Tikkun

POLITICS + SPIRITUALITY + CULTURE

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WINTER 2013

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Cover Image: Reinhard Hunger

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Tikkun is not just a print magazine—visit our blog at tikkun.org/daily and our web magazine site at tikkun.org.

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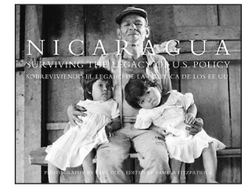
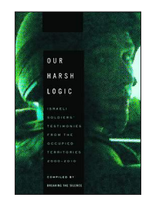


Nicaragua: Surviving the Legacy of U.S. Policy

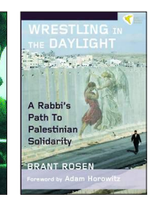
Photography by Paul Dix,
Edited by Pamela Fitzpatrick
Just Sharing Press, 2011

Working with the Institute of the History of Nicaragua and Central America, Paul Dix and Pamela Fitzpatrick have put together a beautiful assemblage of photographs, drawings, autobiographical stories, and interviews with the survivors of one of the many, many U.S. imperial interventions in Central and South America—interventions that have caused huge suffering to the people of that region. The stories in this collection bring us face-to-face with both the cruelty of the contra war in Nicaragua and the tremendous capacity of human beings to transcend the hatred that America's contras manifested as they decimated important parts of the Nicaraguan population. For those who do not attend the yearly demonstrations held by the School of Americas Watch (SOAW) in Fort Benning, Georgia, where the United States continues to train South and Central American police and military to engage in torture as part of their "counterinsurgency" lessons, this book is an amazing wake-up call that shatters the myth of American innocence.



Our Harsh Logic: Israeli Soldiers' Testimonies from the Occupied Territories 2000-2010

Compiled by Breaking the Silence
Metropolitan Books, 2012

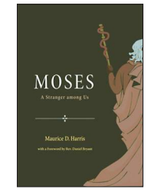


Wrestling in the Daylight: A Rabbi's Path to Palestinian Solidarity

Brant Rosen
Just World Books, 2012

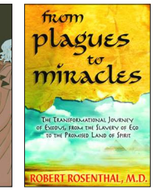
Unfortunately, many apologists are now misusing the cry of "anti-Semitism" to justify Israeli policies; they don't understand how Israel's treatment of Palestinians and its efforts to drag the U.S. into war with Iran provoke more hatred of Israel and, by extension, the Jews worldwide who support it. It is never right to extend anger to all members of an ethnic, racial, or religious group for the obnoxious behavior of some of its members—doing so is the quintessence of racism. Yet the testimonies of Israeli soldiers presented by the Israeli organization "Breaking the Silence" might give even the most morally blind supporter of the Likud government an understanding of why people around the world are increasingly directing their anger toward Israel. *Our Harsh Logic* also profiles many morally sensitive Jews who refused to accept the IDF's disrespectful and oppressive treatment of Arabs as legitimate—it's a book that needs to be read by both Zionists and the haters of Zionism and will make many Jews proud of our Israeli dissenters!

Moral sensitivity is also a main theme in *Wrestling in the Daylight*, a compilation of the emails that Rabbi Brant Rosen received from congregants, American Jews, and Israelis as he slowly developed an understanding of the injustice of the Occupation, along with Rosen's reflections on those exchanges. Like *Our Harsh Logic*, Rosen's book reveals a capacity to transcend the unthinking nationalism that permeates many contemporary synagogues. It also shows why anti-Semitism must be fought with the same energy with which we fight Israel's self-destructive and immoral policies.



Moses: A Stranger Among Us

Maurice Harris
Cascade Books, 2012



From Plagues to Miracles

Robert Rosenthal
Hay House, 2012

Here are two books that provide us with insightful interpretations of Torah—one focused on Moses, the other on "the transformational journey of Exodus, from the slavery of ego to the promised land of spirit." Maurice Harris is a Reconstructionist rabbi, and his close readings of the text and the latest secondary materials are integrated into a lively discussion of some of the critical issues of spiritual interpretation. Instead of explaining away contradictions in the text or assigning them to different authors, Harris attributes them to the wisdom of Torah redactors who understood that consecutive and conflicting accounts in Torah are "commenting on the contradictory and logic-defying nature of the intense human-Divine encounter." Spiritual experiences, he argues, do not need to make logical sense: "The nature of some aspects of Reality may be nonlinear . . . with contradictory elements sitting alongside each other and creating a paradoxical tension that may be part of the truth of our own encounters with the Divine in our lives." Accepting this as a way to read the Moses story, Harris concludes that, despite the prophet's flaws, Moses is a "great mythic iconoclast and advocate for the downtrodden . . . [who] represents the possibility of radical transformation and the triumph of justice in human affairs."

Robert Rosenthal, on the other hand, seems less familiar with liberation theology's interpretive tradition and the approach of Hasidism, and more familiar with the insights of Helen Schucman's book *A Course in Miracles*. Nevertheless, he comes up with insights that are not only consistent with Hasidism and liberation theology, but also deepen their insights. In Rosenthal's view, Moses and Pharaoh are dueling aspects of the human mind. Rosenthal is far from being reductive or New-Agey—he is a sophisticated psychiatrist, and this book provides a provocative and spiritually insightful reading that will enrich any Torah study you do in your own life.

Red Letter Revolution

Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo
Thomas Nelson publishing, 2012

Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo are two of the most significant prophetic voices in the Christian world. *Red Letter Revolution*, which raises the question "What if Jesus *really meant* what he said?" is such an exciting and brilliant book that it should be read by people of all faiths and by secular humanists as well. Claiborne and Campolo's interpretation of Jesus's message closely aligns with that of many Jews who are now reclaiming the Jewish prophet from Nazareth as one of their inspiring teachers, though many of these same Jews seem to extend his teachings to the issue of abortion in ways that have no foundation in Jesus's actual teachings and conflict with the standard Jewish interpretation of Exodus 21:22–23. Make sure you get this book in the hands of any Christian who wants to repair America's economic and political ruins—it will give them a spiritual foundation for the healing we desperately need.

Readers Respond

A NOTE ON LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We welcome your responses to our articles. Send letters to the editor to letters@tikkun.org. Please remember, however, not to attribute to *Tikkun* views other than those expressed in our editorials. We email, post, and print many articles with which we have strong disagreements because that is what makes *Tikkun* a location for a true diversity of ideas. *Tikkun* reserves the right to edit your letters to fit available space in the magazine.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

I was heartened to read the many articles about restorative justice in the Winter 2012 issue, as I believe in the need for a holistic and relationally oriented revision of our often heartless, overly legalistic and unjust legal system. From what I read about restorative justice, however, I am disappointed that it seems to bear no vision for the revision of our system of civil law, which some would argue is more fraught with abuse and harm than is the criminal justice system. The articles referred only to criminal cases.

The systemic blindness to the injuries caused by the legal process itself has led me to believe that the blindfold of Lady Justice has become, instead of a guarantee of equal justice, a serious obstacle to justice. Our blindfolded lady can't see clearly enough to recognize the lives she flattens, the justice she snuffs out with the steamroller of her letter of the law. What is the vision restorative justice might contribute to such a situation?

Those charged with crimes are given free representation, yet if those facing litigation cannot afford a lawyer, they are not provided one. Rather, they are told that if they can't afford a lawyer, they will surely lose the case, regardless of the truth in the matter, so they'd better pay the settlement fee demanded by the suing party. If they can't afford that either, then their home could be sold to pay as little as a $15,000 judgment. The civil legal system, as it exists today in the United States, is practically a red carpet rolled out to those who wish to extort or exact revenge. It harmfully enables—and often financially rewards—those who are eager to find someone to blame for their own misfortune or lack of judgment. It also encourages, rather than dismisses, thousands of frivolous lawsuits that cause untold harm. The civil legal system ostensibly addresses (and often wildly exaggerates) even the smallest and most trivial degrees of injury to a suing party. However, it is completely blind to, and does not take into account, the sometimes great injury that can be done to defendants through the lawsuit process.

As a first step in the reformation of civil law, I'd like to suggest that we focus on actual injury rather than an entirely legalistic focus on violation of laws. Civil cases should be analyzed in terms of what injury *may* have actually occurred, and if injury did not occur, the case should be thrown out.

— Deborah Mikuteit, *Oakland, CA*

PINKWASHING

I write in response to a web article written by Katherine Franke and Rebecca Alpert in May 2012 defending their decision to boycott an LGBT event hosted by the Equality Forum because the event selected Israel as the featured nation and was sponsored by the Israeli Embassy and Ministry of Tourism. Franke and Alpert's explanation rested on the idea of "pinkwashing," a term coined by Sarah Schulman, a supporter of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement.

"Pinkwashing," Schulman has said, is "a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians' human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life." The focus of Schulman's, as well as Franke and Alpert's, ire is on a marketing campaign in which the Israeli Consulate General and other Israeli government officials promote Israel to the United States LGBTQ community as a tourist destination. Their criticism was also drawn upon by others around the country, including in Seattle, where anti-Israel activists in the community successfully pressured the Seattle LGBT Commission to cancel a reception it had scheduled for representatives from the Israeli LGBTQ social justice community.

I have followed the pinkwashing debate closely and am speaking out against what I see as "pinktrashing"—knee-jerk oppression politics rather than an informed, engaged, public dialogue about Israel and queer progressive politics.

The Israeli LGBTQ community has sought and achieved important protections for human and civil rights in the areas of marriage and family equality, as well as in access to health care for transgender Israelis, among others. These contributions and their connection to an international global social justice campaign are worthy of attention and analysis as well as critique.

The boycotts and pinktrashing campaign, on the other hand, have as their goals shutting down public discussion about Israeli LGBTQ social and policy developments. They also take Schulman's analysis to a new and different level. That next step is premised on the idea that progressive LGBTQ policies in Israel have been either designed or accepted by Israeli leaders in order to foster support for Israel among the U.S. progressive community. That proposition is not only false but is also implausible, based on any legitimate political or social development theory and is, frankly, demeaning and disrespectful of Israeli LGBTQ activists.

In any case, by making its goal the termination of public discussion regarding Israel, the pinktrashing campaign is unfortunate. There is an important conversation to have about the relationship between LGBTQ politics in Israel and Palestinian-Israeli relationships. Pressuring city commissions, conferences, and public

MORE LETTERS

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events to withdraw speaking invitations, as opposed to engaging in public discussion, prevents civil resolution of difficult issues.

The recent criticisms of the Israeli Consulate General's efforts to host public discussions about LGBTQ rights in Israel remind me of the silencing tactics of the supporters of the Zionism is Racism resolution at the United Nations in the 1970s. Like the resolution, the point of the pinktrashing campaign is not to foster discussion about the complexities of Israeli queer progressive politics in view of Israeli-Palestinian relationships. It is to shut down any engaged, reflective discussion by drawing upon insecurities and imperfections of the U.S. progressive (particularly queer) political communities.

The pinktrashing campaign requires that LGBTQ individuals and organizations pick a side—without ever having had the chance to engage in any dialogue—and it polarizes those sides as either being in support of Israel and its development of progressive queer politics or being in opposition to the pro-Palestinian, anti-Occupation movements. It guarantees conversations in echo chambers.

My hope is that someday soon we can get beyond the polarized and polarizing rhetoric around Israeli politics and now around Israel and queer politics to come to a solution, or at least a conversation, that recognizes the humanity of all people who lay some claim to Middle East lands. Inflammatory rhetoric and speaking in silos create, unfortunately, only roadblocks.

—Jennifer Levi, *Springfield, MA*

REBECCA T. ALPERT REPLIES:

I appreciate Jennifer Levi's acknowledgement that this is a targeted marketing campaign by the Israeli government, which was not acknowledged by the organizers of Philadelphia's Equality Forum. I would disagree about its intentions, however. I understand its main purpose is not to inform the queer American community about Israeli LGBT-friendly policies, but to deflect attention from their decidedly unfriendly policies regarding the human rights of the Palestinians. And as a progressive Jewish lesbian, I resent the Israeli government's efforts to suggest that good policies toward one oppressed group can in any way mitigate horrific policies used against another group.

I also agree that boycott may not be the best tactic, and my own work through Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) focuses on the divestment strategy. I was attracted to this work to support nonviolent Palestinian solutions, and in the long run I prefer boycott to a third Intifada, which I fear will be the next stage if Israel does not stop building settlements and walls and strangling the Palestinian economy.

And please understand that for my public stance I have been boycotted by the American Jewish community. A representative of JVP is not welcome to speak at Hillel or virtually any American synagogue, effectively terminating any truly open discussion on Israel in Jewish communal settings.

Ultimately Levi and I share a common purpose—open dialogue. As Katherine Frankel suggests, we want to talk with queer Israeli activists and imagine that we have much to learn from one another. (See her response to Arthur Slepian at tikkun.org/pinkwashing). We only disagree about who is to blame for the absence of the conversation. From my perspective, when the Israeli government is ready to encourage American Jews to talk about Palestinian rights, I will welcome the dialogue that I hope will ensue.

RAV KOOK AND THE TRANSITION TO A HOLY STATE

Nathaniel Berman's eye-opening article on Rav Kook's thoughts about the state ("Statism and Anti-Statism: Reflections on Israel's Legitimacy Crisis," *Tikkun*, Summer 2012) left me with a question. I am with Berman in wishing for a Jewish statism that has at least enough universalism that would not make peace impossible, and in celebrating Kook the Jewish universalist. But what of the necessary stage? I wanted Berman to connect to Marxist thought on the same issue, of means and ends, necessity and agency, and to deal with the thought that a violent nationalist espousing racism can, according to this scheme, argue that to be caught up in evil/darkness is unavoidable. It took the women's movement to reevaluate the utopianism that had been derided by Marx. But still, the jump to preferable pleasantness leaves me wondering about how we come to our different views and commitments, and about whether or not we are in the peace movement or the violent Right, etc. How possible is it to live the change you want to see in the world?

—Mark Joseph, *Jerusalem, Israel*

NATHANIEL BERMAN REPLIES:

If particularistic nationalism is a "stage" on the way to nationalism with a universalist vocation, Mark Joseph asks, how can we know when the moment of transition has arrived? This question can really be posed to any worldview that both articulates a vision of historical teleology and yet demands political and ethical action to achieve its telos. As Joseph suggests, this quandary was long central to Marxist polemics, pitting "revisionists," who trusted in historical inevitability, against revolutionaries, who demanded violent rupture with an unjust order. In the Jewish tradition, this issue emerged in rabbinic denunciations of "forcing the end-times" (*dehikat ha-ketz*) through actions such as mass migration to the Holy Land. Indeed, Religious Zionism needed to interpret away the many traditional sources that take such stances, in order to refute widespread condemnations of it as heretical. My own view is that whether one is concerned with national self-assertion, social justice struggles, or religious audacity, "stage" theories should be replaced by an understanding that the ever-present possibility of divergent diagnoses is what makes political, ethical, and spiritual choice both imperative and yet never definitive. Nationalists will always have to choose, in ever-changing circumstances, between consolidating their group and opening up to other peoples and cultures; social progressives between working within and against "the system"; religious devotees between submitting to the divine and wrestling with it. Such perilous choices are central to the human condition—and the choice between different forms of Jewish identity has never been more urgent than in our time.

COMMENTS ON BDS

In August, we sent out an online newsletter to our readers. In it, contributing editor Stephen Zunes argued that boycotts, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) should be directed not just at Israel, but also at all occupations and at the worst human rights violating countries. His article comes very close to articulating the position on BDS that Rabbi Michael Lerner has articulated for *Tikkun*. We differ only in the following respects:

1. The occupations of Tibet by China and of Chechnya by Russia should count, and there may be other such (India in Kashmir, perhaps). Ethical considerations should be considered valid in determining what is and is not an "occupation" when considering BDS.
2. We believe that BDS is also appropriate against any country engaged in prolonged warfare (and hence occupation) in some other country's territory (the United States in Iraq till this year, and in Afghanistan continuing; Sudan in Darfur; Syria in Lebanon for many years; Israel in Lebanon for many years) unless it can make a credible case that failing such an occupation,

it would face occupation by the other country.

3. In the case of Israel (or any other country ruled by a group that has a long history of being victims of persecution prior to having a state under its control), Rabbi Lerner has argued in *Embracing Israel/Palestine* that BDS has the potential negative consequence of increasing the paranoia of a previously persecuted group, which in turn might lead to more oppressive behavior rather than a lifting of the oppressive behavior, and that therefore it is a dangerous (though appropriately nonviolent) strategy that should be used very sparingly if at all, and then only in a very targeted way.
4. It is imperative that those who launch BDS campaigns make clear what it would take to stop the campaign. It is not enough of an answer to say "Stop the Occupation," because in the case of Israel/Palestine, the criterion is in doubt. Some supporters of BDS (like those of us at *Tikkun*) are calling for the end of the Occupation of the West Bank and the boycotts and blockades of Gaza by Israel. Other supporters of BDS think that the Occupation refers to Israel's very creation in 1948 and that its dissolution would require the ending of Israel as a refuge state for Jews facing oppression elsewhere. One major reason *Tikkun* has not joined the BDS movement as a whole is that BDS seems to include both of these positions. That makes it very easy for blind supporters of Israeli policy to claim that support for BDS is really support for ending the State of Israel, since at least some parts of the BDS movement genuinely hold that view. We believe that in the case of the State of Israel, those who support BDS (ourselves included) need to continually make clear that they also support the right of the Jewish people to national self-determination in at least part of its ancient homeland in what became Palestine after Jews were forcibly expelled by Roman imperialism roughly 1900 years ago.

Tikkun magazine is . . .

. . . a vehicle for spreading a new consciousness. We call it a spiritual progressive worldview. But what is that?

What Do You Mean by "Spiritual"?

You can be spiritual and still be an atheist or agnostic. To be spiritual, you don't have to believe in God or accept New Age versions of spirituality. You don't need to give up science or your critical faculties. We use the word "spiritual" to describe all aspects of reality that cannot be subject to empirical verification or measurement: everything pertaining to ethics, aesthetics, music, art, philosophy, religion, poetry, literature, dance, love, generosity, and joy. We reject the notion that everything worthy of consideration to guide our personal lives and our economic and political arrangements must be measurable.

What's a Spiritual Progressive?

To be a spiritual progressive is to agree that our public institutions, corporations, government policies, laws, education system, health care system, legal system, and even many aspects of our personal lives should be judged "efficient, rational, or productive" to the extent that they maximize love, caring, generosity, and ethical and environmentally sustainable behavior. We call this our New Bottom Line.

Spiritual progressives seek to build "The Caring Society: Caring for Each Other and Caring for the Earth." Our well-being depends upon the well-being of everyone else and also on the well-being of the planet itself. So we commit to an ethos of generosity, nonviolence, and radical amazement at the grandeur of all that is, and seek to build a global awareness of the unity of all being.

