend. Recently, I've known several progressives who identify as secular humanists and atheists, whose pre-teen children insisted on studying for Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The children are interested in the link between Judaism and their family's values, even if their parents aren't.

Making Links

In the daily prayer, *V'e'avavta*, we are commanded to speak of the love of God when we walk on the road and when we return home. Similarly, I have been trying to mention my Jewishness in my daily life and to share something from it when the subject comes up. When I am teaching (I work with adults returning to college) and the subject is my students' multicultural heritage, I make sure to talk about my own. If I can find a natural way into the subject, I say something about the progressive activism of my tradition.

I believe that others, everywhere in the United States, are thinking about the importance of making this link. Recently, I received a mailing from an organization in Seattle, "The Witness Campaign," which was formed to aid Moslem women in the former Yugoslavia who were raped as a matter of policy by the military forces of opposing armies. The letter containing the fund-raising appeal was written by a woman whose parents had been in Hitler's camps and who felt that it was this experience that moved her to work to aid the victims of systematic violence and humiliation. I

doubt that such a letter would have been written ten, or even five, years ago. Similarly, in the spring of 1994 there was a spate of letters to the editor in the *Boston Globe*, in which the individual writers protest, as Jews, the treatment of Haitian refugees.

The ideal of universal understanding and tolerance is not harmed by Jews identifying as Jews in causes that fight for freedom from oppression. Rather, progressive activists who have so diligently obeyed Hillel's maxim, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" must now also explore, perhaps for

the first time, the beginning of Hillel's directive, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

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1. Gershen Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman, 1980/1992), 9.
 2. Steven M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York/London: Tavistock, 1983), 34.
 3. Marshall Sklare and J. Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
 4. I am thinking of individuals, who, if tested, might register between 7-9 on the Beck Depression Inventory.
 5. Michelle Clark, "No Shuttle to Central Vermont," in *Bridges* 1, no. 2 (1990), 15-21.

Babel and Political Sectarianism

BY LAWRENCE BUSH

"Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves" Genesis 11: 4

Two monologues used to alternate in my mind whenever I walked the streets of my hometown, New York City.

The first was self-evaluative: How do I rank? Or as former mayor Ed Koch used to put it, "How'm I doing?" In this city of vast power and wealth—in this city of vast inequity and poverty—how should I measure my own achievements? In what percentile do I stand in terms of well-being, independence, income, good looks, self-actualization, and so on?

My second monologue resembled that of a "Prepare for the End of the World" prophet/lunatic. I adjudged the city, in its vastness, artificiality and indifference, to be "unnatural," "wrong," an idolatrous monument to power, on a par with the Tower of Babel. The harried look on people's faces, the tension between races and genders, the looming skyscrapers that confined the sun and the moon to narrow corridors, the hovering sense of danger, along with the constant sexual stimulation and the bombard-

ment of commercial messages—beneath it all I could sense, as Job had once sensed: "Men groan(ing) in the city;/ The souls of the dying cry(ing) out..." (Job 24:12).

These two obsessive monologues were actually connected, even interdependent. I was fostering my sense of personal exemption and exceptionalism by castigating the city as a fallen, sinful place. My self-esteem was dependent upon a pessimistic, damning view of the metropolis and the "system" it represented. I was embracing what conservative historian Aileen S. Kraditor calls a "Grand Negation" for the purpose of self-promotion—a practice typical of salvational religions, which promise redemption to the true believer, usually in rather vague terms, and vilify the world, usually in explicit and relentless terms.

My New York monologues were not religiously-inspired scripts, however—at least, not in any classic sense. Instead, my "Grand Negation" and my related claim to exceptionalism were expressions of a radical, Marxist

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mind-set which I had inherited from my grandmother, a charter member of the Communist Party in 1921/22 and an ideologue for at least half a century thereafter, and from my parents, who were Party members until the mid-1950s. It was a mind-set which I had also cultivated on my own as a Sixties-generation, pot-smoking hippie, for whom radical opposition to the capitalist/imperialist/white power system was an intellectual touchstone.