If you are willing to help promote this New Bottom Line for our society, you are a spiritual progressive. And if you are a spiritual progressive, we invite you to join our Network of Spiritual Progressives at spiritualprogressives.org.

KEITH BARTON RESPONDS:

Rabbi Lerner, I realize that you are trying to set a "fair and balanced" tone when it comes to analyzing the BDS issues that are percolating through various constituencies in the United States. I find that your perspective is no more fair and balanced than Fox News, due to the preponderant dependence of Israel on U.S. foreign "aid" and on the American Jewish community, which has a stranglehold on the American democratic process. BDS is currently the only avenue through which people can express opposition to Israeli policies, because the "democratic" process is locked down by the tentacles of AIPAC. Similarly, U.S. public opinion has more influence on Israeli policies than it has on China, Russia, and India, since those regimes are not, by and large, dependent upon American largesse in the way that Israel is. China would find BDS amusing at best, considering that it currently manufactures the vast majority of consumer goods that America depends on and owns half of American treasury assets besides.

So you cannot separate the militarism of Israel and the nefarious machinations of AIPAC from considerations of BDS. Because of the special relationship between the United States and Israel, BDS is well suited for expressing moral opposition to Israeli policies, both in the occupied territories and in wider Middle Eastern affairs, whereas BDS is a poor choice of tactics for influencing China, Russia, or India. In fact, BDS is probably the only avenue through which Americans—and even American Jews—can express moral opposition to Israeli policies, due to the preponderant influence of the reactionary American Jewish community in American politics.

However, Israelis do seem to care about what Americans think about Israeli policies. Why else would they expend considerable effort trying to stamp out BDS? I cannot believe that BDS actually threatens Israel in a direct financial way, any more than BDS against South African apartheid could have directly brought South Africa to its knees. But moral opinions do matter, and BDS is primarily a symbolic expression of disapproval that seems to carry some weight above and beyond writing letters and op-ed pieces, particularly when BDS originates from sober religious institutions or from idealistic young Jews (YJP, etc.).

BARRY WRIGHT RESPONDS:

May I ask whether the United States has vetoed over eighty UN resolutions against any other country for its occupation and quasi-apartheid policies except Israel? And has the United States supported any other countries practicing questionable human rights abuses with billions a year in aid except Israel?

MICHAEL NOVICK RESPONDS:

Dictating to the Palestinians what they should call for is unacceptable. Their struggles against

Occupation, for civil rights within Israel, and for the right of return are the three demands of the BDS campaign initiated by Palestinian civil society, and the terms under which the campaign would be ended. Do you or do you not support those demands? Apparently, you think that allowing Palestinians to return to their homes and homeland conflicts with your desire to see Israel as a "refuge state for Jews facing oppression elsewhere."

It's fine for Professor Zunes or Rabbi Lerner to denounce other occupations or prolonged wars. But in the real world, there is no campaign led by the Western Saharans (internationally recognized as occupied) or the Chechnyans (not so recognized) for BDS by other nations or other civil societies. It is also telling that when you consider occupations, you do not mention Puerto Rico (where the UN has called for decolonization) or any other U.S. "territories."

DAVID KRONFELD RESPONDS:

Let me translate Professor Zunes's article: let us create a flimsy smokescreen (by adding Morocco into the equation) so that we can continue to attack Israel, but under cover of attacking "all" occupations.

Like so much of the anti-Israel sentiment infecting the progressive movement, the article is disingenuous to the core. Its intention is to push the BDS movement directed primarily at Israel and to deflect criticism of that movement, without any substantive change.

This piece is just a specious argument, which adds to the self-righteous stance of "just helping the downtrodden" professed by those who seek to fundamentally harm Israel. I think it is a shameful piece of attempted sleight of hand, aimed at gaining propaganda value alone.

DIANE REIKE RESPONDS:

Well, we all know where this is going. Heal the rest of the world, and then maybe (or maybe not) Israel will consider thinking about it.

IMMIGRATION

I am a political activist whose only allegiances are to God, myself, and doing what I can to heal the world. My motto is "take care of myself so that I can take care of others, be good to myself and be good to others, and use everything that comes my way for my uplifting, learning, and growth." I truly respect your work and see you as one of those around the world who are anchor points for God to work through. From my perspective, the web article on immigration that you shared via email is so right on. I do see that there will be a time when we will be living in a society wherein we all know we are our brother's/sister's keeper. In the moments when the picture looks bleak, through God's grace I can remind myself to look for the good in all things. At these times I can perceive that perhaps the plan is for all that has been hidden to come to Light so completely that the darkness will not be able to survive. It gives me great joy to know that you are here and making a difference.

—Annette Saint John Lawrence,
Sherman Oaks, CA

Volunteer at TIKKUN

Tikkun invites people of all ages to apply to work as interns and volunteers on editorial and consciousness-raising tasks at our office in Berkeley, CA. Info: tikkun.org/interns.

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Billionaires like Sheldon Adelson cast a long shadow over Washington due to their outsized campaign contributions. Adelson donated millions of dollars to right-wing PACs to support Republican candidates during the 2012 elections.

Get Money Out of Politics

Despite all the divisions and distortions that dominated the 2012 election season, many Americans from across the political spectrum were able to see eye-to-eye on one thing: that the huge amount of money being spent by candidates for public office is undermining democracy. It's a problem that can only be solved if approached with the seriousness and urgency it deserves.

Many people experience a deep level of despair after they've been through a campaign in which moneyed interests have played such a large role in both parties, supplying hundreds of millions of dollars to each side to ensure their future influence over the policies that both parties will pursue. That despair reinforces the powerlessness that many experience in our work lives and that then plays a role in limiting the fulfillment we get even in our personal lives, where we too often encounter people who have internalized the "me-firstism" of the competitive marketplace and view us too often through a frame of "what can you do for me to satisfy my needs?"

Even though we all yearn for loving connection and mutual recognition from others, that yearning seems to be constantly undermined by the actions of others who are too scared to break out of their own narrowly defined roles in society and acknowledge that they too have the same desire for real loving connection. As a result, many of us come to believe that everyone is just out for themselves and, as a result, idealistic plans will never come to fruition. We come to believe that to be "realistic" is to accept the basic contours of power and wealth in this society and then find a way either to access that wealth or resign ourselves to accepting our positions in the economic hierarchy, and accepting our political powerlessness as inevitable, thereby accepting an unjust economy and social realities that most people resent or, at times, even detest.

The Power of Advertising

The despair and resignation that most of us feel is intensified by advertising, which presents and misrepresents "everyone else's desires" in a way that makes each of us feel that our yearnings are peculiar rather than widespread. Ads leave us feeling that to be "normal," we need to do what the ads are trying to get us to do. This manipulation works to the extent that we are isolated from each other, rarely talk about how foolish the ads and consumption-oriented media are, and live in a culture of separation, depoliticization, and nonparticipation in democratic movements. That is another dimension of why money is so powerful—if people were deeply connected with each other on a daily basis and engaged in true communities pursuing democracy, money would not be as powerful.

The point is not hard for people to grasp. If it takes close to a billion dollars per candidate for someone to run a successful campaign for the presidency, tens of millions of dollars to run for the Senate, and many millions to run for the House, then the candidates are going to have spend a great deal of time both during the campaigns and during their tenure in

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To truly protect democracy for the 99 percent, we would need to ban not just corporate campaign contributions, but also donations from the super-rich.

office playing up to those people in our society who have the ability to donate large amounts of money. On September 13, 2012, the *New York Times* presented the details of some of the richest donors to the Obama campaign and described how their donations bought them access to Obama and his inner circle, which in turn shaped Obama's vision of "what the people *really* care about." Why should we be surprised, then, if tens of millions of potential voters do not show up at polls? They've already seen that it is not they but the rich who will shape the ideas of candidates in both major political parties.

A democratic system should be based on the notion of one person/one vote. But in the United States today it would be more accurate to describe the political arena as closer to one dollar/one vote. Closer, but not exact. Those with money often determine which candidates will be able to buy the television, radio, newspaper, and direct-mail advertising, which in turn determines who is taken seriously by the media and eventually by voters. If you haven't heard much about a candidate (e.g., a Green candidate or a Libertarian candidate), you are unlikely to vote for that person unless you have a very strong commitment to that party and a willingness to stand up to friends who tell you that you are going to hurt a less principled candidate who will be the lesser evil in the election.

The Limits of Our Democracy

Money isn't everything in elections—and it is quite possible for the richest campaigner to lose occasionally to another candidate who has spent less money. We saw that happen a few years ago in California when two very wealthy businesswomen, each with the ability to raise over 140 million dollars in their campaigns for governor and U.S. senator, lost to incumbent Senator Barbara Boxer and former governor Jerry Brown. But of course those Democrats had already proven their loyalty to wealthy donors, raised tens of millions of dollars, and courted powerful unions like the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, a forceful advocate of pro-incarceration and anti-rehabilitative policies in California.

So long as candidates prove themselves non-threatening to the wealthy and succeed at raising significant amounts of money from them, they can at times beat a better-funded opponent. In these circumstances, our votes matter in determining which of the two pro-capitalism candidates gets to win. So it's not entirely true to say that our system is one based on one dollar/one vote: once the potential candidates have been vetted by the economic powerhouses and their allies in the media, the major political parties, and a significant section of the capitalist class, our votes do matter. In other words, we have a limited democracy in which our own political involvement, such as campaigning for a candidate or voting, plays a significant role in choosing among candidates who have already proved their loyalty to the powerful.

In turn, the candidates must spend a significant amount of time courting the rich and their power-oriented allies in the corporations and media, not only to get their money for the next election cycle but also to prove to these donors that they are getting at least some of what they are paying for. This courting of the rich is an ongoing process, occurring both during the elections and also during the politicians' time in office.

The nuance is important. It's not that donors get absolute power to shape the votes and policies of each elected official, but that together as a group those donors shape a universe of discourse about what is plausible in politics and what is "realistic"; within that framework, politicians make choices that may at times offend one section of their donor base in order to please another section.

Once we get over the impulse to say that politicians are merely bought or bribed into their positions, and once we recognize that politicians experience themselves as having a range of choices and freedom to make them, we can then acknowledge the limits of those choices shaped by the entire system of money-dominated politics. So, for example, the *New York Times*' failure to report regularly on progressive candidate Dennis Kucinich during the presidential primaries in 2004 was not due to bribery by the other candidates or to an order from the paper's publisher or advertisers—it was due to the editors' accurate belief that Kucinich would not raise the level of money necessary to be described as "realistic" because his policies were at variance with the interests of the wealthy and the large corporations with the money needed to fund candidates. As a result it seemed unrealistic for the media to give Kucinich's views the opportunity

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to be heard by those who might, had they heard them, have given him far more support than he received in the primaries after his candidacy was systematically ignored and shunned by corporate media. Conversely, the mainstream media accorded a high level of coverage in 2012 to the candidacy of Donald Trump precisely because he had money and the capacity to raise more from his wealthy contacts and hence was judged a "realistic" candidate—his inane ideas were consequently given much publicity.

But with all the qualification above, money does become a central factor in elections. This is particularly true in various referenda. In those states where democratic forces once had the ability to encode in the state constitution the right of the people to shape ballot measures, the initiative process has increasingly been dominated by those with enough money to hire people to collect the number of names needed to put on the ballot. Whenever a ballot measure is deemed to be in conflict with the interests of the rich and powerful, those with money pour tens of millions of dollars into advertising that systematically distorts what the ballot measure would accomplish if passed. Again, there are times when huge mobilizations of ordinary people, taking time away from their busy work lives and family lives, can push through a progressive measure despite the corporate media and the extensive advertising of the wealthy, but these are few and far between.

The Movement to Amend the U.S. Constitution

It's easy to focus the outrage many Americans feel at the way the 1 percent controls politics on the 2010 decision of the Supreme Court now known (ironically enough) as "Citizens United." That decision—built on a history of the Supreme Court treating corporations as "persons" and hence protected by the Fourteenth Amendment, and by the court's decision that the expenditure of money is a form of speech or a prerequisite to effective speech—struck down the McCain-Feingold act that sought to limit the amount of money in politics. In late June of 2012, in the midst of a presidential campaign in which huge amounts of money from corporate-funded political action committees were already dominating public discussion, the high court voted five to four to summarily reverse the Montana Supreme Court's December 2011 decision to uphold the state's Corrupt Practices Act of 1912, which similarly sought to regulate the way corporations could influence elections. What the court made clear is that any attempt by state legislators or the Congress to put serious checks on how much money can be used in elections or on the role of corporations in trying to shape the outcome of elections will be declared unconstitutional. That is why we must take the more difficult and years-long process of getting a constitutional amendment passed.

The Montana decision should make it clear to anyone who thought that legislation could repeal Citizens United that nothing passed by the Congress or by a state legislature would be sufficient to overturn Citizens United. It thus gave more impetus to the group called Move to Amend, a broad coalition that describes itself as calling for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution "to unequivocally state that inalienable rights belong to human beings only, and that money is not a form of protected free speech under the First Amendment and can be regulated in political campaigns."

The current direction of the Supreme Court (whose most reactionary justices were confirmed by Senate democrats like Diane Feinstein) is the outgrowth of a thirty-year struggle to eviscerate the public sphere and the 1960s ideal of community by privatizing the whole culture in the name of liberty. The Supreme Court has framed the law for many years in ways that ignore or implicitly deny the existence of any "we" that could transcend the paranoid impulse (the worldview of fear) and affirm the loving impulse (the worldview of hope and generosity) that we seek to strengthen through *Tikkun* and our Network of Spiritual Progressives.

How to Pass a Constitutional Amendment

There are two ways to pass a constitutional amendment. The first requires that two-thirds of the House and the Senate approve the amendment and send it to the states for a vote. Then, three-fourths of the states must affirm the proposed amendment. The second way is through a constitutional convention called by two-thirds of the legislatures of the states. That convention can propose as many amendments as it wishes to the Constitution, and then send those amendments back to the states to become part of the Constitution when three-fourths of the states ratify any or all of those amendments.

Either direction would require a massive mobilization of grassroots forces to make the passage of an amendment possible. We witnessed that reality in the 1970s and 1980s, when a momentarily progressive Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment but then the women's movement could not mobilize enough states to ratify it. We have argued that the struggle for the ERA was itself a major factor in changing the status of women in this country. Many conservative states passed legislation to give women more rights as a way of heading off the more sweeping terms of the ERA. Most important, the public debate that the ERA generated made feminist ideas accessible to ordinary citizens who not only grasped them but intuitively understood their legitimacy. So such a campaign can have a major impact on public understanding and defacto change much in American life and politics even if it never passes.

It is time to wage such a campaign beginning in 2013—but not a campaign whose primary focus is on overturning

Citizens United, though that should certainly be part of the amendment. The problem with a Citizens United–focused amendment is that it would not address the fundamental problem of money's powerful role in U.S. politics and the consequent limits to our democratic process. What it would do is useful and important—it would overturn the Citizens United decision by saying that corporations do not have the rights of natural persons and that the Congress and the states have the right to set limits on spending. If passed that would bring us back to the situation we faced prior to 2010.

But do you remember what it was like before 2010? Money still played a major role in shaping campaigns and will continue to do so even if Citizens United is overturned. The money of the rich was so powerful a factor in the elections that candidate Obama had to abandon his promise to only take public monies and instead seek funds from the super-wealthy.

Overturning Citizens United Is Not Enough

Here are some ways that money will still undermine democracy if all we do is what Call to Amend advocates:

1. Even before the McCain-Feingold bill's limit on corporate donations was undermined by the Supreme Court, the rich were still able to "bundle" contributions from friends (each giving the legal $2,400 contribution to each of several candidates in the primaries and then again in the general election) so that a single person could hand the candidate $100,000 or even a million dollars assembled from wealthy friends. I witnessed directly how this bundling works a few years ago, when a wealthy donor to a particular candidate whom I had known from childhood unexpectedly asked me to be part of his packaging. Obviously I didn't have the money, but that was no problem: the donor simply winked and handed me the $2,400 in cash so that it would cost me nothing to be part of his scheme. It was hard to say no, though I did, because he was actually offering me a way to cheat that would cost me nothing. Wealthy people and corporate managers do this all the time (sometimes with their employees), and they can continue to do this even if Citizens United is overturned by an amendment aimed at addressing that problem. The amendment proposed by Move to Amend gives Congress and the state legislatures the right to put further restrictions on the use of monies, but it doesn't require them to do so. Indeed, a selling point of the limited amendment that Move to Amend is proposing to Congress and the state legislatures is precisely that it allows them to elect not to pass any legislation limiting the amount of monies individuals can donate or bundle together.
2. One of the huge disparities in the ability of candidates to get their message across is the need to buy airtime or to convince major media that the candidates' messages deserve a focus on news or other programs. As a few corporations have managed to buy up major parts of the media, corporate and wealthy-friendly station managers, publishers, and news anchors have been able to give disproportionate time and attention to the "realistic" candidates while effectively blocking the messages of those who challenge corporate power. There is no reason to believe that this would change even if Move to Amend's limited amendment were to pass. When members of the public hear one side's view over and over and over again, they tend to accept parts of that message as plausible, even when it isn't.
3. The daily experience of life in large corporations tends to reinforce the dominant worldview that all people are out for themselves, that nobody really cares about your long-term well-being except you, and that consequently the only rational way to act is to focus always on maximizing one's own advantage. Looking out for number one and believing that material rewards are the key to the good life are instilled not only by the media, but also by corporate culture's idea of a "bottom line." This in turn shapes what most of us think is realistic to ask for in our dealings with the elites of wealth and power that run both the corporations and the politics of the larger society.
4. Even if an amendment to overturn Citizens United is passed, corporations will still have the power to threaten to move their assets and jobs out of the United States and to other countries where there are fewer environmental controls and demands for labor rights. Even the most liberal politicians feel that they have to show that they are creating a good environment for corporate profits, lest they be charged with having failed to prevent a "capital strike" in which the rich simply move their assets and jobs elsewhere. It is this huge power of corporations that makes many politicians believe that they have no choice but to take legislative actions that earn them the title of "corporate-friendly" in order to protect their own district constituency from facing higher rates of unemployment.

In short, the combined power of the rich, their control over much of the media, and their ability to move capital at will means that passing a limited amendment like the one proposed by Move to Amend would require a huge expenditure of time, energy, and money. And since the framing of the issues is so limited, it does not raise consciousness about these other important ways in which the rich and their corporations would continue to shape American political life. Since the education that the campaign accomplishes would be so very narrowly focused, it would not change the most fundamental aspects of what undermines our democracy.

But waging such a campaign takes enormous amounts of work and money. Once in a generation such a campaign can be waged. This is why I'm not convinced by my comrade

Overturning Citizens United will not stop the super-rich from distorting the democratic process. Only the ESRA can do that.

and friend Peter Gabel, the editor-at-large of *Tikkun*, who argues that overturning Citizens United is valuable, even if it only puts us back to the legal situation of 2010, "because the politics of overturning it at the existential level is very important in mobilizing people's resistance to the right-wing turn." Gabel argues that I understate "the importance of the anti–Citizens United movement from an existential political standpoint while making a very important mind-opening argument for ESRA as what we really need."

My answer to that is that making a struggle for a constitutional amendment will take a great deal of resources and energy and may fail, like the ERA did in the 1980s. We don't just get to "whack" the Supreme Court—we have to mobilize tens of millions of our fellow citizens. That means a decade of work, after which, win or lose, very few people are going to feel the energy to take the next step. So the main impact of such a struggle, the only sure outcome, is to raise the public's consciousness about a new view of what our society could look like. That is why I think that a movement for a more visionary and far-reaching amendment such as the ESRA (the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment) could have a more far-reaching impact than the more limited struggle to overturn Citizens United.

The attraction of a quick win for a liberal political position by staying away from a larger ideology and focusing on "what can win" has proved very destructive in the Obama years, and in any event is unlikely to be applicable in this case, where a fast win is a fantasy, even for the narrower Move to Amend focus. The ESRA would revoke the rights recently given to corporations by the Supreme Court, but it also goes beyond that to present changes that would be substantive if won, and consciousness-changing if not won.

What Will Work? The ESRA!

Here's what the ESRA says: Corporations are not persons, money is not a protected form of speech, and the rights granted in the Constitution do not apply to corporations. Congress and the states must fully fund all elections and no other source of funding direct or indirect is permitted. No private or corporate money may be used to attempt to influence the outcome of an election for any ballot initiatives or for any federal or state elections. Major media must provide free and equal time for all major candidates (those who have 5 percent in public opinion polls in the relevant electoral district in which they are running) sufficient to allow the public to understand the issues. Media must not provide additional time to any candidate, party, or political position without granting equal time to opposing candidates and positions. Every corporation with incomes of over $100 million a year must get a new corporate charter once every five years, which will only be granted to corporations that can prove a satisfactory history of environmental and social responsibility to a jury of ordinary citizens chosen at random. That jury will hear testimony from representatives of all the constituencies both nationally and globally whose lives have been impacted by that corporation.

The ESRA goes on to say that no corporation may move its operation or its assets outside the United States without first paying compensatory damage to all those communities and individuals impacted negatively by such a move. And all educational institutions must provide mandatory courses at each grade level from kindergarten through graduate and professional schools to help develop the skills—including cooperation and caring for others—needed to face potential

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environmental dangers to the earth, and to foster solidarity among the citizens of the United States and between U.S. residents and the rest of the earth's inhabitants. This education must also seek to cultivate a recognition of our shared responsibility to protect the earth, air, water, and food supplies. Any part or section of international treaties or agreements or domestic laws or part of the Constitution deemed incompatible with this ESRA are hereby declared null and void. And Congress shall develop national practices, institutions, and laws that encourage the development of an ethos of caring for the planet and caring for each other (all human beings on the planet). Individuals shall be allowed to sue in Federal Courts to ensure that such laws are passed.

The ESRA is no less likely to pass the constitutional requirements for a new amendment to the Constitution than the far more limited focus of the Move to Amend. But the campaign for the ESRA is far more likely to have a fundamental and transformative impact on all those who enter into conversation about its vision of what is most badly needed in America. Just imagining an America with these provisions will allow people to think beyond the present boundaries of "political realism" and make them more open to candidates at the state and national level who think in these terms and endorse the ESRA.

Until something like the ESRA is passed, every partial environmental, social justice, or human rights campaign or candidate serious about these issues risks being defeated outright by big money or subverted by legislators who feel the need to be responsive to the needs of those who fund them. Democrats make half-hearted efforts to achieve some of

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How Do We Get Money Out of Politics?

RABBI LERNER'S EDITORIAL in this issue of *Tikkun* provoked disagreement among some of the members of our editorial board, so we decided to invite a founder of the Move to Amend movement, David Cobb, and some others to participate with Rabbi Lerner in a roundtable discussion of his perspective. A transcription of the discussion—edited for space and clarity—appears below. We invite you to join this debate as well: please send your comments to letters@tikkun.org.

DAVID COBB: We all agree, and *Tikkun* readers agree, that the problem is not corporate power. The problem is that we are being ruled by a small minority that has created a racist, sexist, class-oppressive political, social, and economic institution that is destroying the planet that we depend upon for life itself. The solution must engage a true mass movement for participatory democracy. Move to Amend—the coalition that I'm involved with—seeks to abolish all corporate constitutional rights and abolish the legal doctrine that money equals speech. It's the best opportunity to launch, build, and nurture that mass movement. Move to Amend has engaged almost a quarter of a million people; several thousand organizations have endorsed and are participating in it, and we have a hundred and twenty local affiliates of people on the ground doing work, day in and day out, on this.

PETER GABEL: I participated in writing the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment (ESRA). I think it's a great document because it articulates a vision of the role of corporations that requires them to have social responsibility and allows the community to evaluate how well they live up to that requirement. It's a radical difference from the current idea that corporations are purely self-interested and money-oriented, profit-making entities. The ESRA takes seriously everyone's environmental responsibility. It mandates required educational courses in schools for young people to learn about the environmental crisis.

I agree with the critique that Michael made in his editorial—that the movement to overturn *Citizens United* is not going that deep. But there are aspects of the current movement to amend effort that I think need to be framed the way that the current amendment that David was talking about is framed. Move to Amend has captured the absurdity of the *Citizens United* decision and has galvanized a mass response on the part of this belief in a significant number of people—the absurdity of claiming that corporations are people and that money is a form of speech.

In response to that absurd Supreme Court decision, a movement has emerged that is helping people overcome their passivity and engage actively in politics to challenge the key aspects of the status quo. This overcoming of passivity has energized large numbers of people around the issue of corporate personhood—it's a mobilization that creates the possibility of building a movement that we should strongly support. Michael's editorial is too critical of that movement, when what is needed is strong support for it, while recognizing its limitations.

The Scalia-driven Supreme Court has gained an inordinate amount of social power in recent years, and it is making a relatively successful effort to legitimize the entire

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS
(in order of appearance)

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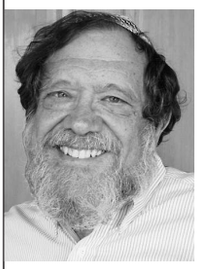
National Projects Director of Democracy Unlimited

Peter Gabel
Editor-at-Large of *Tikkun* and critical legal theorist

Harriet Fraad
Feminist psychotherapist and author of *Class Struggle on the Home Front*

Amory Starr
Author of *Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization*



Michael Lerner
Editor of *Tikkun* and chair of the Network of Spiritual Progressives

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Who are the real voters, citizens or corporations? When corporate dollars jam the airwaves with influential political ads, it gets hard to tell.

conservative movement as representing the ideals of, and meaning of, what "we the people" want. They've done this with the *Citizens United* decision by defining corporate spending on elections as an expression of freedom of speech; they've done it in limiting environmental regulations. And finally in the year 2000 they created the basis for themselves to be able to decide law and the president for eight years, which has profoundly impacted our country.

The Move to Amend movement, which would overturn *Citizens United*, is a mobilization to reclaim who "we the people" are and to reject the Supreme Court's way of interpreting who we are to each other. What the Move to Amend movement should make a part of its discourse is that this is *only the beginning* of an effort to transform the role of corporations in American culture and to require them to become socially responsible entities that do not act solely for profit, but for the building of a better society.

Changing Law, Changing Consciousness

HARRIET FRAAD: We can create all the regulations that we want to, but within a corrupt, for-money system, everything will be tarnished and corrupted no matter what you regulate. I think part of the despair and inactivity of American people is that they know as long as the people in power continue to hold onto that power, no matter what you regulate, they'll find a way out. We see this in the efforts of the right wing to undo the regulations of the New Deal, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women's Liberation Movement. There has to be an anticapitalist movement, because as long as you concentrate trillions of dollars and other critical resources in the hands of very few people, you effectively take democracy out of the economy and you empty of reality the idea that people who are producing the wealth of a nation have to be the ones to decide where it goes, on a micro as well as a macro level.

We need a two-tier movement. One tier is the ESRA. Americans are opening up to new ideas, but they are still very cynical. They don't want to commit to yet another legislative reform that will then be compromised because the financial power continues to rest in the same hands. In a corrupt system everything is tarnished. And we have to change the way things are done here. Change is possible—it has happened on smaller levels like in the city of Mondragón in Spain, where an 85,000-member cooperative works though economic democracy and where the cooperatives decide what they're going to invest in. In Mondragón, residents have to give money to a central fund that gives them pensions and such. Every leader is elected and all the meetings are compulsory because you have to decide what's happening to you. Americans need some model that our society doesn't always have to be like this. That will give people real hope.

MICHAEL LERNER: OK, thank you. Amory?

AMORY STARR: I was a street activist in the anti-globalization movement from Seattle to Miami in 2003 and in the anti-war movement. A few times I had to fly out, which was a bit traumatic because people in the airport didn't even know about the actions that we had been participating in, because of the media blackout. But I also realized that I wasn't participating in a movement that represented the desires of my fellow citizens. We were struggling on the edge of this thing that people weren't yet interested in. And that made me start to think about how I was understanding political work.

The European Left has recognized that what a successful social movement does is introduce a new idea into the culture. If we just look at something like the struggle for health care in the United States, we see that Americans don't yet believe that they are entitled to health care. It's no surprise that we're losing over technicalities. So we need to change the culture.

The model that I look to is the local food movement. In the ruins of Wall Street, people have built a new economy that's all about integrity. Small farms were nearly extinct in the United States; we now have $4.8 billion in revenue going to small farms. There are no leaders selling it out, there are no contentious conventions, and nobody can be kicked out of the movement or feel marginalized. People are empowered to participate, they're active. All kinds of people are finding ways to make it bigger and stronger and deeper by making new spaces, creating new economic institutions like CSAs for low-income communities, and even writing helpful policy. And the movement completely defied or basically was unaffected by the corporate buy-out of organics. I think this successful movement is the model we should be looking at for building a diverse, robust, and cross-class movement for economic and political change that isn't going to get destroyed when lobbyists rewrite the legislation. (*continued on page 64*)

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Co-ops: A Good Alternative?

BY LITA KURTH

Co-ops run the gamut from corporate-style entities like Ocean Spray, which has been accused of monopolizing the cranberry industry, to the inspiring co-ops launched by Women's Action to Gain Economic Security, which works with Latina immigrants to create green business cooperatives.

Creative Commons/Dan4th; Bottom: Elena Fairley (wagescooperatives.org)

It's sad to think that "let the buyer beware" should apply to credit unions, which so many progressives conscientiously choose over Wall Street–operated banks, but recent news bears out that warning: when a North Carolina credit union declared that credit unions should lead the way in transparency and made public its CAMEL rating (a metric of its health), the National Credit Union Association immediately took steps to prevent members from getting that information. How disappointing.

Historically, the co-op model has offered a workplace theory far superior to capitalism. Not driven by the profit motive, co-ops ought to be worker-empowering, democratic, healthier, less expensive, and more responsive to employee and community needs—valuable traits during this period of capitalist meltdown.

At this economic moment, as I found myself wondering whether I should get seriously involved in a co-op again, I began to investigate a few in Northern California near where I live. What I found inspired me, and also inspired caution.

Co-ops can sometimes go right, but they often seem to go wrong in one of two ways. The first is by becoming adolescent circuses (Berkeley's legendary Barrington Hall, for example, has become an excellent venue for punk bands but remains unattractive to the elderly and most people with kids). The second way they go wrong is by becoming successful.

Some agricultural co-ops and credit unions have become big, professional, and distant from the membership. Does anyone think "Progress! Democracy!" upon hearing the names Sunkist, Land O'Lakes, or Ocean Spray? Sad to say, some of these purported co-ops resemble monopolistic cartels that promote only the interests of their own restricted memberships. Several years ago, Ocean Spray even faced an antitrust lawsuit from Northland Cranberries, which alleged that the cooperative had unlawfully monopolized the cranberry products industry to the detriment of its competitors and consumers.

The credit union I currently belong to, First Tech, is technically a co-op, but I never receive a dividend, and recently I was handed an onerous set of new fees, including a fee if my *savings* account didn't show activity *every single month*. Over the years, First Tech has switched hands several times (it was called University and State Employees and then called Addison Avenue before it was given its current name). With each buyout, the credit

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What makes some co-ops better able to stay true to their progressive ideals? Here, the author stands outside the Audre Lorde Co-op, a housing co-op in Madison, Wisconsin, that articulates an explicit commitment to racial justice and feminism.

union became more indistinguishable from a bank. Except for structural differences mandated by law and a slightly higher interest on certificates of deposit and checking accounts, First Tech feels exactly like a bank.

A Mixed Bag

Shouldn't a co-op be a haven of sanity in the financial maelstrom? Some co-ops—though forbidden to invest in certain kinds of real estate—managed to sink along with the banks. For example, Valley Credit Union, the credit union located nearest me, was placed into conservatorship with the National Credit Union Administration in September 2008; or, in other words, it was taken over by the feds. Originally designed to protect poor people from loan sharks, credit unions are often hard to distinguish from their banking kin.

Why doesn't the co-op model make much difference? Perhaps they fall prey to the same problems as the savings and loan associations, another co-op venture that began with philanthropic objectives. According to John A.C. Hetherington, author of a scholarly study from 1991, *Mutual and Cooperative Enterprises: An Analysis of Customer-Owned Firms in the United States*, savings and loans associations sprang from "the efforts of philanthropists and reformers who considered existing arrangements . . . to be inadequate or exploitative," and their first clients and beneficiaries included "working people, immigrants, and seamen."

A hundred years later, the savings and loan crises of the 1980s and 1990s testified loudly to the collapse of their original ideals. Worse, Hetherington notes, the savings and loan associations' boards of directors enjoy the pleasure of setting their own compensation and "perquisites" with the distressingly ironic result that their pay was *even higher* than that of management at traditional banks. In addition, "nepotism and appropriation of collateral business opportunities" dogged their footsteps. Does anyone these days tout savings and loans as models of virtuous investment?

Why do these good impulses go so wrong? Is there a way to prevent it? Does it help to have an intention of service and benefit to humanity? (After all, a good choice for progressives cannot be a merely financially successful one.) Does every successful movement need reform from time to time?

E. Kim Coontz, the executive director of a nonprofit in Davis called the California Center for Cooperative Development, suggested, "You might ask whether or how the co-op adheres to established co-op principles." The center's stated mission is to "address the economic and social needs of California communities," certainly a worthy goal, though open to many contradictory interpretations. Coontz noted that "co-op members span the political and economic spectrum" and "they may operate using a traditional top-down management structure or by consensus." There are wonderful co-ops, thank goodness, but the word "co-op" alone may not guarantee much.

Co-ops Past and Present

One nineteenth-century precursor to the modern co-op movement was the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, an English consumer co-op founded in 1844. The society's members "refused to be religious, political, or moral partisans," according to Ellis Cowling's opinionated but useful 1938 book, *Cooperatives in America: Their Past, Present, and Future.*

In contrast, Robert Owen and the British Christian socialists, early supporters of worker-owned cooperatives, were clearly religiously motivated, though often remarkably unsuccessful at keeping their concerns alive. In any case, (*continued on page 67*)

Lita Kurth Facing page: Gouache from *Life? Or Theatre?* by Charlotte Salomon © Collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam © Charlotte Salomon Foundation

Justice in the City

Geographical Borders and the Ethical and Political Boundaries of Responsibility

What would happen if we took seriously the biblical idea that we are responsible for the well-being of everyone who has passed through our city, even if only momentarily? In our me-first society—structured as it is by the capitalist imperative to "look out for number one"—our notion of responsibility for others is painfully limited. In the pages that follow, Aryeh Cohen envisions a new social justice ethos rooted in Rabbinic Judaism's idea of accompaniment—the idea that we must personally care for all the people who enter our shared, common space. And we are delighted to print responses and critiques from a variety of thinkers and activists.

This discussion implicitly challenges legal philosopher John Rawls's conception of "justice as fairness" by introducing into Western legal thought the notion of justice as caring for other human beings. It is the obligation to care for others that may move our society beyond the individualism and materialism that have so often stymied the development of ethical consciousness and behavior in our economy and in daily life. Aryeh Cohen's approach has many fascinating consequences.

Rabbinic Judaism demands that city residents care for and accompany every person who passes through. What would it take to make such acts of care everyday occurrences rather than special events? Here, volunteers from The Giving Spirit in Los Angeles assemble survival packs for distribution to Angelenos who sleep on the street.

Noel Kleinman (nkpix.com)

Justice in the City

BY ARYEH COHEN

Every December, a Los Angeles organization called The Giving Spirit packs thousands of survival packs containing apples, bars of soap, crackers, notepads, Slim Jims, tuna, wool hats, and more—the alphabet of bare coping in a desperate environment. The packs are distributed to Los Angeles residents whose only home is the street.

Each year my family and I go to a local Modern Orthodox synagogue on a Sunday to break down boxes of toothbrushes, tissues, lip balm, skin cream, and tuna fish and then, working as a human conveyor belt, we fill plastic containers with these items, which are shipped to a Presbyterian Church where other volunteers place these supplies and more in large duffel bags. On the next weekend, we gather at the church and move the duffels and camp blankets out of the large auditorium and into our cars. We drive off to areas with heavy populations of homeless folks to distribute our wares and to meet a small percentage of the sixty thousand or so Angelenos who live on the streets. The most depressing part of the activity is the speed with which we are able to distribute the packs.

For a few hours, a thousand or so volunteers stand face to face with people who share our city but not our privilege. We make a small dent in one side of a structural problem. Hopefully, as a result of our actions some more folks will make it through the winter. Hopefully, after distributing the packs and meeting the people, more folks will start asking why so many residents of this great city are living on the streets. These are the thoughts that I hope will shadow the plastic snow in the downtown windows and the warm glow of candles in the windows of our homes.

I believe that out of Rabbinic Judaism a model of responsibility emerges which, while recognizing the poor and homeless in society, citizen and noncitizen, as groups in need of

Aryeh Cohen, Professor of Rabbinic Literature at the American Jewish University, is the author most recently of *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism* (Academic Studies Press), upon which this essay is based.

care and deserving of support and shelter, sees the answer to homelessness and poverty also in political terms. It is an idea that I have developed at more length in my book *Justice in the City*. The responsibility is placed on the city as a community defined by obligation toward those who reside in its boundaries. The boundaries of obligation are not the geographical boundaries of intimacy or municipality. The central argument here is that the boundaries of responsibility redraw and exceed the boundaries of intimacy, community, and municipality.