The “Grand Negation” of Marxism

Though it is as difficult to reduce that mind-set to a few propositions as it would be to reduce Judaism to a few essential doctrines, Aileen Kraditor does so admirably in her provocative book, *“Jimmy Higgins” — The Mental World of the American Rank-and-File Communist, 1930-1958*. She presents the following nine propositions as fundamental to the Communist version of the “Grand Negation:”

“The American social order is a System; it is evil; anti-American regimes may commit abuses, but pro-American regimes commit crimes; a free-market economy distributes wealth unjustly; the profit motive is wicked; some version of socialism is progressive and on the agenda of history; human nature should be improved through social engineering; the poor are more virtuous than the rich but more easily swayed by propaganda; and it is immoral for anyone to wish to rise in the world as an individual.”¹

Kraditor acknowledges that “many

inhabitants of the real world believe in one or more” of these credible and arguable propositions; it is when “each proposition forms part of the context of the others; each adds one brick, carefully fitted to the others to leave no spaces” that we encounter what she calls an “ideological style of thinking.” As a Communist Party member from 1947 until 1958, Kraditor was enthralled by such a “comprehensive ideology,” and recalls the following as among its core perceptions:

- “The world-historic significance of trivial acts...(and) the total responsibility shouldered by each individual...No matter how humble your task, it is an integral part of the total movement of humanity toward the glorious future, and if you fail in your task, you will set humanity back in its struggle.”

- “People and actions lost their individuality; they were defined by the labels they wore. For example,...if a black murdered a white person, he was protesting against oppression, but if a white murdered a black, he was manifesting the degeneracy of our culture....Nothing was what it seemed to be; everything was a sign of something else... (A Communist) did not react to data on their own terms; he first found out how to categorize them and only then felt free to interpret them” (72-73).

My Sectarian Search for Social “Truth”

This description of sectarian thinking resonates powerfully for me as a

“red diaper baby” who used to believe, at the very least, in the attainability of a “correct, scientific” analysis of social reality. During my college and young adult years (early 70s), I wrestled intensely with the various “political lines” presented by the sects of the New Left in hope of finding an ineradicable Truth that would shape my life decisions. Was the Weather Underground, for example, correct that black Americans constitute an oppressed nation, that surrendering “white skin privilege” and submitting to the leadership of black revolutionaries are the main tasks of white radicals, and that the goal of revolution should be the dismembering of the imperialist U.S.A. (with the Southwest being returned to Mexico, the Deep South being reserved for the black nation, etc.)? In which case, I should, at the very least, stop performing Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” during my stints as an amateur musician, since the song was, as one above-ground Weatherwoman pointed out to me, a celebration of white skin privilege.

As for China’s Cultural Revolution, was it, as proclaimed by the October League, an incubator for the “new socialist man”—whose sense of ambition, responsibility, community and personal well-being would likely be incomprehensible to, and far in advance of personalities such as mine, which were deformed by the class system? In which case, I should cease my intellectual strivings and my efforts to develop as a writer and find a job that would bring me in contact with “the

people.”

Was fascism an inevitable outgrowth of the inevitable crisis of capitalism, as maintained by the Communist Party and most other left-wing groups? In which case, I should regard reformers of capitalism, such as Ralph Nader, and defenders of “bourgeois liberties,” such as the American Civil Liberties Union, as “running dogs of the ruling class,” rather than as allies (and prospective employers).

Was marriage inherently oppressive to women, and lesbianism more natural and liberatory for women than heterosexuality, as assumed by certain feminist separatist groups? In which case, rather than moving on from living together to getting married, Susan and I should at least experiment with bisexuality within the context of an “open” relationship.

Was Zionism a form of racism, as contended by nearly *every* left-wing group? In which case, despite its astonishingly tenacious liberalism, the Jewish community deserved only my scorn.

Which of these realities were real—and how should my life choices reflect them? This question tormented me, for even while I was bent on making an ideological commitment, even while I yearned to understand and master reality, there was some measure of skepticism always standing watch in my heart. The ideologue in me warred with this skeptic, vilifying him as a weak, petty-bourgeois character who was clinging to his male, heterosexual and white-skin privilege—yet my skeptical critic hung on, vindicat-

ed by the fact that too many of the radicals with whom I actually associated were either guilt-ridden masochists or domineering mind-benders. I could share revolutionary Rambo fantasies with them, and passionate denunciations of the system, and brave exercises in self-criticism, but no real vision and no real intimacy.