The Ritual of Accompaniment

There is a ritual, obligatory in Jewish law, that serves as a recurring reminder that the boundaries of obligation exceed the boundaries of geography or intimacy. When a guest leaves one's house, one is legally obligated (according to Jewish law) to accompany that person for a set distance beyond the front door or the front of one's property. The rabbis ground this ritual in one of the more interesting of biblical laws: the law of the "broken-necked heifer." In the section of laws of war in Deuteronomy, the following situation is described: "Someone slain is found lying in the open, the identity of the slayer not being known." The biblical authors face two questions. First, whose responsibility is this corpse? Second, how can the blood guilt be purged from the land, since there is no known murderer to atone for the sin?

The solution they proffer is both technical and moral. Since the victim was found "in the open," that is, not in the municipal boundaries of any settlement, those who discovered the body must take measures to find which town is closest, and then that town must assume responsibility for the purging of the blood guilt. The elders of that town (and I am simplifying the ritual a bit) bring a young heifer to a river bed and kill the heifer by breaking its neck while reciting, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done."

This ritual seems to be an anti-sacrifice. First, it is not brought to the Temple in Jerusalem (or the altar in the place "that I have chosen"). Second, the sacrificial victim is not slaughtered in a way that is ritually proper—its neck is broken; its throat is not slit, as are those of all sacrificial victims. The rabbis understood the oddness of the sacrifice and interpreted the ritual as a simultaneous acceptance of responsibility for the victim and rejection of that responsibility.

The third-century Mishnah (Sotah 9:6) restates this part of the ritual in the following manner:

> The elders of that town wash their hands in the water at the place of the killing of the heifer, and they say: "Our hands did not spill this blood, and our eyes did not see."
>
> And did we believe that the elders of the court are spillers of blood?
>
> Rather [they say]: "For he did not come to us and we dismissed him. And we did not see him and let him be."

"The boundaries of responsibility redraw and exceed the boundaries of intimacy, community, and municipality," Aryeh Cohen writes. A crisscross of freeways forms the boundaries of Los Angeles in this painting by Timothy Bruehl.

Timothy Bruehl (artistincalifornia.com)

The Babylonian Talmud (sixth to seventh century) expands this moment in the following way:

> And they shall make this declaration: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done."
>
> And did we believe that the court [is composed of] murderers?
>
> Rather [they say]: "He did not come to us and we dismissed him with no food," and "We did not see him and yet leave him with no escort."

The talmudic comments take the Mishnah's expanded or midrashic reading of Deuteronomy 21:7 one step further. The author of this comment takes the generalized Deuteronomic ritual of purging blood guilt and focuses it on the imputation of responsibility to the elders (as the representatives) of the town closest to the victim. The talmudic comment explains what is meant in the Mishnah by "dismissed him" and "let him be." The former refers to not providing the stranger with food and letting him sally forth on his own, hungry. In the eleventh century, Rashi (Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzhaki) poignantly commented: "This is what is meant by 'our hands did not spill'. . . . He was not killed as a result of our action that we dismissed him without food and he was forced to steal from people and was killed as a result of that." Rashi adds another narrative layer in trying to imagine what the

The Babylonian Talmud calls for the *levayah* of the dead—the accompaniment of a body across the threshold to burial. Our obligation to accompany the living can similarly draw us across unexpected boundaries. *Prayer for the Dead* by David Schwab.

exact events leading to death were. The counterfactual story, the story that the elders are disavowing, is that a stranger comes to town, does not find any food, and leaves empty-handed, alone, and hungry. Desperate for food, he attempts to rob another wayfarer and is killed in the attempt. The detail in this story, which we swear did not happen, pushes us to begin to suspect that it may, in fact, have happened. This is somewhat akin to what the literary theorist Jacques Derrida calls "writing under erasure"—introducing something into the conversation and immediately negating it, in the manner of saying "Johnny is not sick" rather than "Johnny is well." Saying "Johnny is not sick" places the idea of sickness in the conversation (as if one said "Johnny is ~~sick~~").

This is true here. The elders, the representatives of the city, say: "This stranger ~~came to us and we dismissed him without food and he was forced to rob another person and was killed in the process.~~" The counterfactual details, the facts of the case that are disavowed continue: "~~We let him be without providing an escort for him.~~" It is not true, the elders protest, that we were blind to his plight. The growing facts of the disavowed narrative lead us to the conclusion that there is actual responsibility here. Somebody should have seen. What kind of place is this in which a stranger can wander through in total anonymity and not be offered food and provided with escort? Therefore the court, the institution that defines a settlement as a city, has to atone for this death.

The feeling of responsibility for one who passes through is immediately translated into legislation as the talmudic discussion continues.

> Rabbi Meir would say, "We coerce accompaniment, for the reward for accompaniment has no measure."

This is the final step in articulating the responsibility placed upon the city. In the Deuteronomic ritual, we first find the elders responsible because of geographic distance from the blood impurity that must be purged—"Your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil" (Genesis 4:10). The Mishnah assigns a more specific responsibility, which the comment thickens. A stranger passing through town is owed, it seems, food and protection. Finally, Rabbi Meir codifies this responsibility.

The "coercion" of Rabbi Meir's statement implies that there are judicial institutions in the background able to enforce the law. In the twelfth century Maimonides articulated this responsibility in his great code of Jewish Law, the *Mishneh Torah*: "We coerce accompaniment as we coerce alms-giving; the court would appoint agents to accompany a person who was traveling from one place to another."

Can Accompaniment Be Coerced?

There are two parts to Rabbi Meir's statement quoted just above. The first part is as stated: "We coerce accompaniment." There seems to be an internal contradiction in this phrase itself. Accompaniment suggests itself as an intimate act. One accompanies a friend home after dinner. One accompanies a lover to a play. Or, in an example less anachronistic to the talmudic texts, one accompanies a sage to the study hall and back as a sign of respect and love. Why then does Rabbi Meir say that we *coerce* accompaniment? This then is obviously not (only) the intimate accompaniment of friends and lovers, or even of students and teachers, but the accompaniment of strangers. The accompaniment of those for whom the city takes responsibility since there is not necessarily a single person who otherwise would take responsibility. The care for the stranger could no longer rely on the omniscience of individuals. There is too much risk of inaction, of indifference. The city as a body needs to be able to delegate obligations to individuals in order to maintain the justice of the whole.

We now read the second half of the statement: ". . . for the reward for accompaniment has no measure." If the reward for accompanying a stranger has no measure, why would there be a need to coerce someone to do it?

Rabbi Meir's statement highlights the fact that accompaniment is part of two discourses. On the one hand, it is a matter of personal piety, for which the reward has no measure; it is immeasurably large. On the other hand there is the matter of justice in the polis. The city as a community based on relations of justice has an obligation to the stranger. This

David Schwab (to purchase: tinyurl.com/davidschwab or 212-927-0652)

obligation devolves upon any or every specific individual as a limb of the communal body.

Levayah (accompanying or escorting) occurs in one other context, which might shed some light on the structure of the gesture itself. The only other usage of the term levayah is in the discussion in the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 18a) of the obligation to accompany a dead person on the way to burial.

The levayah of the dead reinforces the basic structure of accompaniment. It is a reaching out toward another, a gesture that has no hope of being repaid. It is not a gift in the anthropological sense—a gesture that creates an obligation. It is only an answer to a commanding of the Other, the Stranger in the Levinasian sense.

Redrawing the Boundaries of Responsibility

The obligation to accompany another is an obligation to cross boundaries. In accompanying the dead, the boundaries that are crossed are those between life and death. The gesture is not one that is dependent on a sense of mutuality, since there is no possibility that the dead will repay the kindness. Accompaniment is a stretching across fixed boundaries, whether those of a city or of life itself.

This movement of stretching across boundaries (especially the impermeable boundary between life and death) moves the conversation into the realm of the fantastic. The distinguishing feature of the fantastic as a literary genre is an uncertainty or a hesitation experienced by the reader. As Tzvetan Todorov notes in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature confronting an apparently supernatural event." The fantastic functions only in the context of the normal workings of the universe or, as Todorov writes, "The fantastic is always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality." Within a work of fiction, the intervention of the supernatural in life constitutes a break "in the system of pre-established rules."

I want to suggest that accompaniment presages just this "irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality." One might even be tempted to read the phrase "it has no measure" as meaning that the effects of accompanying the stranger are unknown, are beyond the simple causality of the day-to-day. The assumption of the obligation of accompaniment by the city and its performance by an individual serves to redraw the boundaries of a city. The boundaries of the city are no longer the geographical boundaries or the cartographical boundaries. They are the boundaries of responsibility. These boundaries lie well beyond the boundaries of intimate geography that define most of our communities. The gesture of accompaniment points toward, or is in fact, a reaching through or stretching of the boundaries of intimacy, which are usually defined by hospitality.

We find this explicitly in the discussion of accompanying the dead, *levayat hamet*, in Tractate Berachot. The discussion there moves seamlessly from the initial charge to accompany the dead to stories of the "courtyard of death," in which the dead and living meet and the dead can teach the living. Escorting the dead leads to crossing the boundaries that separate the living from the dead.

Phyllis Serota (phyllisserota.com)

So often "justice" in the city looks like this: police brutality against those struggling for change or against the most vulnerable. How can we bring true justice—a justice grounded in care and a sense of radical interconnection—to our cities? *August, 1968* by Phyllis Serota.

Bringing Levinas's Theory of "the Other" into a Political Context

Emmanuel Levinas argued for the importance of grounding philosophical speculation in the initial gesture of recognizing the Other—any other person—as being beyond our grasp. He described this recognition of an unknowable Other as a departure from the Western philosophical tradition's approach to "knowing" the world by describing it with categories that originate in the knower. For most Western philosophers, he suggested, the task of knowing is to successfully assimilate the Other into the Same, that is, the knower or me.

This may seem to be a good way to go, philosophically, for a while. If I want to know what exists in the world, I create large categories of things (flowers, plants, planets, TV shows) and then slowly distinguish between the objects in each category by the subtler differences between them. Thus I am not left with an undifferentiated laundry list of stuff that happens to be in the world. I have a way of grasping what those objects are. What I am doing at base is bringing those objects into my categories so they become familiar. I am bridging or breaking the gap between them and me, intellectually. Hence I am assimilating that which is other, different, not me, into that which is the same—that is, me and my intellectual concepts.

Knowing an object in this way does, however, deny the object any uniqueness. A unique object cannot ever really be known—just as we must guess at the meaning of Hebrew words that occur only once in the Torah. If there is no category in which to place the object, then there is no way to differentiate it from some other category.

This is, perhaps, all fine and good for inanimate objects. But as Levinas argues, the basic characteristic of a person is that he or she is unique. Or, to use Levinas's terminology, a person is an "infinity." This is opposed to those other objects that are a "totality," meaning that we can grasp them *in toto*. The problem then is that if we want to know the world, perhaps the most important, or at least the closest, part of that world that we want to know cannot be described by category and difference. The basic characteristic of other people, the Other, is that they are ungraspable, an "infinity." Then if I do breach the chasm that exists between me (the Same) and you (the Other), I have misunderstood you. If I place the Other in a category and define the Other by difference, I have by definition misdefined the Other.

The only possible engagement with the Other is response. The relationship is not equal; it is hierarchical, with the Other always in the transcendent position. It is also not mutual. My response to you is not contingent upon an expectation that you will then respond to me.

As I've described it, this is an ethics of intimacy. This is a powerful way of describing and conceptualizing relationships between two individuals so that I do not profess to ever be able to know you to the extent that I might be tempted to use you. The model, however, stumbles on the political. This is sometimes referred to as the problem of the third. If there are three people in a relationship (or more, *ad infinitum*), who is responding to whom? As a political model it seems unworkable.

New York Wing by Charles Fazzino.

Accompaniment as a conceptual frame offers a solution. Apart from my obligation to respond to the Other, the city as a community of residents has an obligation to the Stranger. The city mediates this obligation in the form of delegating responsibility to residents. "We coerce accompaniment." The reward for accompaniment is that my neighborhood or community does not have impermeable boundaries. The obligation of accompaniment accomplishes both the Levinasian task of recognizing one's obligation to *respond* to the other face-to-face while at the same time not being overwhelmed by the ethical perplexity of all the Others that equally demand one's response. The city mediates the response to Others as Strangers by placing the obligation of response on one resident (*coercion*). However, this still preserves the uniqueness of the Other as a particular person whose presence demands a response from *me*.

Creating a City Where Justice Dwells

The logic of levayah/accompaniment says that the justness of a city is a function of the web of relationships between "strangers," people who are anonymous to each other. If people can fall into a place that is beyond anybody's responsibility, this is a reflection on the justness of the city itself. This is when the city needs to atone.

Accompaniment as a practice exists for both the individual and the city. The actual accompaniment of guests out of one's house as the invoking of the Abrahamic ideal of hospitality is a token of remembrance that the boundaries of responsibility extend beyond the boundaries of intimacy. In our daily lives, the practice of reaching out beyond ourselves is also a performance of accompaniment. This practice starts with paying attention to the other people whose paths we cross:

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Acknowledging the cashier as a person and not just part of the cash register, for example. Speaking to the workers you happen upon in the hallways of the hotel. Walking the picket line with them. Respecting the servers, janitors, and salespeople in the places that we eat and work and shop. Engaging a homeless person in a conversation rather than either walking by or just giving them money.

Giving money to people who live on the street is not the solution to the fact that thousands of people are homeless. However, responding to the immediate needs of a homeless person with money, water, or food is a practice of inclusion, a statement that the homeless person is also created in the image of God and is part of the community. Responding to the immediate needs of the homeless person in front of the grocery store or in the parking lot is only a placeholder for the commitment to address poverty and homelessness politically and structurally. We who are privileged must also teach our children that while poverty is dangerous, poor people are not.

Finally, in the life of a city, when budgets are being decided upon, when scarce resources are being allocated, the response to the Stranger has to be in the center of the discussion. Eradicating the existence of "ownerless places" has to be the first, not the last, priority. We must be allies with all the residents of the city who are made invisible by the corporatist mentality of the city. We must demand adequate housing; we must demand living wages; we must demand access to education; we must demand a fair tax burden and an equitable sharing of resources.

The very facts of widespread homelessness, of people suffering and dying because they cannot afford health care, and of people going hungry shatter the illusion that we live in a just society.

On the other hand the promise of the fantastical implications of accompaniment is that, if we do embrace this personal and political practice of responding to the Other, it has the power to immeasurably transform our urban landscapes—to make our cities over into communities of obligation wherein justice once again dwells.

We are then, at this moment, in the midst of this era's seemingly radical indifference to the Other (to the many, many Others), faced with a choice. We can either succumb to the distance and desolation in which a just society is impossible, or embrace the radical possibilities of accompaniment, in which we start to create the city in which justice dwells. ■

Islamic Law and the Boundaries of Social Responsibility

BY RUMEE AHMED

Aryeh Cohen's essay on "Justice in the City" in this issue of *Tikkun*—and his remarkable book on the same subject—sent me searching for an analog in the medieval Islamic texts that I study. I was inspired by Cohen's fresh look at rabbinic legal discourse, in which he uncovers profound disquisitions on the nature of obligation and interpersonal relations in an urban context. He manages to connect ancient legal debates on such pedestrian topics as zoning rules and ritual law to issues like homelessness in modern-day Los Angeles. Cohen is not the first to attempt

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Rural Muslim jurists expressed a similar vision of obligation as can be found in Rabbinic Judaism, but jurists from medieval Islamic cities focused more on individual rights in the context of a welfare state. This sixteenth-century miniature painting by Matrakçi Nasuh depicts the city of Aleppo in Syria.

Creative Commons/Matrakçi Nasuh

"The face of the Other should strike doubt and obligation into any person of conscience," the author writes. Here, protesters from Vancouver march to Ottawa to protest the abduction and murder rates faced by Native women in Canada.

such a connection, and the shortcomings of similar works breed a certain skepticism and cynicism toward the enterprise as a whole. To suggest that rabbinic scholars had the same concerns as those raised by the modern nation-state is embarrassingly anachronistic, if not incredibly naïve. Cohen, however, resists such anachronisms and instead offers a sophisticated method for reading rabbinic texts.

Rather than calling upon the particular conclusions of rabbinic scholars and selectively applying them to a modern context, Cohen focuses his attention on the logic of rabbinic argumentation as a whole. By reconstructing this logic, Cohen calls us to consider the underlying concerns of care, hospitality, and obligation that make legal thought religious. Cohen notes that—especially in the context of a city—rabbinic scholars assumed regular interaction between neighbors and strangers, and, through seemingly inconsequential legal dictates, articulated an ethic of justice predicated on care for the Other. This is a kind of Levinasian view of obligation, though Cohen helpfully guides us so as to appreciate the differences between Levinas and rabbinic notions of obligation. What results is a picture of city life as one of constant care for the neighbor, of questioning one's own level of service, and of a worship of God that reflects an unwavering obligation to His creation. I am jealous of this depiction of a justice-filled citied life, and I desperately want to see it in medieval Islamic texts on similar topics. I do see it, but not in the same way.

Urban/Rural Differences on Community Obligations

When reading Islamic law, one quickly gets an impression of the context in which certain jurists were writing. In texts from tight-knit, rural communities, one gets a sense of obligation similar to that described by Cohen. Citizens are called upon to look after the welfare of their neighbors, and one must stand at the ready to help a stranger in need. Strong members of the community must look after the less fortunate, and everyone contributes to the creation of a just society.

In texts written by citied Muslim jurists, however, one finds almost the opposite. Citied jurists carefully guard individual rights against any encroachment from the state, neighbors, and/or strangers. Especially in the realm of property law, the landowner is protected whenever possible against any would-be claimant. Did your vicious dog attack a passerby while on your property? That passerby should be more careful next time. "Undesirables" moving into your neighborhood? Try forming a housing association that keeps them from acquiring land in your area. Neighbors complaining that your fancy new construction project will give you an intimate view into their private grounds? Tell them to build a wall on their property that blocks your view or, better yet, tell them to invest in some nice curtains. The citied jurists consistently champion personal rights, especially the right to do what you want on your personal property, and they were hypersensitive about enforced care for the Other. It is almost an inversion of the ethic that Cohen sees playing out in rabbinic texts.

Yet, if we apply Cohen's method to the texts of citied Muslim jurists, we find that they assumed a state infrastructure vastly different from that assumed by rabbinic scholars. Muslim citied scholars assumed a welfare state, wherein citizens gave regular, mandatory taxes that would be used for the purpose of providing for the destitute. In theory, the state treasury would provide housing for the homeless, food for the hungry, and funds for the poor. By paying high taxes, citizens could be assured that they were supporting a state that would take care of the most needy. In return, the state would give citizens protection from outside claims. More important, citizens felt a kind of self-satisfaction that they were doing their part to contribute to justice. The system was modeled upon a sort of social contract wherein citizens agreed to pay high taxes so long as the state worked to create a just society. Citied jurists, it seems, were not describing Los Angeles so much as my adopted city of Vancouver.