Jewish Consciousness as a Source of Skepticism

“Someone who is arrogant because of his Torah-study [read: political line],” Rabbi Akiba is quoted as saying (*Avot DeRabbi Natan* A: 11) is comparable to “an animal’s carcass thrown by the side of the road. Everyone who passes by puts his hand on his nose, stays far away, and goes on as quickly as possible.”² Here lies an explanation of the pitiful marginality of the groups with which I was associating. Though the passage, the text, and the speaker were all unknown to me, somewhere in my heart there lived a Jew with Talmudic intuitions—a Jew for whom skepticism and seeing both sides of an argument were essential ingredients of “Truth.”

His complex Jewish identity was neither wholly religious, nor wholly nationalist, nor wholly ethnic, nor wholly whole, nor wholly pulverized. It was an identity that defied tidy definition, yet powerfully persisted—which was enough to drive an ideologue crazy!

The Jew in me was attracted to moderation and caution, to the balance of the great Hillel, who summed

up Judaism while standing on one foot by speaking of *not* doing unto others what you would *not* want done unto you—a negative golden rule, a golden rule of restraint, unlike the Christian (or Stalinist or Maoist) preachment to *do unto others*.

The Jew in me believed that “heal” rather than “smash” should be the byword of true political change (“Anger is a fool,” says a Yiddish proverb). He believed in compassion (*rakhmones*, from the Hebrew root for “womb,” womb-consciousness), not rage, as the passion to be mobilized within the human heart on behalf of progress—and that progress might be better represented by *Shabbat*, by a redefinition of the meaning and purpose of production itself, than by a mere reshuffling of ownership of the means of production.

The “Chosen People”—Judaism’s Sectarian Scheme

Of course, Judaism can itself be rendered an ideology, full of salvational madness, as has been made obvious in our own time by the triumphalist right-wing settlers of Israel. In particular, the “chosen people” doctrine and its “inevitable” dénouement of messianic redemption mark Judaism as classically “salvational,” different only in its embrace of the community, rather than the individual, as the exceptional and excepted unit.

There is even a “Grand Negation” linked by Jewish legend to the “chosen people” idea—namely, the story of the Tower of Babel, that prime symbol of human iniquity and godlessness.

Louis Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews* notes that when the languages of human beings were "confounded" and the 70 nations of the human race were "scattered...over the face of the whole earth" (*Gen.* 11:9) in response to the building of the Tower, "God and the angels cast lots concerning the various nations..."

Each angel received a nation, and Israel fell to the lot of God. To every nation a peculiar language was assigned, Hebrew being reserved for Israel—the language made use of by God at the creation of the world.³

The sinfulness of the world and the election of Israel were thus established as interdependent events—an example of a "Grand Negation" for purposes of self-promotion, strongly reminiscent of my "Whoa to New York" monologue.

Ginzberg assures us, however, that the alarming linkage between "chosenness" and the Babel "Grand Negation" is only folkloric, a popular notion fostered by pseudepigraphic works (that is, by falsely attributed writings that were not included in the Jewish canon as it came together in the second century c.e.).⁴ The Talmudic rabbis, for their part, usually sought to downplay the messianic dénouement of chosenness, despite the redemptive fantasies that were epidemic following the disastrous wars against Rome and the subsequent Jewish exile from Palestine. The Mishnah makes no demands about believing in a forthcoming Messiah or messianic age, and the Palestinian Tal-

ud fails to record messianic speculations.⁵ Only the Babylonian Talmud indulges talk about *mashiah*—and often with a firm hand of restraint.

"Repentance and Good Deeds"

There is, for example, Rabbi Jonathan ben Eleazar's outburst in the Babylonian Talmud (*B. Sanhedrin* 97b), quoted by Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman: "Blast the very existence of those who calculate the time of redemption!" There is the famous warning attributed to Yohanan ben Zakkai, who smuggled himself out of Jerusalem to save Judaism from the ruins of Bar Kokhba's messianic campaign against Rome: "If there is a seedling in your hand and you are informed, 'Messiah has arrived,' first plant the seedling, then go greet the Messiah." There is Master Samuel's effort to minimize the revolutionary significance of the messianic age-to-come by arguing that it would be identical for the people of Israel to their present age, only without subjection to foreign powers.⁶ And in my favorite passage of the lot, Rav (Rabbi Abba ben Aivu), the third century c.e. sage whose debates with Samuel comprise large portions of the Babylonian Talmud, declares that "all the calculated dates of redemption have passed, and now the matter depends upon repentance and good deeds" (*B. Sanhedrin* 97b).

These utterances all seek to downplay apocalyptic expectations without jettisoning the messianic doctrine—to keep hope alive, yet cushion disappointment and blunt people's zealous-

ness about (as Aileen Kraditor puts it) “the world-historic significance of trivial acts.” I hear within them a sigh of hope and a groan of realism (which, for Jews, both sound like “Oy!”).

Rav, especially, seems to have understood that the *calculability* of redemption implies its *inevitability*—“It’s coming, we just need to figure out when!”—and that the *inevitability* of redemption looms large as an element of the ideological style of thought: the inevitable crisis of capitalism, the inevitable triumph of socialism, the inevitable redemption of Zion, the inevitable Second Coming of Christ.

Such a belief in inevitability lends extraordinary arrogance to salvational enterprises. It renders non-believers, especially those who would oppose our version of salvation or propose alternative solutions, as arch-enemies—opponents not only of our designs, but of the Good itself. At the same time, inevitability lends to each of our deeds a magical, incantatory power. An enlightening word usage (e.g., “differently abled” as a replacement for “disabled”) becomes not merely a consciousness-raising tool that serves to shed valuable new perspectives on the status quo, but a reality-shaping tool that is an indispensable part of the calculus of redemption and a badge of membership among the chosen.⁷ The ideologue thus gains what Kraditor calls “the promise of intellectual control of reality... Belief in inevitable outcomes,” she notes, “is really belief in the infallibility of the theory that predicts

them...” (250).

After disposing of the calculability/inevitability of redemption, Rav calls upon us nevertheless to *participate* in the redemption of the world through *teshuvah* and good deeds. This presents a bold challenge to the ideological style of thinking, on two fronts:

1) By calling for universal repentance, Rav is withholding from the ideologue a claim to innocence and exceptionalism. Rav poses not an “either-or” political paradigm of good-versus-evil, poor- versus-rich, innocent-versus-guilty (“If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem”), but a more holistic “and-therefore”—“We’re all part of the problem *and* the solution, therefore let’s get to work.”

2) By issuing a call for good deeds, Rav denies the “Grand Negation.” A world that can be redeemed by *mitzvot* is a world not systematically flawed. Rav thus affirms the Ralph Nader/ACLU type of “reformism” that has been the bane of every left-wing ideological sect I’ve ever encountered.

Activism without Ideology

What, then, is the difference between the radical activist and the radical ideologue? What is the difference between constructing a tower as an observation deck, in hope of penetrating the illusory surface appearances of social phenomena and seeing the “Big Picture,” and constructing a Tower of Babel to assault the heavens?⁸

For me, as a recovering ideologue, the distinction is subtle and hard to

parse. My flight from ideology has entailed a flight from significant social activism, for I tend paranoically to detect a “Grand Negation” lurking behind even new and refreshing programs of radical insight. Behind the “politics of meaning,” I sense a supposition about systematic meaninglessness in our lives; behind radical environmentalism, I sense an apocalyptic vision and a contempt for science; behind Jewish Renewal, I sense condescension towards the dimly aware, unintoxicated Jewish masses. While the insights of these and other movements thrill me, that very thrill sets off alarms.

Ideological agnosticism therefore feels like my safest stance for now: to master my passions without idealizing any particular role model; to clarify my values without lending them religious weight; to avoid doing to others what I would not want done to me; to sustain compassion for my fellow human beings and appeal to them on that basis; to perform whatever healing deeds I can perform.