Injustice in Vancouver

Walking through downtown Vancouver, one is confronted by two realities. The first is the presence of great wealth, visible not only in the crisp silk suits of pedestrians, but also in the public works projects that keep the city gleaming. The beauty of the city reflects a communal ethos and also higher taxes

Valerie Taliman and Indian Country Today Media Network

(relative to the United States) that distribute a larger portion of individual income for the public good. The second reality is persistent homelessness, which is just as plain to see as the high-rises. Just beneath the surface of the shimmering city is a systemic failure to provide for some sectors of society, and, more egregiously, institutionalized racism against indigenous peoples. British Columbia contends with a shameful history of dispossessing its indigenous population and stripping them of their material and cultural resources through policies like the Residential School system, ensuring that future generations will be severely disenfranchised culturally and economically.

Anyone of conscience must feel dismayed that a city so awash in wealth can abide such destitution. But the role of the state mollifies some of these inequalities as compared to countries like the United States, where social welfare programs are meager and difficult to access. Canada and the province of British Columbia take an active role in promoting social welfare in return for higher taxes. They have a universal health care system that does not discriminate based on socioeconomic status. Public housing projects abound, and though they are often located outside the most desirable areas of the city, they ensure that many homeless people nonetheless have a place to rest their heads. Homeless people in Vancouver are entitled to receive an income assistance stipend, a housing assistance stipend, a clothing stipend, technical education, access to detoxification clinics, employment assistance, and access to multiple other social programs. The province has taken concrete steps to apologize for its injustices against its indigenous population, and has dedicated significant resources to indigenous economic development and cultural preservation.

And yet, homelessness and poverty persist. The face of the Other should strike doubt and obligation into any person of conscience, forcing us to continue asking, "Am I doing enough?" This, of course, threatens (*continued on page 69*)

We Are One Body

A Christian Perspective on Justice in the City

BY ALEXIA SALVATIERRA

What is our responsibility to one another, and how can we motivate one another to fulfill it? Those are the core questions Rabbi Aryeh Cohen asks and answers, both in this issue of *Tikkun* and in his new book. They are questions on which the survival of our planet may well depend.

I am a Lutheran Christian, ministering primarily at this point in my life in Pentecostal and other evangelical contexts, rooted in immigrant communities. I have also been answering these questions implicitly throughout my thirty-five years of experience in congregational and community organizing. Rabbi Cohen's work provokes me to attempt to articulate my own answers from my own wells and context.

Years ago, in the Philippines, I was helping to organize a community of urban squatter women to become engaged in the movement for peace and justice through participating in multisectoral demonstrations. I was trying to agitate them around their "self-interest." They laughed at me, explaining that it was certainly not in their self-interest to risk their lives. Abashed and confused, I asked them what would induce them to risk their lives. They were thoughtful. A leader replied, "Because we love our children." I then asked, "If you love your children, why would you participate in the march? Why wouldn't you just take your children and get out of this dangerous place?" Another woman answered, "Pastor, don't you know that all children are our children?" This is a truth that most of us have forgotten: all children are actually our children. We are connected. What happens to you affects me, on more levels than I can name or define.

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New Testament Texts on Social Responsibility

In the letter to the Corinthians, a New Testament epistle, Paul the apostle teaches that we are so connected that we are like the members of a body. It is that impossible for one of us to escape the pain of another. We do not have the choice to stop being a family (another common scriptural image of connection); we have only the choice of being a functional or a dysfunctional family. It is worth taking some time to absorb this text (I Corinthians 12:14–26):

What strands within the varied field of Christian theology can support the idea that caring for others is a religious obligation? Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Augustine, and others appear in this painting, *Pope Benedict XVI at Prayer with the Holy Theologians* (oil and acrylic on canvas, 2002-2008).

> For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Another text I look to is Paul of Tarsus's letter to the Galatians, which asks the community to "remember the poor." Rev. Timothy Dearborn of World Vision connects this passage with the body imagery in the letters to the Corinthians and Romans; he says that the poor are members of our body that have become dismembered and must be re-membered in order for the body to be healthy, fully able, and strong.

During the big earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1989, I was running a homeless ministry in Berkeley. The disaster was major, shocking, traumatic. A section of the Bay Bridge fell. A major freeway connection collapsed, crushing cars and bodies. All communication systems were down. No one knew the latest news . . . except a number of homeless leaders in the ministry, who were receiving their information directly from the police. Before the disaster, the police arrested the homeless leaders regularly. In a time of disaster, the nature of their relationship changed. They became fellow sufferers, victims of a common tragedy. They saw one another differently; for the moment at least, they realized the depth and breadth of their human connection.

Faith as a Common Ground for Activism

For eleven years, I worked for Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, an interfaith ministry that organizes faith leaders and congregations to join low-wage workers in their struggles for living wages, health insurance, safe working conditions, and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. During that time, I learned that faith can be a common sacred ground for organizing. We found that shared faith enabled congregation members and low-wage workers to more easily recognize one another as siblings and members of the same body.

Shared faith could also be drawn on strategically during labor disputes. During one battle for union representation by nursing-home workers at a chain of convalescent homes owned by an orthodox family, the resolution of the conflict

Fred Villanueva (fredvillanueva.com)

came shortly after they learned that one of the worker leaders was an orthodox Jew from Argentina. The owners could see the other workers as "Other," but she was unavoidably part of the family.

During my sojourn at Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, I also joined the national struggle for immigration reform. In the midst of that struggle, we discovered another instrument for awakening congregations to the truth of our common connection. The biblical tradition of hospitality recognizes the Other not only as brother or sister but also as potential angel. The visitors to Abraham and Sarah's tent in Genesis 12 were messengers of God. Hebrews 13:1–2 reminds the early Christian community that any visitor may in fact come to bring a blessing:

> Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

When immigrant believers read these passages, their sense of self often changes. They lose their shame and find their dignity. That inner sense of authority then subtly transforms their interaction with non-immigrants; a new reality (which Jesus called the kingdom of God) emerges in the room. Non-immigrants reading these passages often also shift their perspective in the same direction. They become prepared to see the contribution of the Other as every bit as significant (or even more significant) than the threat of the Other.

Of course, understanding our common connections (and even the unexpected blessings that we can bring one another), doesn't in itself solve the problem. When we are feeling the pinch of scarcity, human beings become territorial. Twenty years ago, an official at the World Council of Churches prophesied that over the next twenty years around the globe we would see increasing political democracy and increasing economic tyranny—an economic consolidation of power. We would seem more free but we would feel less free. That self-contradictory experience, the official prophesied, would produce great anxiety, which would lead people to seek out demagogues and crave simplistic solutions. False religion, he said, would mask this truth; true religion would expose it.

I think that his prophecy has come true. We are a frightened people. Our chronic anxiety impacts our capacity to solve the problems that create it. This is where the Lutheran emphasis on the grace of God and the way of the cross offers a remedy. Grace tells us that God's gifts are greater than our capacity to use them up or abuse them. The way of the cross tells us that the love of God is stronger than death and that, in the end, love and power are not opposite, as they so often seem to be in this world. Rather, love must seem weak on its way to ultimate victory. Intentional vulnerability and courage in the face of suffering are at the core of our journey to salvation and the renewal of the world.

As a Christian, I trust that Jesus leads the way through the valley of the shadow of death and carries us on the way when we cannot walk it alone. This doesn't promise safety and abundance at all times; crucifixion is always a possibility. It does, however, ensure us that the sacrifices on the way to justice are worth it. To the extent that we actually believe these tenets, we have the capacity to overcome our natural "growl" and live into the connection and mutual blessing that is the deepest truth of our lives. The letter to the Hebrews calls us to remember and join that cloud of witnesses of all faiths who have spent their lives in the beautiful struggle. May it be so! ■

Jonathan Burstein (jburstein.com)

"The biblical tradition of hospitality recognizes the Other not only as brother or sister but also as potential angel," Alexia Salvatierra writes. In this painting, *Dumpster Dive* by Jonathan Burstein, an angel digs through a trash bin in San Francisco's Mission District.

Beyond the Limits of Love

Building the Religious Counterculture

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS

A HOMELESS MAN NAMED Roger lives on my block in the entryway to an abandoned building. He sleeps there every night, and every day he wanders around the neighborhood. We always greet each other; sometimes we stop to chat. He knows my kids and my dog, and they know him. He has never asked me for help of any kind. Most of our exchanges are absolutely ordinary—just small talk about the weather.

Except that it's not at all ordinary small talk. There's a forced breeziness on both of our parts. We're both pretending that it's normal for someone with a wealth of earthly possessions and social capital to be chatting about the weather with someone who has virtually none. We are radically Other to one another. We pretend that we're commiserating about the rain when, in fact, the stakes could not be more different for the two of us. There's no "co-miserating"; it's misery for him and not for me. When we talk about the upcoming thunderstorm, for me it's a question of whether to bring the kids to the park before or after the rain. For him it's whether his sleeping area will be flooded, whether he'll be safe from lightning, and whether he'll be able to sleep at all.

And when I'm home and dry and the storm is raging outside and we're counting the seconds between the lightning and the thunder, sometimes it hits me that Roger is still outside—*right* outside—not in the Sudan, not in Delhi, not even in East Harlem, but right outside, just a few doors down at this minute. He is sitting there alone in the pouring rain.

Liberal Religion's Flight From Obligation

It is a well-known fact that religious congregations, particularly liberal ones, have been hemorrhaging congregants for the last fifty years. Theological updates, long overdue, have done nothing to staunch the outflow. In fact, in a July *New York Times* op-ed column, Ross Douthat observed that the decline of liberal religious denominations maps perfectly to their efforts to adapt themselves to contemporary liberal values. In a stark illustration, he notes that at the very same time that the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops was finally approving a rite to bless same-gender unions, Episcopalian church attendance figures for the last ten years came out, showing that average Sunday attendance had dropped 23 percent and not a single diocese in the country saw churchgoing increase.

Of course, correlation does not imply causality, but at the very least we can say that the liberalization of religion (in its current form) has been ineffective at keeping moderns engaged in religious life. Bewildered congregational board presidents, clergy, and bespectacled Alban Institute consultants are tearing out their hair over the question of why. They sit around boardroom tables with cups of fair trade, organic, shade-grown coffee and ask each other, "What more do they want?"

Douthat named the defining feature of liberal religion as the idea that "faith should spur social reform as well as personal conversion." While a this-worldly concern for justice is certainly an important feature of liberal religion, I would offer that the signature orientation of liberal religion has rather been one toward increasing personal freedom from religious strictures. The joke is that the Ten Commandments have been demoted to "ten suggestions." By way of a few examples, according to the Barna Group, liberal Christians are far less likely to tithe than their conservative counterparts. Sabbath practice, prayer practices, and the observance of kashrut have fallen out of favor in mainstream and liberal Judaism. (In fact, Richard Levy, director of HUC/LA rabbinical school, scandalized the Reform Jewish community in 1999 by posing for the cover of *Reform Judaism* wearing tallit and kipa.) Liberals give less to charity, volunteer less, and give less blood. According to Arthur Brooks, author of *Who Really Cares*, if liberals gave blood as often as

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The role of religion is to "take us beyond the limits of love … to take us outside of ourselves, show us the sweeping panorama of the universe and, in that context, teach us to create true community," Ana Levy-Lyons writes. This mural, *Reconciliation*, was created collaboratively by Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists for the Interfaith Center of Case Western Reserve University.

Building Bridges and Katherine Chilcote (clevelandmurals.org)

conservatives, the American blood supply would increase by 45 percent.

Religiously mandated practices—literal practices that one performs with one's body—have come to seem gauche, déclassé, primitive, or even infantilizing to modern liberal sensibilities. In our haste to jettison the particular obligations that we didn't like, we have discarded the notion of obligation itself. Liberals now tend to envision religion as a private, internal, affective endeavor rather than a shared set of public behaviors. In what I see as a misconstruing of Jesus' message, religion has ceased to be about what you do, and instead now revolves around how you feel about it. One result of this is that there is no moral accountability—there is nothing and no one to tell me that I ought to do something about the fact that Roger is sitting out there in a thunderstorm. One could argue that I should tell *myself* to do something about it, but apparently that doesn't work because I consistently do nothing. I, for one, cannot lift the chair that I'm sitting on.

Embracing a Theology of Obligation

Aryeh Cohen implicitly contests our contemporary, obligation-averse understanding of religion in his essay, "Justice in the City." He describes the "coercion of accompaniment" as a system designed to take us, as a community, beyond the natural limits of our affective capacities. It compels us to accompany the stranger across otherwise uncrossable gulfs. It addresses the sad truth that love doesn't take us far enough. Love simply doesn't motivate us enough to care for all the people who need to be taken care of. Obviously it doesn't. If it did, the world would be a very different place.

Cohen embraces the notion of obligation—even coercion—and yet his essay is far from literalist homage to Talmudic

authority. It is a piece of liberal theology, both in its sanctification of social reform and in its imaginative reinterpretation of religious tradition. He brings the insights of modernity to bear on the ancient concept of *levaya* (accompaniment), employing Levinas and Derrida to uncover/add layers of meanings. The city's obligation to the literal stranger becomes an obligation to the ontological Other in this formulation. The desert wilderness becomes the liminal, interstitial gaps in our ethical consciousness. A dead body becomes a suffering body in our midst. He weaves a modern-day midrashic tapestry out of ancient threads.

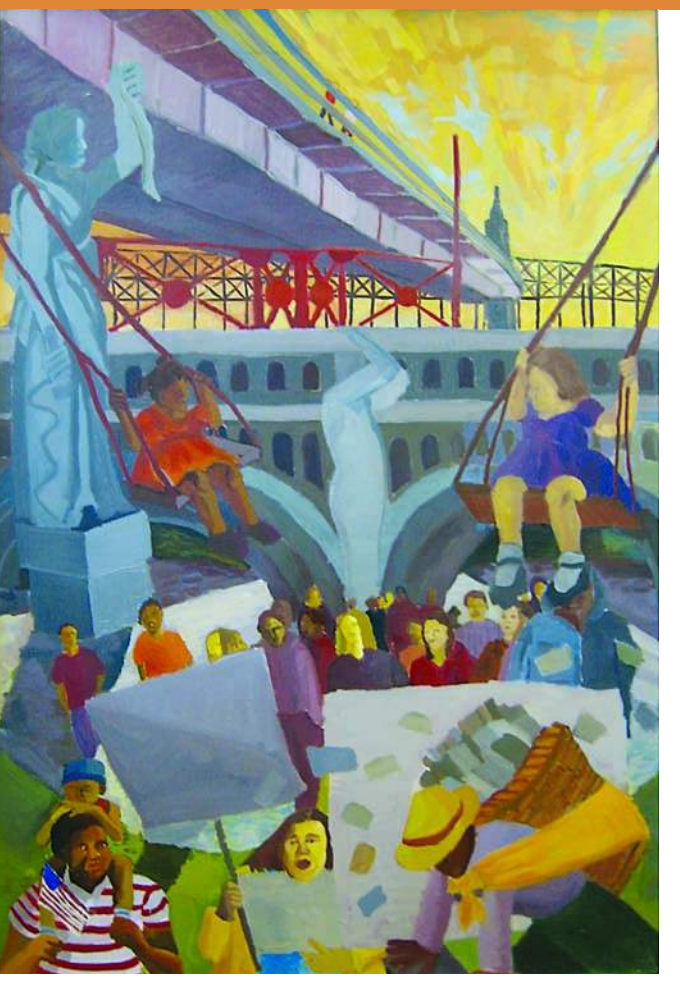
But through all these nimble acrobatics over the undulations of the historical discourse, Cohen insists on the fundamental stability of the obligation itself. He writes, "The actual accompaniment of guests out of one's house as the invoking of the Abrahamic ideal of hospitality is a token of remembrance that the boundaries of responsibility extend beyond the boundaries of intimacy." The halachic law and the current-day application in this case are consonant. Obligation has not been abandoned, but rather expanded and reimagined to meet the needs of today.

This is not to say that traditions of obligation make inherently good foundations for present-day obligations and ought always to be preserved. Modern thinkers have rightly apprehended that many ancient traditions are true abominations. (The Episcopal Church is right, for example, in blessing same-gender unions and breaking with a long tradition of discrimination.) But I believe that the burden of proof rests on the person who wants to break with tradition—the burden to show that the tradition is somehow oppressive or violent—rather than on the tradition to defend itself as worthy of devotion. The approach taken by religious liberals is often just the opposite: it is to sweep all traditions and practices off the table and then revive some of the old favorites according to the dictates of nostalgia, aesthetics, and a secular understanding of what's reasonable.

Cohen's work offers a beautiful alternative model for how liberal religious communities could approach traditional religious practice. Rather than discard practices that generations of faithful men and women have labored to develop, we might redeploy them in new contexts. The application changes, the interpretation modernizes, but the soul of the obligation remains. I believe that this is what today's religious seekers are actually seeking—not complete freedom from religious strictures, but strictures that speak to the heart and mind of today. They want to know that when they join a religious community, something is expected of them; that it has real implications for how they live their lives; that something is at stake in what they do; that they can make and keep commitments to others. Otherwise, in the absence of religious practices and a meaningful engagement with tradition, I believe that the pews will continue to empty.

As much as I adore the Beatles song "All You Need is Love," it's not actually true. Love can't carry us all the way to the Other. Love can't take us all the way out of our own private universes. Love can't always overcome our cultural norms, our prejudices, our self-protective impulses, our internalized pain. We need wisdom, too. We need communities of responsibility. We need perspective. We need obligations to remind us that all of our actions, even the most mundane, are dense with meaning because they ripple outward, touching everyone and everything.

This is the role of religion—to teach love, yes, but also to take us beyond the limits of love. It is to take us outside of ourselves, show us the sweeping panorama of the universe and, in that context, teach us to create true community. It is to teach us to care for the Other—to teach me to accompany my neighbor Roger, the stranger in my city, in whatever ways he may long to be accompanied, across the no man's land of the desert wilderness. If religious communities can start to engage a robust theology of meaningful practices and obligations, reimagined and redeployed for our place and time, religious liberals might just find it worth their while to stick around. ■



"Love can't carry us all the way to the Other," the author writes. "We need communities of responsibility." To create this mural, *Envisioning Racial Fairness,* artist Katherine Chilcote worked with the Racial Fairness Project of Cleveland, Ohio, and student leaders to conduct interviews about racial fairness in the justice system.

Building Bridges and Katherine Chilcote (clevelandmurals.org)

Healing the Miser Within

The Kabbalah of Giving and Receiving

BY ESTELLE FRANKEL

In this painting, *The Power of Aleph* by David Friedman, the Hebrew letter creates a circular path between giver and receiver—with each powerfully fueling the other.