Such a program won't summon up *mashiah*, but *mashiah* is too busy, these days, wrestling with the Religious Right, to be bothered with the likes of me. Indeed, stuck with merely defending the Constitution, the federal government, liberalism and pluralism against the “Grand Negation” of Pat Robertson/Buchanan, I do feel my activist soul stirring. Just don't ask me to partake in the “vision thing.” Rather, like the citizen of Chelm who got panicky at the news that *mashiah* was approaching, I'm

committed to muddling through:

“Don't worry! Think of all the trials and tribulations our people have met and survived--the bondage in Egypt, the wickedness of Haman, the persecutions and pogroms without end. All of these the good Lord has helped us overcome, and with just a little more help, we will overcome *mashiah*, too!”⁹

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1. Aileen Kraditor, “Jimmy Higgins”—*The Mental World of the American Rank-and-File Communist* (New York, London, & Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 7.
 2. Trans. by Danny Siegel, *Where Heaven and Earth Touch* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1989), 293.
 3. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. I, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), 181.
 4. Ginzberg, Vol. V, 204-205.
 5. Judah Goldin, *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 375-376.
 6. Goldin, 362, 372, 373.
 7. On the other hand, dismissals of “politically correct” language usually encourage not independent thought, but hateful irreverence and cynicism about human progress. We are well-advised by our tradition about the power of words to materially create and destroy!
 8. The Tower of Babel “enterprise was neither more nor less a rebellion against God,” writes Louis Ginzberg (Vol. I, 179), “and there were three sorts of rebels among the builders. The first party spoke, Let us ascend into the heavens and wage warfare with Him; the second party spoke, Let us ascend into the heavens, set up our idols, and pay worship unto them there; and the third party spoke, Let us ascend into the heavens, and ruin them with our bows and spears.”
 9. Adapted from Nathan Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1948), 337-338.

On That Day

BY JOSEPH G. ROSENSTEIN

After the *Shema*, perhaps the most familiar verse of the traditional Jewish prayer book is the closing verse of the *Aleynu*—*bayom hahu, yihiyeh Adonay ehad, ushemo ehad*—“On that day, God will be one, and God’s name will be one.”

The rousing tune to which it is chanted and its proximity to the end of the morning service have ensured both its familiarity and its obscurity; we all recognize it, but we hardly ever focus on the words. We desperately need, however, to understand the verse and its meaning for us.

To set the verse in context, we note that the opening phrase, “on that day,” is unabashedly messianic, looking toward a time when all somehow will be made right with the world—so that the *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) mentioned several verses earlier in the prayer is indeed a reality. The verse does not utter a wistful hope, but a clear vision—not “one day” but “on that day.”

Both in the *Aleynu* and in the book of Zechariah (14: 9), the verse is the culmination of a prophecy that all nations will acknowledge God as ruler. In the days of Zechariah, pagan-

ism and idolatry were prevalent; his expectation was that the amoral and whimsical world-view that these reflected would one day be abandoned and replaced universally by the view of a world created and sustained through morality and purpose. This world-view is expressed using metaphors of God as creator, as parent, as ruler. In Zechariah’s prophecy, the universal acceptance of this world-view is reflected in the image that one day everyone together would acknowledge God’s authority and dominion.

Different Gods or One?

“On that day, God will be one.” Today, it is religion, not paganism, that is prevalent, and though many ostensibly acknowledge God as ruler, we all pray to different gods. Although, on a personal level, religion provides many people with comfort and strength, on a global level religion is a significant factor in almost all of the disputes that occur around the world. The adherents of the world’s religions continually elevate themselves, their beliefs, their gods above those of others; ultimately, after years

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of rehearsing these commitments, they take them to their logical conclusion and kill for them.

God's oneness is in our hands; it can only be manifest through our unity of purpose. We need to put more effort into affirming what unites us, and less on emphasizing what divides us. We need to find ways of transforming our own faith communities and faith commitments so that in generations to come it will be impossible for our descendants in faith to claim that they and only they have "the Truth".

The challenge is to do that and also, paradoxically, ensure that our religions provide their adherents with the spiritual resources and strength to live, individually and communally, by their Truth. It requires that we continue to draw spiritual strength from our different heritages, live by different visions of the ultimate reality, travel on parallel spiritual paths, and, at the same time, affirm the essential unity and harmony of our goals and visions. Is this a challenge that we can meet, or can our religions only fulfill their purpose by continuing to assert their supremacy before God?

"And God's name will be one." Many verses in the Bible and the prayerbook refer to "God's name," and the key to understanding these verses is to remember that in the Bible one's name describes one's essence, one's most important characteristic. Unlike in *Romeo and Juliet*, where a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet, a god by any other name would smell quite different. And what

is God's essence? This is clear from the Bible—the essence of God is redemption; our God is the One who rescues. When God appears to Moses at the burning bush, Moses is told that God's "name" was not known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—for they did not see God's redemption at work, as Moses would shortly. Whenever the phrase occurs, it speaks to rescue and redemption, at the global level and at the individual level.

God of Redemption: The One Who Rescues

This redemption can be dramatic and national, as in the Exodus from Egypt, where the "mighty hand and outstretched arm" was evident to all. Or it can be modest and personal, in the words of the psalmist "when everything is surrounding me, encircling me, closing in on me, I rely on God's name" (Ps. 118: 11); even if the difficulties do not disappear, I am able to deal with them with God's sustaining strength.

Most Jews have not focused on God as "the One who rescues," focusing instead on God as "the One who commands." The Rabbis taught that God took us out of Egypt in order to give us the Torah—that the purpose of redemption from Egypt was acceptance of God's will at Sinai; as a result, the high point of Judaism is not at the Sea of Reeds, but at Mount Sinai. The essential holiday is Shavuot, not Passover, and our daily relationship with God is to "the One who commands," rather than to "the One who rescues." In part, this shift in focus

may be a reaction to Christianity and its other-worldly “salvation”; in part, it may be a defense against the harm done our people by the eternal stream of false messiahs, which began millennia ago and continues to our day, whose promises of redemption never materialized.

As a result of our ignoring the One who rescues, we have no contemporary religious language for discussing the messianic era. When it comes to Jewish practice, we have developed a framework within which we can discuss what it is that God commands us to do, what kinds of lives God wants us to lead. We have found ways of giving the tradition a voice (though without a veto). But we have not put into the spiritual marketplace alternative expressions of redemption; as a result, when a group of Jews is asked “What will happen on that day?” one of the few answers they can provide is that “the Temple will be rebuilt”.

Why is that response no longer adequate?

Two Competing Messianisms

In our tradition, there are two competing perspectives on messianic times. One is represented by the visionary prophecies of Isaiah—a time when the lion will lie down with the lamb; the other is the down-to-earth vision of Jews liberated from oppression and domination. For Rabbi Akiba, nearly nineteen hundred years ago, the military commander Bar Kokhba was the *mashiah*, since he would overthrow the Romans; for Maimonides, about eight hundred

years ago, messianic times meant that Jewish subjugation to other peoples—Christian and Moslem—would be ended. In those days, that was an imaginable goal—to throw off the yoke of oppression, return to our homeland, return to Jerusalem and restore the monarchy that God promised everlastingly to David and his descendants, worship our God in our rebuilt temple, sit securely under our vines and fig trees, and live our own personal and communal lives.

That goal is no longer imaginable—or rather is no longer imaginative, no longer messianic—for our world has changed. We still must strive for all those objectives, but achieving them will not bring about the messianic era we pray for. We must understand that no community will ever again be able to live so in isolation from the rest of the world that it can simply tend its own garden; all of our destinies are irrevocably connected.

The “down-to-earth” vision of messianic days has become irrelevant. Suppose for a moment that the Lubavitcher Rebbe were really the *mashiah*. How would that make our world any different?

On that day, in the words of Isaiah, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea” (11: 9). Messianic times will involve a sea-change, a transformational event that changes everyone’s perspective; at some point our interconnectedness and the consequences for our beliefs and behaviors will become apparent to all. If it is not

apparent to all that the messiah has come, then it is a false alarm. For this reason, *mashiah* cannot fulfill exclusively the scenario of any one group, but must instead fulfill every religion's and non-religion's vision of the end of days. Thus a major reason for the delay is ironically the fervor of those who want their own *mashiah*, not recognizing that there is only one *mashiah*, and that *mashiah* must be for all. Each religion is the guardian of its Truth, each has its own Vision, but these competing truths and visions make it impossible for humanity to receive a transformational event that transcends each of the parochial visions. (The irrelevancy of Lubavitch is, poignantly, the narrowness of their vision.) Before *mashiah* can come, all religions must come to see themselves as "faith communities," not as "truth holders," affirming that there are many gates to the city. Each can be chosen and can see the particular value in its own path, without denying the paths of the others. Only the visionary universal view of redemption is now realistic.