David Friedman (kosmic-kabbalah.com)

In virtually every large city in the world today there are street corners and squares where the needy and destitute congregate. Holy cities in particular draw many who sense the opportunity present at the sacred sites where openhearted pilgrims flock. When I lived in Jerusalem we used to refer to the street people we encountered as "holy beggars," for one never knew who among them might be a hidden tzaddik, or an embodiment of Elijah the prophet himself! I have fond memories of one such holy beggar who used to hang out in Jerusalem's Geula district, where I lived. Upon receiving my meager offering of a spare shekel or two, he would proceed to shower me with abundant blessings for good fortune of every kind. During these exchanges, it was not always clear to me who had given what to whom, but I know that I often left the encounter feeling enriched, sensing that the distinction between giver and receiver had been blurred.

Today, living in Berkeley, California, I am faced on a daily basis with the dilemma of when and how much to give to the many homeless individuals who camp out on the streets where I work and play. Some of my friends argue that it is useless to give money directly to these beggars, as one never knows what they will do with the money, and that it is preferable to give generously to the local food banks and homeless shelters. Though I understand their argument, I still feel compelled to give. What I have come to realize is that giving to the needy has much more to do with me than with the recipients' deservedness.

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The Euphoria of Giving

I give because it hurts *me* on a soul level when I close my heart and walk by a person in need. And, as I have learned from recent research in the fields of immunology and neuroscience, when I give to someone in need, my immune system is fortified and my brain actually gets bathed in oxytocin, the chemical responsible for feelings of pleasure and euphoria! Furthermore, Judaism teaches that when I give freely and generously I am connecting with my divine nature, for the Holy One, by definition, is the Source that continuously gives and sustains all existence and does so regardless of our deservedness.

Giving, of course, is not limited to monetary gifts. When we give our time, energy, knowledge, and love to others, we also benefit from what has been called "giver's high." Reflecting on the great sense of reward that he felt as a teacher of Torah, Rabbi Akiva once said to his favorite disciple, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, "More than the calf wants to suck, the cow longs to suckle" (Talmud Pesachim 112a). This famous talmudic dictum can be applied more broadly to all relationships in which giving and receiving are central dynamics, for all giving increases the supply available to the giver, just as a cow or a mother's milk increases as she nurses her offspring. This blurring of the boundary between giver and receiver can also be seen in the book of Ruth, the quintessential biblical tale that portrays a society in which the poor and vulnerable members of society are cared for with dignity through the ancient spiritual practice of *leket* (gleaning). At the end of her first day of gleaning in Boaz's fields, Ruth describes her experience to Naomi as something "she did for him" (Ruth 2:19). The midrash reads this phrase as a reversal of the conventional understanding of giver and

"I give because it hurts *me* on a soul level when I close my heart and walk by a person in need," Estelle Frankel writes. "When I give freely and generously I am connecting with my divine nature."

receiver. Through the act of receiving Boaz's wheat, Ruth does something for him.

For the rabbis, the metaphor of the suckling cow and calf also served as a symbol of the relationship between the Creator and creation, suggesting how much God longs to give to us if only we can receive. Giving and receiving are at the heart of kabbalistic doctrine, hence it is no great surprise that the esoteric spiritual tradition of Judaism is called Kabbalah, which literally means "receiving." According to Kabbalah, our purpose as created beings is to receive the divine gift of life.

R. Isaac Luria describes creation as originating in a divine yearning to give to and love an Other. Out of a divine outburst of love, the worlds and all their multitudinous forms were created to serve as vessels capable of receiving and housing the boundless light of *Ein Sof*. These vessels, or *Sephirot*, are described as a series of ten divine potencies or energies that receive and, in turn, give their light to the Sephirot that follow them on the kabbalistic tree of life. This great chain of being represents both God's innermost life and the very structure of the universe and all its contents. Every person, say the Hasidic masters, is a world in miniature, and so these very same divine potencies exist within each of us as our capacities to receive, hold, and also give of the divine bounty, or *shefa*, that flows through us. Through our good deeds and generosity, we enable this shefa to flow unimpeded through all the worlds, bringing blessing, harmony, and abundance into our lives. Any block in our capacity to give and receive love can block that flow.

While this kabbalistic doctrine provides a useful model for how we can ideally participate in the divine dance of giving and receiving, not everyone is blessed with the necessary tools. Those whose emotional needs were not adequately met during childhood may find it difficult, as adults, to give and receive freely with friends and intimates. In the best of circumstances, when a child receives what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott referred to as "good-enough" parenting, the child can slowly internalize a basic sense of goodness and self-worth, experience gratitude and, in turn, take joy in giving and receiving. It is the repeated experience of receiving from and being received by one's caretakers that enables a child to master these capacities. The Hebrew term for

Creative Commons/Gary Dee

gratitude, *hakarat hatov*, literally means recognition of the good. Recognizing the good one has received from others is indeed the force that inspires gratitude and the desire to give back.

A Therapeutic Perspective

As a therapist and spiritual director, I work with many individuals whose needs for emotional recognition were not met in childhood and who, as a result, are unable to either give or receive freely. We often think that "receiving" should be no problem whatsoever, yet this is not always the case. Many of us have real hang-ups when it comes to receiving and prefer to stay on the giving end of relationships so as to avoid bumping up against our own feelings of unworthiness or our discomfort when it comes to relying on others. For some of us, the indebtedness we experience when others give to us is simply unbearable. We just don't feel entitled to having our needs met. On the other end of the spectrum are those who become narcissistically self-involved and over-entitled as a response to emotional deprivation. These individuals are typically unable to recognize the needs of others, and they expect others to make it up to them. And though they are constantly taking from others, they are rarely able to actually take in and receive what is given to them. No matter how much they have, they are never satisfied, so they hold on to what is theirs in a miserly fashion, unable to take pleasure in giving without feeling depleted. To heal, these individuals need to experience a true recognition of their needs and find a safe source of goodness (in themselves and others) that cannot be spoiled through envy or aggression.

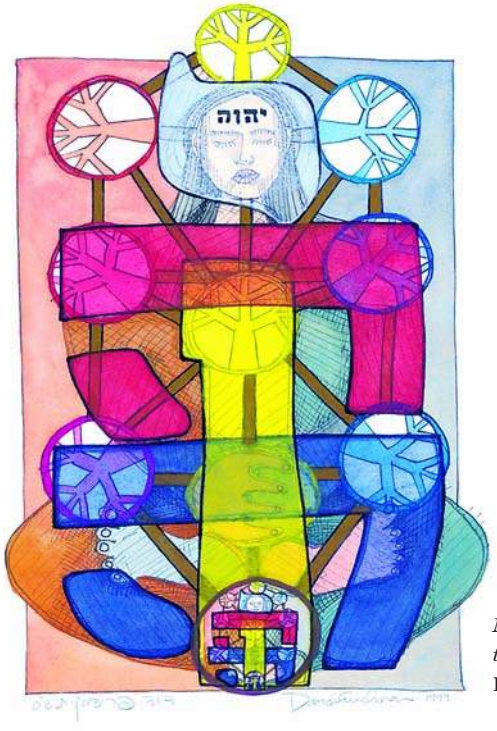
The turning point in therapy for many narcissistically wounded individuals is when they are finally able to experience gratitude. I have learned, from my work integrating Judaism and positive psychology, that gratitude is a virtue that can actually be cultivated through mindfulness and spiritual practice. By developing mindfulness that everything that is ours is given to us as a gratuitous gift by others or, on a deeper level, by God, we can begin to truly "receive" and take in the good in our lives. We can also enjoy what we have, instead of focusing on what we lack.

Learning to Be Generous

A newfound capacity for gratitude awakens in us a feeling of generosity and a desire to emulate the Creator by giving back to others, as Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's classic tale about the healing of a lonely miser suggests.

For those who do not know the tale, here's my own retelling of the story, inspired in part by Rabbi David Cooper's retelling from *God Is a Verb*:

In his youth, Rabbi Shneur Zalman was once summoned to raise funds to free a young man held for ransom on the eve of his wedding day by the Russian police. Knowing there were no rich Jews in the community who could possibly come up with the ten thousand ruble ransom being demanded, Shneur Zalman decides that his only hope is to approach the one rich man in town, Ze'ev the miser. Shneur Zalman's two friends, Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and Reb Mendele of Vitebsk, try to dissuade him, reminding him that Ze'ev never gave more than a dirty kopek to even the most desperate beggar. But Shneur Zalman insists that Ze'ev is their only hope, and he tells them that if they want to come along to support him, they can come so long as they promise not to say a word, no matter what transpires.



Meditating on the Holy Name by David Friedman.

After consenting to Shneur Zalman's terms, the three young rabbis go and knock on the miser's door. Invited in, Shneur Zalman proceeds to pitch his cause. Ze'ev responds with a show of sympathy by pulling a dirty kopek out of his money pouch and handing it to Shneur Zalman saying, "Here, Rabbi, please take my contribution." To everyone's surprise Shneur Zalman then proceeds to thank the miser profusely and bless him for his generosity. As he concludes his elaborate blessing and gets up to leave, his fellow rabbis give him an exasperated look, but Shneur Zalman simply reminds them of their promise to keep quiet.

Just as the three rabbis are about to leave the house, Ze'ev comes running back and says, "Come back, please, I want to give you a little more. It is such a sad story." Ze'ev then proceeds to pull another pouch out of his pocket and from it he procures a shiny ruble. Again, Shneur Zalman showers the miser with blessings, thanking him again and again for his generosity and compassion. The scenario repeats itself several more times, each time ending with Ze'ev giving a bit

David Friedman (kosmic-kabbalah.com)

more and Shneur Zalman continuing to bless and thank him. Eventually the full sum of ten thousand rubles is given and the rabbis are able to obtain freedom for the young captive, who then goes on to get married and invites Ze'ev to be his honored guest at the wedding.

When his companions later ask him how he knew not to give up on Ze'ev, Shneur Zalman replies, "Deep down I knew that Ze'ev was no miser. It's just that no one had ever been willing to receive his tiny offering. Everyone he gave that rusty kopek to threw it back in his face, so he never got to experience the joy of giving and the satisfaction of being received. When I accepted what he could give, Ze'ev found the strength to give more. And the more he let go and gave, the more he wanted to give."

In this tale the boundaries between giver and receiver repeatedly blur. In receiving Ze'ev's gift, with all its limitations, Shneur Zalman gives Ze'ev an experience of his own goodness. By truly receiving not just what was given (a lousy, rusty single kopek), but the giver himself, Shneur Zalman offers Ze'ev what he deeply longs for—unconditional love and acceptance. Each time Ze'ev gives, his inner resources and sense of abundance grow. By giving, Ze'ev receives more and more of what is already his. Generosity functions much like those old-fashioned water heaters whose waters warm up only when the faucet is turned on. Similarly, the act of giving warms us from the inside and allows us to keep pouring forth goodness from our hearts. When the Torah commands us to give to the poor, the phrase used is redundant, "Give, you shall surely give" (Naton Titen, Deut. 15:10), for when we give we are gifted with the capacity and the desire to keep giving.

The relationship between love and giving is beautifully drawn in Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler's classic book of Jewish thought, *Strive for Truth*. We commonly assume, he says, that the more we love someone, the more we want to give to them. While this is true, the opposite is also true, suggests Rabbi Dessler. The more we give to another, the more we grow to love them. This truth is reflected in the linguistic connection between the Hebrew word for love, *ahavah*, and the Hebrew-Aramaic word for giving, *hav*, which is derived from the same root. By giving, he suggests, we invest a part of ourselves in the Other, and it is then easy to feel love, for we see the Other as an extension of ourselves. For this reason, the Bible commands us to give not just to those we love but to our enemies as well, for by giving to someone we do not naturally love, we will inevitably come to love them. In fact, Jewish law teaches that if faced simultaneously with an opportunity to help a friend and an enemy, both of whom are in need, one should help one's enemy first in order to transform hatred to love (Talmud Baba Metzia 32b).

The act of giving finds its deepest mystical expression in the practice of *tzedakah* (giving charity), through which we most clearly come to resemble the Creator. According to Kabbalah, the most sublime name for the divine, יהוה (Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh), depicts the Creator as continuously engaged in the act of charity.

Sephirot and Letters by David Friedman.

According to Jewish numerology, the first letter of this name, yod, equals ten. Small like a coin, the yod symbolizes the gift of existence that God gives us through the ten divine utterances that continuously create the world. This gift is given to us with the next letter, heh, which is numerically equivalent to five. Like the five-fingered hand, the heh holds the gift of existence and reaches out with the divine outstretched arm, symbolized by the letter vav, which is shaped like an arm. The final heh of the name symbolizes our hand that opens to receive God's gift of existence.

God's name is complete only when we receive the gift of existence with the humble awareness that even the hand with which we receive is given to us. Each time we practice tzedakah, placing a coin in the hand of someone in need, we complete the divine name and in doing so participate in the ecstatic, transcendent moment when giver and receiver merge.

Next time you pass by a beggar on the street, you might just remember that reaching for the coin in your pocket and placing it in that individual's hand is potentially a redemptive act, unifying the name of the One. ■

Have you read *Embracing Israel/Palestine*?

Order the print copy at tikkun.org/EIP or the Kindle version at Amazon.com.

David Friedman (kosmic-kabbalah.com)

Community Reparations to Transform Community Desolation

BY LISA "TINY" GRAY-GARCIA

Displacement = Death: a collaborative mural created by lead artists Carina Lomeli, Asian Robles, Muteado Silencio, Charles Pitts, Vivian Thorp, Jasmine Hain, and many more under the auspices of *POOR Magazine.*

POOR Magazine (poormagazine.org)

THROUGHOUT MY CHILDHOOD, when Mama and I were sleeping in our car, we were regularly arrested, cited, and eventually incarcerated for doing so. It is illegal to be houseless in this country, and it is, in fact, a punishable offense. So is sitting, lying, or sleeping on a public street and/or convening on a corner or on a public sidewalk if you are a young person of color, im/migrant, indigenous person in diaspora seeking day labor, or someone who "looks homeless." All of these are what I call "crimes of poverty": overtly raced and classed "crimes" pinned on poor people and people of color, resulting in our ongoing police harassment, profiling, removal, incarceration, and, often, state-sponsored murder.

Sometimes I and my disabled mama of color (she was African-Taino-Roma—although I look like my white father, the descendent of colonizers) would save up enough money from the tireless hours of extremely hard work we were always doing in our street-based micro-business to rent a motel room or a tiny apartment. Because of my mother's disability and my young age (between eleven and twenty-one during this time), we were surviving on only what we made by selling handmade art on the street without a license. But there were times, albeit rare, when we would get "inside." During these times, we had many "landlords," and at least four of them were observant Jews. They treated us no differently than other landlords did. They went to synagogue, observed Shabbat, and celebrated sacred Jewish holidays. I know this much about them because those holidays were the few times they wouldn't be calling us, sending us notices, or pounding on our shabby doors in the single room occupancy hotels or the overpriced and uninhabitable apartments they owned that we barely resided in, asking for their rent money. Every single one of these landlords evicted my mama and me for unpaid or late rent.

Each time we were evicted, my young heart would jump out of my chest, filled with terror about returning to the street or the back seat of our current broke-down "hooptie"

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Participants in *POOR Magazine*'s revolutionary youth media education program paint a mural in San Francisco's Clarion Alley in summer 2011.

(car), which was constantly being towed for the "sleeping in vehicle" citations we were always receiving; or even worse, the cardboard motels (as my mama called them) in doorways or alleys or parks. Our houselessness was, in fact, directly caused by the amount of money we were able to make and then by the evictions we would inevitably receive for not having enough of said money. (Note, I don't use the term "homeless," which is associated with an Other-ing social service industry that profits from our struggle without caring about our survival and capacity to thrive. I see the term "homeless" as one that fetishizes those who are houseless in order to fuel this network of social service nonprofits and for-profits, which could be better understood as "the poverty industry.")

Justice in the City?

As someone well-acquainted with the violence of urban poverty, I was fascinated and moved by Aryeh Cohen's discussion of "Justice in the City." These sacred passages in the Jewish tradition describing a deep and real responsibility for others, a responsibility to "walk" someone most of the way on their journey home, and the naming of "community in desolation" sound so similar to a concept I have developed, in collaboration with my fellow "poverty skolaz" at *POOR Magazine*, called "community reparations." Our vision of community reparations names the direct responsibility of people with race, class, and/or education privilege to support and care for community members, neighbors, and others in struggle. This vision launched *POOR*'s Solidarity Family: a group of supporters with race and class privilege who work in partnership with the landless, indigenous youth, adults, and elders at *POOR*. With the Solidarity Family, *POOR* was able to buy a piece of land in Oakland to launch a project called HOMEFULNESS: a sweat-equity cohousing, art, and community garden project for houseless, landless, indigenous families and elders.

But I had to wonder—these traditions of justice must have been addressed in the services attended by some of my eviction-happy landlords of the past; how did they reconcile these teachings with the eviction proceedings they so blithely pursued against us and countless other poor families?

And why do so many well-meaning people struggle so much with how to support poor community members and their houseless neighbors? How do the conceptions of collective responsibility from the Talmud that Aryeh Cohen cites become distorted or lost? What seems to be missing from many of these narratives is a direct look at systems like capitalism, colonialism, and their requisite bedmate: what I call the "cult of independence." These are the systems behind the theft of indigenous land, the rampant real estate speculation in poor communities of color, the brutality of gentrification, the displacement of entire communities, the eviction of elders and children with impunity, the land grabs, the eminent domains, the hoarding of stolen land in the form of "assets," "equity," and financial portfolios. These are the systems that have created the circumstances of disparity and violence in which we currently find ourselves.

In order to confront poverty and houselessness, we must acknowledge the herstories of so many aboriginal peoples who continue to be removed from indigenous land from the United States to Palestine, herstories that are hidden under the beautifully stitched ironclad quilt of profit margins, acquisition, and independence. The backdrop rationale to the violence of capitalism is that what is most important to attain in life is each of our own personal happiness, "success," and productivity—not community, caregiving, sharing, or journey-walking together.

The creation of conditions that benefit some and destroy the rest of us, not able to "make it" or "get ahead," are pounded into all of us in the United States; we are all asked to buy into the survival-of-the-fittest, bootstraps mythology of U.S. capitalism. This idea intentionally leaves out all who don't have the resources or support to "make it"—people like my mama, an orphan, an unwanted child of color, whose body was sexually abused hundreds of times by the time she was two years old; who made it by any means necessary to give me life, raise me, and keep on keeping on, no matter what—like so many poor people do every day in this racist and classist hate-filled society. But in my mama's case, she couldn't continue fighting through all the pain, which is why we became houseless.