One Truth

"On that day, God will be one, and God's name will be one." On that day, everyone will realize that all of the truths that we adhere to are interpretations of one Truth, that all of the gods to which we pray are manifestations of one God, that all of the peoples to which we belong are variations

of one People. On that day, we will realize that none of us has achieved our vision, that none of us has truly articulated God's redemption, and we will begin to look for a new common vision and new metaphors of redemption. On that day, we will form one congregation—*agudah ahat*—to do Your will whole-heartedly. On that day, we will realize that we, individually and collectively, are not and cannot be the rulers of the world, for it is entrusted to our management and stewardship, requiring our humility. On that day, we will respect the many different paths to God, and remove the disrespect from our own paths. On that day, we will understand that each of us, and all of our peoples, are part of a whole that transcends the sum of its parts. On that day, we will have a "new heart," one that is not made of stone but of flesh, when God's new covenant will be an organic part of us, not etched unchangingly and intolerantly in our "hearts of stone" (Ezek. 36:26). On that day, we will all live together, each tending our own gardens, each according to one's needs and deeds, the lion living with the lamb, each unafraid. On that day, the world will be mended, since all will be involved in mending the world. On that day, "the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea." "On that day, God will be one, and God's name will be one."

A Healing Methodology for Here and Now

Arthur Waskow, *Down-to-Earth Judaism: Food, Money, Sex and the Rest of Life*.
William Morrow and Company, NY: 1995, 402 pp.

REVIEWED BY VANESSA L. OCHS

The “down-to-earth Judaism” from which so many of us have emerged, Arthur Waskow suggests, was a “restrictive, divisive, irrational, oppressive” Judaism, which was passed on to us by forebears serving as “unhelpful guides to the world we sought to live in.” No matter what our earliest orientations to Judaism—if they were angry, loving, ambivalent or altogether disconnected—there are vast areas of disconnectedness we need to bridge, as we seek to harmonize the vast repository of Jewish wisdom and the most basic needs of our day-to-day lives. Here, Waskow provides a healing methodology and offers himself as a guide who can be articulate in the languages of both *Torah* and *Modernity*.

Waskow’s focus on the “here and now” in this book (and what could be more “here and now” than food, money, sex and leisure?) is, for me, its most endearing aspect. If Jewish wisdom feels pertinent only to the complex realities of standing at Sinai or about a life in a forthcoming messian-

ic era, what of the mythic language can speak to us now? Waskow chooses not to get exercised about repairing the existing Jewish world for its future inhabitants. After all, who can divine what their needs and dreams will be? More to the point, he recognizes that this isn’t the moment for altruism—we must attend to our own neediness. Waskow’s concern is, as he puts it, “to bring together knowledge that can lead to action. Knowledge that can help us...transform the world we live in—our households, our friendships, our kitchens, our banks, our beds...”

At the start, a caveat for readers, one which emerges out of a phenomenon which is, undoubtedly, a blessing. A great many Jewish books are now being offered by commercial publishers who are responding to a market hungry for outright spirituality as well as an introduction to the basics of Jewish faith and practice. We are getting many books such as this one that have perceptive insights into Judaism accessible by those in the know next to how-to hints for the novice. Thus, Waskow finds himself

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packaging the sophisticated concept of “eco-kashrut” along with a primer on how kosher meat is broiled. Waskow often manages to merge these two aims harmoniously; when he is less successful, it feels as though readers must skip sections of the book inappropriate to their level of inquiry.

Waskow’s Project

This is Waskow’s project: To use our emotions and guts (his own he calls *kishkes*) in concert with that more standard tool, our intellects, in order to address the biggest issues of our lives from a perspective drenched with *Torah* (the whole battery of sacred texts) and *torah* (the lived wisdom of Jews which, if we were lucky, we managed to soak up—or which, if we have been good cultural detectives, managed to sniff out.) It’s a spiraling dance, a sacred dance with God, Waskow tells us, as we swerve through holy territory in our consultations, from the “authority of the past” to the “deeper structure, the deeper intent, of the wisdom of the past,” and to the reality of our lives now. In Waskow’s hermeneutic, no source of wisdom is privileged: “Not that everything in Jewish tradition is wise. Not by a long shot. But the conversation is wise.”

Like a flea-market maven, Waskow dashes from source to source in search of wise attitudes—as opposed to wise solutions—that will guide us in the nitty-grittiness of eating, making a living, loving and seeking rest and recreation in sacred Jewish style. My favorite example of an off-beat source of Jewish wisdom is prefaced by a con-

ventional enough scholarly tour of textual Jewish sources that can illuminate how and why Jews use food (or prohibit it, or sacrifice it, or organize it in categories) in order to be attuned to its potential for holiness. But how, Waskow seems to be asking, does this all play out in lived Jewish life, a life in which people who love the tradition can still express their ambivalence, their quirkiness and their subversive impulses?

Waskow tells the story of two Orthodox families in Baltimore. Apparently each Passover, a Mrs. Shapiro, the wife of a pious man, would secretly bring her set of dishes to Waskow’s grandmother’s house and bring home the grandmother’s dishes. These borrowed dishes she would pass off as her special *pesahdik* set; Grandmother would play the same trick.

Waskow’s point in telling this anecdote, I believe, is to demonstrate that while men wrote the rules of Kitchen Judaism, it was women who had the jurisdiction to carry them out—with or without the intent of a subversive acting-out. Why did these women act in this way, and what theology did they share? Mrs. Shapiro claimed her husband begrudged her the money for separate Passover dishes, while grandmother used her non-standard Passover *kashrut* as a way of punishing the God who took her young husband. Waskow doesn’t ask this question, but I think it’s implicit: if we have the choice of acting Jewishly and not just reacting (running away or acting out our anger or alienation), doesn’t it make more sense to choose

an active, Jewish engagement? Granted, Mrs. Shapiro and Grandma reacted with creative solutions. Yet we, taken with empowerment, want more than to make a private, subversive lemonade out of what we experience as old Jewish lemons.

Bringing Sanctity Home

Ideally, if we follow Waskow's methodology, we can welcome back the "expelled truths." We will learn to "draw on our Jewish past without being imprisoned by it" and we will feel authorized to learn how to "draw on and reshape the rituals while giving them new meaning."

Waskow offers possibilities for thinking and acting Jewishly in just about every area of the very real, chaotic, and sometimes unpretty daily lives we lead. For example, most Jews know that premarital sex is, to put it mildly, shunned in official Jewish texts and shunned in discourse on "the Jewish view on sex." The lived reality is that all sex between Jews is not always matrimonial. While I don't believe, as Waskow does, that Jews shy away from the community because they do not want to be "part of an institution that looks with hostility...on the source of much of one's most intense pleasure," I do believe that most of us have large chunks of our lives that seem to have fallen out of Jewish jurisdiction, and more importantly, out of the realm of Jewish meaning-making.

Waskow instructs us in how to note opportunities for bringing Jewish sanctity into the everyday. To

those commencing a job-hunt or preparing to start a new job, he suggests that friends be gathered for a ritual which notes that "decisions about work and money might be infused with a sense of holiness." Following the recital of passages of Torah illuminating the nature of work and wealth, it would be appropriate to discuss: "When I imagine myself doing this work, do I feel like an active arm of God, helping to do the work of Creation?...Will my working at this task bring more vitality and more honor to the Jewish community or less? Finally, a blessing is said: "Blessed is the One Who makes us Holy by connecting us with each other, and teaches us to connect by serving and doing work."

Some may not feel altogether comfortable with all of Waskow's suggestions. For instance, he considers how we might go about sanctifying what he calls a Jewish "polycentric marriage"—apparently a small group of committed Jews who limit their sexual fidelity to members of the group. Despite such occasional examples drawn from life-styles potentially more funky than our own, Waskow's approach is, overall, both sound and accessible to anyone who recognizes that we have the opportunity and methodology available to construct Jewish meaning in every area of our lives.

In Waskow, we find (or re-find, as the case may be for many) a wise teacher to oversee those of our efforts that blossom, as well as those equally valiant efforts that never quite take on life.

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