POOR Magazine (poormagazine.org)

Classes on revolutionary journalism at the "PeopleSkool" in San Francisco give students the skills they need to create blogs and radio segments about social change and community reparations.

POOR Magazine (poormagazine.org)

Cohen's description of justice in the city asks us to more deeply consider the role of neighbors—those who, like so many of you, meet and pass houseless people in your own neighborhoods every day. I was happy to see that at least none of the contributors to this special section in *Tikkun* call the police on their houseless neighbors—something that so many others in their position have done). What if we were to step outside the confines of the individualistic model offered by capitalism? What if, instead of merely thinking of your houseless neighbors outside in the rain, you were to offer them a room in your house? What if you were to rent them a motel room? What if you were to use your credit to help them rent an apartment (something so many poor people are unable to do because of former evictions and bad credit scores acquired through the cycle of poverty). What if, by virtue of their relationship and shared neighborhood, you considered it your duty to walk them, if you will, most of the way back home.

At this point you may be asking: What about the social service agencies, the nonprofits and NGOs trying to make a difference? To many of us poor folks, these institutions aren't allies; they often do more harm than good. This is the poverty industry; it fuels the ongoing lie that poor people are inferior, incapable of thinking for ourselves and creating our own self-determined futures. It takes away our power to manage our own land, create our own small businesses and economies. And it fuels the same lie so often offered as a justification for not giving to panhandlers: that we—as the poor, the panhandlers, the recyclers, the multitude of unrecognized and criminalized workers—do not deserve support unless we justify our choices to those with resources.

Those described as "beggars" are in fact working; panhandling is a job, one of the hardest jobs anyone can do—try standing on a highway median for ten to twelve hours at a time. Whether you think it is a loathsome profession, or whether you think the workers spend their money on drugs—guess what, that's not your business, no more than if a CEO at Chevron or Monsanto spends their paycheck on drugs, alcohol, or cheap food for that matter.

Putting Revolutionary Concepts into Action

Cohen's essay highlights truly revolutionary concepts in Judaism: concepts that challenge the ridiculous and violent myths of capitalism. Revolutionary change will not come from a grant application, from a social worker, from the prison industrial complex, or from the nonprofit industrial complex. Rather, it can come from things you have in your power to do.

Don't evict us if we don't have the rent money. Buy and give away healthy, non-genetically-modified groceries. Make land available for community gardens. Offer free talk therapy in the community if you are a therapist; free medical care if you are a doctor or nurse or herbalist; free legal advice, representation, and court appearances if you are a lawyer; or just plain cash, however much of it you happen to have in surplus. For those of you who own land beyond what you and your family reside on, give us back our indigenous, stolen land and respect our sacred burial sites the same way you respect your own. We poor and indigenous folks can self-determine our own futures if given the chance, and we can thrive, if supported with a frame of community reparations.

These ideas are thriving in poor people–led, indigenous people–led revolutions across the globe, such as the Prison Hunger Strike movement in Palestine and the United States, the Shackdwellers Union in South Africa, the Landless People's Movement in Brazil, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, Sacred Site resistance movements like the fight to save San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, and many more.

And be very clear, supporting all us po' and indigenous folks in whatever way we are moving and needing support is not a replacement for keeping up the fight for the last few social service crumbs that are out there—welfare, food stamps, and affordable housing—because that's all most of us have to live on until we gain back what was stolen from us.

Perhaps if we took this regional/community approach of accompaniment and community responsibility, described so beautifully by Cohen and practiced at *POOR* as Community Reparations, we could transform, heal, and repair a great deal in this hurtful and deeply dangerous society for po' folks like me and my family. Perhaps we could become a society of community caregivers who walk each other down the path on our collective journeys. Together, we could all be safe. ■

Trauma as a Potential Source of Solidarity

BY JILL GOLDBERG

Violence in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighborhood (above) has left many residents struggling, like the author, with post-traumatic stress.

Jill Goldberg

When I first moved to Vancouver, I was immediately drawn to its Downtown Eastside neighborhood—a place where drug deals are conducted openly; crack is smoked on the streets and in the alleys; women sell cheap alleyway blowjobs to support their habits; needles lie strewn on the ground; and men and women do strange dances down the streets in time to the beat of the cocaine coursing through their veins. It is Canada's poorest postal code, located in an opulent city with some of the world's most unaffordable real estate prices (second only to Hong Kong).

I think the attraction had to do with what had brought me to Vancouver in the first place: on the streets of the Downtown Eastside I felt a sense of kinship among others struggling, as I was, with the debilitating effects of post-traumatic stress disorder.

My experiences in the Downtown Eastside made me wonder how experiences of trauma can open us to each other and serve as a new source of solidarity that cuts across class and social divisions. How might the ability to see analogies between others' traumas and our own make us more able to see ourselves as part of an interconnected community—a community in which we are all responsible for one another's welfare?

My Own Story

I left my home in Montréal after having been attacked by a man who broke into my apartment in the middle of the night. I got away and was physically undamaged, but the psychological and emotional damage of this event was profound and long-lasting.

In the aftermath of the attack, I developed post-traumatic stress disorder. Every time I tried to sleep, I experienced night terrors from which I would wake up screaming. Flashbacks and sudden moments of panic left me exhausted, utterly depleted. More than a year went by when I was sleeping sometimes less than two hours a night, and during that time I would wake up screaming from nightmares at persistent and regular intervals.

As a result of these and other symptoms, I was unable to concentrate. My memory failed me. I was in such agony that I used to say that I was wearing my nervous system on the outside of my skin, and every bump, every nick rattled me like an electric shock. The more I suffered, the less I recognized myself.

Eventually, I asked to take a semester off my position as a college professor in Montréal. I was granted the leave, but it brought on a whole new set of troubles. My insurance company refused me disability insurance, leaving me panicked over money and entrenched in an acrimonious bureaucratic battle. Because I had no money coming in, I felt stuck in the apartment in which I'd been assaulted, reminded constantly of the terror of that night. And at the end of my semester off, having spent most of that time in a state of extreme and protracted anxiety, I found that my employers had failed to tell me that they had opted not to renew my contract with them, as, at the time that I took my semester off, I was one semester shy of achieving the possibility of a permanent position.

JILL GOLDBERG is a writer, a photographer, and a professor of English Literature at Langara College in Vancouver, BC. Her work has appeared in *Matrix Magazine*, *Tikkun*, *The Dance Current*, and *SubTerrain*. She volunteers in the Downtown Eastside and with Habitat for Humanity.

After all of this, I made a decision that I don't even remember making: a decision to move to Vancouver, which was about as far from Montréal as I could get, in order to restart my life. After living in Vancouver for a year, I began a program that introduced therapeutic massage to a drop-in center for women who are survival sex workers in the Downtown Eastside. Eventually, I began to teach photography at the same drop-in center. Together, the women whom I met at the center and I organized a photo exhibit that was, simply, a document of their lives and an opportunity for them to show what they'd accomplished behind the lens of the camera. The photos ranged from landscapes and street shots to more intimate portrayals of the women's lives, but each photo was a testament to their own power to rise above a city that is so often indifferent to them and to announce to all who would hear, "This is my voice; I am not invisible."

How Traumatic Experience Opens Us to One Another

There are many ways in which my life has nothing in common with the lives of most women in the Downtown Eastside, but in that neighborhood I saw something that I recognized in myself: a feeling of abandonment. I began to see how a shared experience of trauma connected us and created a sense of community between us. Many Vancouver residents who are in other ways like me—middle-class, white, and university-educated—present a wall of indifference toward the suffering that occurs every day in the Downtown Eastside.

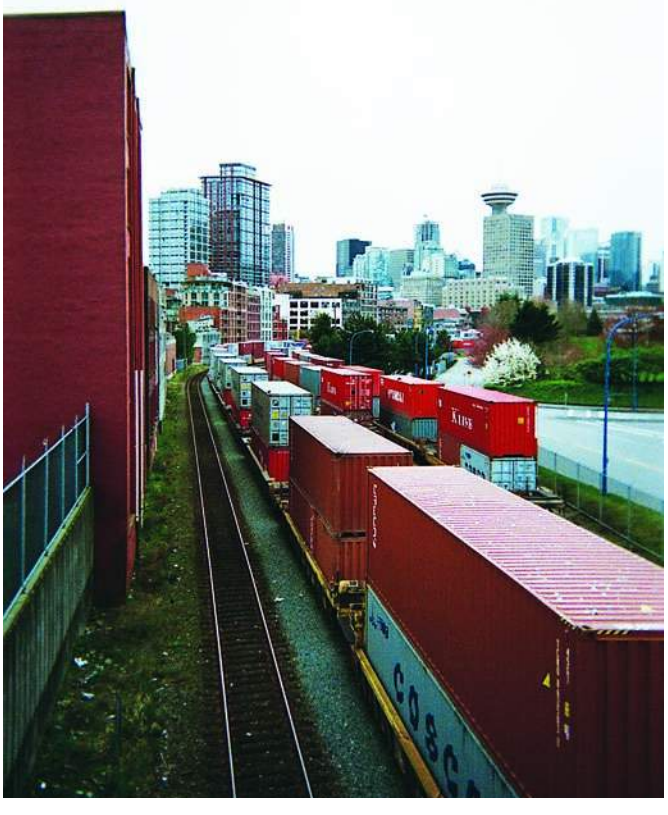
The experience made me aware of how experiences of trauma can open us to a sense of kinship with others in the same city. It also drew me to question what other paths exist—aside from shared experiences of violence and abandonment—to a similar feeling of responsibility and commitment to care for and about those facing the most trauma in our communities.

Aryeh Cohen's article "Justice in the City" in this issue of *Tikkun* proposes a radical configuration of the communal responsibility that we, as societies and, in particular, municipalities, have toward the Other. In his vision of society, Cohen implicates each of us in an obligatory relationship not only to love and respect the Other, but to act on these things in a way that requires us to cross boundaries that are not only geographical or cartographical, but what he calls "the boundaries of responsibility."

My experience with the women in the Downtown Eastside taught me much about the correlation between crossing cartographical boundaries and crossing boundaries of responsibility. On the day of the exhibit's opening, a friend from out of town and my parents, who also came from out of town, related to me that on their way to the gallery they had stopped someone to ask for directions. Both were told, "You don't want to go to *that* neighborhood." But in this case, the act of turning love and respect into action required the crossing of an undrawn but profoundly etched city boundary that prevents those with wealth and social capital from witnessing the suffering and violence occurring right next door. I did want to go to *that* neighborhood for the precise reason of expressing my obligation to transcend the usual lines of responsibility. It was not enough to theorize about the mutuality of our experiences, but I saw that through the burden of insight, I was required to cultivate justice by accompanying the women I met, not to a geographical destination, but to a place of greater power and dignity.

In Vancouver, boundaries have tremendous class implications, and it still troubles me that the women in my course require assistance or accompaniment to capture the attention of those beyond the Downtown Eastside's boundaries. It is as though an ambassador from the middle class is required to legitimize those voices that come from the more marginal Other place to which many of us have such a practiced indifference. And this makes me think that, in fact, we owe the greatest debt of responsibility to enact love and respect in precisely the places that much of society typically loves and respects the least.

Every city has its neglected corners, filled with people who need much more than a spontaneous moment of generosity and the handing out of some spare quarters. Like Cohen,



"Experiences of trauma can open us to a sense of kinship with others in the same city," Jill Goldberg writes. Serial killer Robert Pickton for years targeted women in remote areas of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Jill Goldberg

The opulent skyscrapers of downtown Vancouver appear in the distance in this photo taken by a participant in Jill Goldberg's photography class.

I believe that we must witness the experience of the Other and "assimilate Other into same"—to actually identify aspects of ourselves in those we might normally ignore or disdain. Asking an ordinary middle-class citizen of Vancouver to identify with a Downtown Eastsider would likely bring psychological defenses screaming to the forefront, but transcending these defenses and crossing the mental barrier of self and Other to see a fundamental, human sameness will surely cultivate the radical responsibility that prompts us to choose compassion over disdain, accompaniment over indifference, and justice for all rather than justice for me alone.

I Could Easily Have Become Homeless

I arrived in Vancouver at an interesting time: it was right around the time that serial killer Robert Pickton, who had been preying on the area's sex workers and other disenfranchised women, was on trial and then convicted of first-degree murder. As a woman who was in the process of dealing with the judicial system's handling of the man who attacked me, I was listening closely to the legal and societal response to the unspeakable violence wrought by Pickton on society's most vulnerable. And what I heard was not always encouraging.

Serial killing of women is an all-too-common feature of many societies, but this makes it no less shattering. Still, what is exponentially more anguishing is the response to the Pickton serial killings. It took police years of missed opportunities and ignored evidence to catch Pickton, and meanwhile more and more women went missing from the area for good. The investigation into the disappearances of women from the Downtown Eastside was so botched on the part of police and authorities that there was a legal inquiry into the handling of it. However, even this inquiry was deeply flawed and considered by many of the Downtown Eastside's stakeholders to be a complete sham that further marginalized the population that was most affected by these murders.

But perhaps what disturbs me even more than the official responses are certain views that I keep hearing in the court of public opinion. The phrase "high-risk lifestyle" has been used over and over to describe the women who were slaughtered by this mass murderer, often as though to suggest that the victims brought it on themselves. What I have been aching to say is this: the women who have supposedly "chosen" their high-risk lives and are therefore deemed unworthy of serious and adequate protection and compassion did not choose all of the circumstances of their lives, just as I did not choose mine following my own brush with trauma. Ending up on the wrong side of chance is so much easier than most of us in the middle classes know, yet we can all easily fall prey to what Shakespeare called "Giddy Fortune's furious fickle wheel."

I sometimes imagine that I had been attacked while I was working a minimum-wage job. I would have had little or no savings. I could not have taken a leave, as I would have had no benefits. The cost of the medication that I took for help with sleep would not have been covered. I might not have been able to get a new job and recover from my losses. Perhaps I might not have even had the knowledge or resources to understand my own condition (PTSD) and articulate my needs.

Change around the conditions of my life and I too could have been a woman living on the street. It would have been easier than I ever knew to end up in that situation. And what kept me in my middle-class groove was as much good fortune as the break-in was bad luck.

The Structural Inequalities that Divide Us

I have always been aware of societal inequities, but this experience gave me firsthand knowledge of how far we are from being an equal society in terms of not only gender, but also class, and by extension race.

Because I am an educated, white, middle-class woman, the police believed me when I said I was attacked. They got the guy and charged him, and still only a small measure of justice was done. Imagine if I had been homeless and, as a homeless woman, been attacked; I wonder then how much I'd have been listened to, and I intuitively know the answer—it is an answer that is apparent in the deep disdain that our society seems to have for the homeless, the poor. It is in our vocabulary when we call people "bums" and "whores" or worse. It is in our sideways glances that we say that the person asking for money is a parasite, less than human.

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How might the ability to see analogies between others' traumas and our own make us more able to see ourselves as part of an interconnected community? Downtown Vancouver emerges from foliage in this photo taken by a participant in the WISH Drop-in Center for survival sex workers.

The women who went missing from the Downtown Eastside were unprotected because of the systematic marginalization and revictimization of the most vulnerable in our society: women (in this case often Aboriginal) who live in poverty and resort to drugs and sex work to support themselves so that they can survive the cruelty that fate has blown their way.

I do not for a minute believe that given a full range of choices, the women in this neighborhood, most of whom have long lived with intolerable abuse, would have chosen their "high-risk" lives. In society in general, most people do not dramatically change social class from the one they were born into: why would these women be any different from the rest of us? For the sake of argument, though, let's imagine for a minute that the women who disappeared made poor choices that they are morally responsible for all on their own. Who amongst us has not made poor choices at times in our lives? For some the stakes are higher than for others.

A New Lens

With the burden of this insight weighing heavily on me, I ventured into the Downtown Eastside to do volunteer work at the WISH Drop-in Center for women who are survival sex workers. This began as a project in which I used my training as a shiatsu (massage) practitioner as a tool of outreach to the women at the center. I did this for a couple of years, and I loved the connections that this work fostered, but I also wanted to help give the women at the center a chance to tell their own stories, to determine their own narrative.

Since living in Vancouver, I feel like I've heard the story of the women in the Downtown Eastside told through everyone's perspective except their own. So, I approached the director of WISH with the idea of teaching a photography class there. After getting the go-ahead and a generous donation of single-use cameras, I began to teach the basics of composition and camera use. After our first photography session, the group gave itself a name, "East Side Talent," and we mounted an exhibit at a beautiful old building in the Downtown Eastside that houses a number of services crucial to that community.

The composition of the group of women varied from week to week, but there are a few who remained with the course the entire time. With cameras in their hands, they captured stories that no one else tells. It's not all about misery and despair. There are pictures of friends and loved ones, pictures of pets, pictures of flowers blossoming and of Vancouver's

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beautiful parks. These are pictures that tell the story of lives that are rich, of passions, of hopes and disappointments. They counter our society's oversimplified and overdetermined clichéd idea of "sex worker." I hope that, in some small way, the photographers were able to gain a degree of empowerment by not being the object of someone else's story, but having the opportunity to be the teller of the story. And, indeed, for many women this was the case.

One of my most loyal students told me that in learning about photography, she has experienced the joy of developing a new skill and the pleasure of having a hobby. Perhaps most significantly, she said, she loves the opportunity to express her feelings and to describe her experiences through her camera. She told me that the photography course, the exhibit, and the camera she received through her participation in the workshop are some of "the best things that ever happened" to her. Moreover, she spoke of the "dignity and the power" of being the one to hold the camera. And indeed, there is power in being the master of your own narrative.

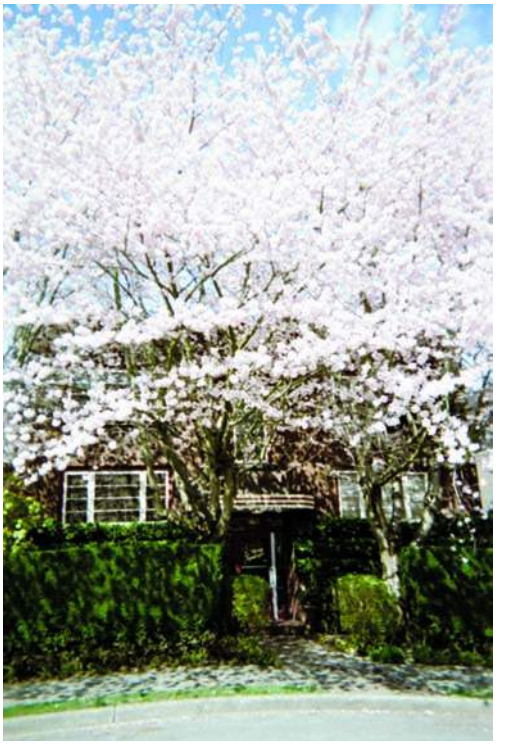
The Foundations of Solidarity

It was partly out of a sense of kinship that I entered the Downtown Eastside to be with the women I met there. But I did not do this without overcoming certain intellectual, psychological, and emotional boundaries pertaining to the differences that I believed existed between us. Even after having experienced a traumatic event that to some degree shattered my perceptions of difference as defined by class, I still encountered my own resistance to the task of assimilating the sameness I shared with the women at WISH.

Perhaps the most significant boundaries that must be crossed in order to accompany the Other and to cultivate justice are the boundaries that exist in each of our minds: the ones that allow, for example, middle-class people to believe that we could not experience the same type of abject poverty experienced by those who exist in a more marginal class, as if *they* are implicitly different from *us*—less meritorious, less human. To realize that difference is a social and mental construct rather than an implicit human condition is to be able to comprehend the core sameness of all humans and to understand that it is our shared humanity, not necessarily our shared conditions, that require our solidarity in another's cause.

I don't think that one has to experience a trauma—to share a condition, so to speak—to develop compassion. If solidarity were built on shared experiences alone, then we would truly live in an atomistic world. It is not enough for me to say, "I've experienced violence, therefore, I stand in solidarity with all victims of violence." The greater act would be to say, "I am human, therefore, I stand in solidarity with all humans—every person's well-being is equally important no matter the material conditions in which they live."

I wish I knew how to generate solidarity in the absence of shared experience, and I also wish I knew how to encourage all people who have experienced something traumatic to reach outward to those who are in need rather than to recoil back behind the boundary of comfort. Perhaps the answer does, indeed, lie in Aryeh Cohen's vision of "accompaniment"—which I take in part to entail the act of citizens offering compassion by standing in solidarity with those who are in need. The struggle though, is how we move toward seeing such accompaniment as an obligation, not a whim, that must be borne communally. If we ever succeed in truly delegating this obligation to all citizens of a given municipality, justice will be created and love and respect will be enacted in their highest forms. ■

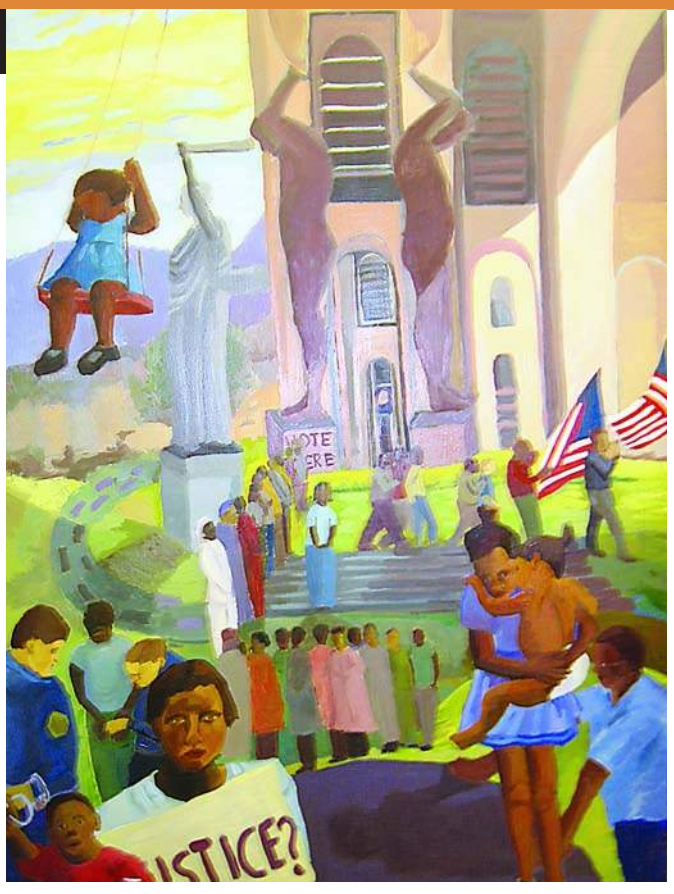


Goldberg's photography class sought to counter society's oversimplified vision of "the life of a sex worker" by inviting participants to tell their own narratives. "It's not all about misery and despair," Goldberg writes. "There are pictures of friends and loved ones, pictures of pets, pictures of flowers blossoming."

LB

Searching for Solidarity in an Atomized Society

BY PETER LAARMAN



"We desperately need to build up an ethic of accompaniment," the author writes. "We should commit to creating a counterculture of resistance and celebration." Detail from *Envisioning Racial Fairness* (see caption on page 30 for more details).

Building Bridges and Katherine Chilcote (clevelandmurals.org)

How can we continue to behave ethically within a wider culture in which so many forces prod us to use others for our own satisfaction or self-advancement? It's an always-vexing question that Aryeh Cohen's essay on "Justice in the City" raises in a fresh way.

There have always been unscrupulous individuals who operate in this way, seeking out others' vulnerabilities in order to exploit them. But now we have entire industries devoted, in essence, to harvesting heretofore personal information for the sake of prompting particular consumer and political choices. We have people on the left, not just on the right, who "network" systematically with an intent that is flagrantly self-interested.

My point is the obvious one, that the wider society grows ever more oblivious to the problem of instrumental relationships: relationships based on what good I can get out of the Other rather than what good I can provide to benefit the Other. For many of our contemporaries, whether we should be using other human beings to our personal advantage is not even a question—it's just the way things are.

A Drought of Lovingkindness

There is, of course, the issue of compassion fatigue in a situation of information overload, but I think an even more troubling issue is the question of why and how to persist in doing good—acting out of generosity and goodwill—within a wider culture in which the old idea of doing good anonymously and as daily practice, of doing good routinely, has been supplanted by the idea of "doing good" as a means of enhancing one's celebrity through the occasional act of very public kindness.

I may well be exaggerating the degree of ethical coarsening that we have been undergoing (and I speak here only of the U.S. situation—I cannot address the state of play elsewhere). If I am exaggerating, I trust readers will correct me. But these days I see very little genuine (i.e., disinterested) public charity taking place, let alone the kinds of practices that exemplify what we in our faith traditions understand to be public justice. Accordingly, I believe we are already in a new and unprecedented moment, one with extremely troubling parameters whose full measure we have yet to take.

Politically, all of our democratic institutions have been draped with giant "for sale" signs. Economically, nearly all of our major business enterprises appear to have dispensed with the quaint idea that employee well-being matters, except inasmuch as it boosts the bottom line. Religiously, most Americans continue to gravitate toward a fear-based religiosity or a success-based religiosity (or some combination: the two are obviously related), whereas the market share for an unapologetic prophetic faith continues to slide. And, as bad as they are, all of these other warning signs pale in relation to the ever-rising tide of social fragmentation and atomization. There is a fearsome public price for this growing alienation, as underscored in Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*.

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To resist the atomization of capitalist society, we need to build a counterculture of generosity, compassion, truth-telling, and joy, the author writes. Detail from *Envisioning Racial Fairness*.

For all of these reasons, we desperately need to build up an ethic of accompaniment. But we must do it while consciously understanding ourselves to be operating in a profoundly countercultural context. This is not our grandparents' America, where there was certainly no shortage of rapacious capitalists but where rapaciousness was commonly understood to constitute antisocial behavior, deserving only of contempt. Today, the wielding of the sharpest possible elbows is socially accepted and sometimes even celebrated. Audiences jeered Frank Capra's Mr. Potter; today they cheer Donald Trump.

Building a Counterculture of "Accompaniment"

Becoming appropriately countercultural means, at a minimum, that we ourselves, in our communities of resistance, shape a recognizable and recognizably different culture whose hallmarks are generosity, modesty, compassion, truth-telling, and joy. It means not withdrawing from the larger society but nevertheless engaging and challenging it to do better while avoiding self-righteousness: no easy feat by any means. A few of our progressive faith communities today exhibit a countercultural edge at certain times, but not in sufficient depth or at sufficient scale to change the basic frame of acquisitive individualism as the norm, even as the desirable norm, for human behavior. Even our most vibrant faith communities—what some have taken to calling "spirited congregations"—contend with the fifty-minute problem: that is, they claim fifty minutes of their congregants' rapt attention during the course of a given week, after which these same congregants sink right back into a common culture in which the socially Darwinian Fox News ideology continues to gain strength.

If we do nothing else for the generations that will follow ours, we should commit to creating a counterculture of resistance and celebration that is thick enough to pose a real challenge to the Social Darwinists.

Contemporary America's reluctance to accept an ethic of accompaniment has in part to do with Christian squishiness regarding ethical obligation. Cohen quotes Rabbi Meir—"We coerce accompaniment"—and notes that this formulation is both odd and wonderful.

Christian essayist and novelist Marilynne Robinson has some important things to say on this topic in "The Fate of Ideas: Moses," an essay from her book *When I Was a Child I Read Books*. In that essay Robinson excoriates the liberal Christians who continue the long-established and offensive practice of appropriating the Hebrew Bible only to dismiss its clear ethical mandates as irrelevant. She writes:

> It seems entirely appropriate for Christians to come to whatever terms they must with the difficulties of their own sacred narrative, their own mythopoesis. But the Old Testament is another matter. It is not in the same sense theirs, and if they refuse to grant it its terms, or to give it their respectful attention, then it is not theirs in any sense at all.

If we have an accompaniment problem in contemporary America, and we do, it stems in significant part from American Christians' general cluelessness regarding the kind of discourse with which Aryeh Cohen, and Emmanuel Levinas before him, have been engaged. Jews may have to struggle with these issues, such Christians would say, but we are not bound or compelled in any way in relation to our treatment of the Other.

Really? Try telling that to Jesus, who left no daylight at all between his own teaching and the Mosaic inheritance. For him, the accompaniment principle was nonnegotiable.

This takes me back to the need for developing a thick and durable culture of resistance. Christians won't be able to do this without putting sabbath and jubilee principles at its very center. And this in turn means getting acquainted, at a profound level, with the liberationist power of the law and the prophets in ways that very few North American Christians (besides those too-easily-mocked Puritans) have ever done.

If my reading of these times is correct, and if we have indeed entered a new and dangerous social space of extreme exploitation and extreme atomization, then we must at all costs avoid responding superficially: we must avoid treating the wounds of this people in an "offhand" way (Jeremiah 8:11). We need to be sober and serious. We need to hunker down for the long haul. And that means hitting the books—or, in this case, hitting the Books, where there is still feast, not famine, for the discerning intelligence. ■

Building Bridges and Katherine Chilcote (clevelandmurals.org)

A Spirituality of the Commons

Where Religion and Marxism Meet

BY JAN REHMANN AND BRIGITTE KAHL

Marx describes religion as the imaginary flowers adorning the chain that holds us captive and envisions a day when we "shake off the chain and pluck the living flower." Is this framing as anti-religious as some seem to think? One could argue that the flowers on the chain are a "pre-appearance" of the living flower—a vision of a better world.

Laura Beckman (lauraBeckman.com)

Why do contemporary megachurches and their gospel of individual well-being find more followers than the assemblies of the Left? And why, even as mainline churches lose their members, are yoga and Tai-Chi classes experiencing a steady growth? How does spirituality outside the walls of established religions, parties, and institutions bring people "on the move" together in new ways? The programs of Alcoholics Anonymous can be described as a spiritual mass movement with religious overtones—where does it fit?

In our effort to imagine another world beyond capitalism, we undoubtedly encounter religion and spirituality as perplexingly paradoxical and as contested sites on multiple levels. Is there a chance for progressives to claim and reframe the aspirations and energies of spiritual practices for this-worldly projects of economic democracy and social liberation? Let us try to take stock for a moment.

Whereas anticapitalist movements and liberation theologies in Latin America have found multiple ways to join forces and build alliances since the 1960s, the relationship between religious communities and the socialist Left in the United States is more often characterized by a deeply anchored political and cultural divide. In the eyes of many religious people, socialism (and more particularly Marxism) is the typical representative, if not of the devil on earth, then at least of a narrow "materialism." Marxism, they claim, adheres to a shallow optimism that misses the existential, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of human life.

Many Marxists, on the other hand, consider religious folks as dupes caught up in an irrational worldview and manipulated by the powers that be. If they have the chance to meet progressive believers, they may appreciate their moral commitment, but not without

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a certain regret that it is not based on a sound "scientific" base. From this perspective, the term "spirituality" is usually associated with self-centered individualism, a neglect of social dimensions, and attempts to escape from real-life issues.

This blockade is harmful for both sides. It prevents people of faith from recognizing that the struggle against oppression and exploitation, as well as the hope for another world (not just in heaven but here on earth), is an integral, innermost part of their very own founding documents and traditions. It keeps socialists from realizing that it is in particular the oppressed, the downtrodden, and the poor who turn in droves to religion for help and consolation. To dismiss religion and spirituality in the usual generic way risks transforming socialist commitment into an intellectualist and ultimately elitist attitude that cuts itself off from popular common sense. We can learn from many historical examples—the Roosevelt era, the Civil Rights movements or current poor people's movements, to name a few—that there is no chance of a sustainable progressive and popular alliance in the United States that would not comprise a vibrant religious component. The Left has to realize that the idea of doing community organizing and movement building against or without the churches and religious communities is a naive and empty pipe dream.

Flowers on a Chain: A Closer Look at Marx's Critique of Religion

Part of the problem is a deep-rooted misunderstanding of what Karl Marx actually said about religion. A look back at his critique of religion reveals that there is much more to it than many Christians and Marxists believe there is—it's not just a rejection of religion as "opium" and "false consciousness" or a portrayal of religion as a mere instrument of manipulation in the hands of the ruling classes.

No discussion of Marx's critique of religion can get around his famous definition of religion as "the opium of the people," which has been used from both the Marxist and the Church side alike to prove that there is no chance of a serious collaboration. But if we consider the two sentences that immediately precede the opium quote, the picture changes considerably:

> Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

In this painting by Boris Kustodiev, a Bolshevik towers over the church. Leninists have long portrayed religion and Marxism as starkly opposed. Not so fast, say the authors.

Creative Commons/Boris Kustodiev

Marx then compares religion to the "imaginary flowers" adorning the "chain" that holds the people captive, and he imagines a society in which humans "shake off the chain and pluck the living flower." Even if Marx does not pursue this poetic line of thought, as soon as one takes these descriptions seriously, the perception of his supposedly hostile approach toward religion changes considerably. Isn't the "sighing" of the oppressed creature the very stuff, the raw energy, from which "spirituality" emerges over and over again—the "sighs" condensing into laments, prayers, symbols, and rituals, thereby forming the very basis for collective and individual commemoration, consolation, and coping, as well as for the resistance of exploited and marginalized classes? How could one resist a heartless and spiritless world without the potentials of what Marx describes as its "heart" and "spirit"? Similarly, is it not possible that the religious "flowers" on the chain are perceived as a "pre-appearance" (to use a term from Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope*) of the flowers without the chain, and

thus keep alive the dreams and hopes of a better world? Can socialists do away with religion when it actually constitutes a main form in which the protest against real misery and suffering is expressed?

Instead of denouncing religion, Marx in fact takes us to a differentiated and dialectical understanding of religion as a field of contradictions that contains potentially activating and paralyzing dynamics (the latter being specifically targeted in the "opium" quote). The problem is not so different from what Antonio Gramsci described in his *Prison Notebooks* as "common sense," namely a composition of contradictory and incoherent elements that are far more inconsistent than people are usually aware of.

Confronted with such a "patchwork" reality, progressives (be they religious or not) have to learn to discern the different elements. They cannot just dwell on the conformist and deactivating dimensions of religion but have to take the "sigh of the oppressed" seriously. In other words, progressives must connect these sighs to a critical analysis of exploitation and oppression, as well as a rational strategy to overcome the structural causes of misery and suffering. They also need to align themselves with the "spirituality of the sighs," for aren't the sighs their own as well? Don't they need "flowers" too in their struggle, which is not for bread alone, but for roses as well?

Capitalism's "Religion of Everyday Life"

There is another aspect of Marx's approach to religion that is also often overlooked. The introduction to Marx's "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," the early text from 1843 or 1844 where we find the opium quote, is not, strictly speaking, an essay on religion. It is rather an appeal directed by this emerging, twenty-five-year-old philosopher to his colleagues in the Young Hegelian movement to overcome their unproductive fixation on a critique of religion. He calls upon these "critical" philosophers to give up their obsession with pulling apart the "holy form of human self-estrangement." Instead they should transition to a critique of the "vale of tears, the halo of which is religion." In other words, Marx wants to unmask human self-alienation no more in its sacred forms, but in its secular forms. The "criticism of heaven" is to be turned into the "criticism of earth," the criticism of religion into the "criticism of law," the criticism of theology into the "criticism of politics."

This is indeed an interesting paradox: the very moment Marx gives his famous description of religion as both an opiate and a sigh of the oppressed, he leaves the whole matter behind and programmatically turns to what he sees as a more burning issue. Taking up Feuerbach's pattern of a critique of religious alienation, he applies it to the secular forms of ideology. In his critique of Hegel, he applies Feuerbach's pattern to the juridical ideology; in *On the Jewish Question*, he applies it to the political ideology of the modern state, which at Marx's time was in its most advanced form in the United States. And in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, he applies it to the alienation of the workers from their products of labor, which have been torn away from them and appropriated by the capitalist class. The real God of bourgeois society is money, he observes: it rules over the human beings who bow to it, and it degrades the traditional gods by turning them into commodities.

If one looks for the specific characteristic of Marx's approach to religion (e.g., in comparison to Feuerbach's concept of religious projection), it is not only to be found in what he is saying directly on the subject (which is not much), but also and more importantly in the very shift he is making from religious to "earthly" manifestations of alienation. The relevance of this shift becomes clear when we look at how, in writing *Capital*, Marx later transformed the critique of religion inherited from Feuerbach into a critique of commodity fetishism, money fetishism, and capital fetishism. The term "fetish" originally meant something that has been made and then gains power over its maker. In order to illustrate how this applies to the capitalistic market, in which the producers are ruled by the "things" they produce, Marx uses the analogy of traditional religion:

In *Capital*, the authors write, Marx transformed the critique of religion he inherited from Feuerbach into a critique of commodity fetishism, money fetishism, and capital fetishism—the earthly forms of alienation evoked in this painting, *Wall Street,* by Timothy Bruehl.

Timothy Bruehl (artistincalifornia.com)

The Path of the Parent

How Children Can Enrich Your Spiritual Life

BY STEVE TAYLOR

DIRTY DIAPERS, being woken up in the middle of the night, a house full of screams and squeals, food splattered all over the walls, toys strewn chaotically over the floor, no more late nights out, no time to read books or attend courses or retreats . . . What could be spiritual about bringing up children? Isn't spiritual development just one of the many things we sacrifice when we have kids?

Many spiritual traditions would agree with this view. That's why priests and monks have always been celibate. To be spiritual we're supposed to live apart from the normal world, in monasteries, forests, or in the desert, meditating and praying in solitude. Nothing is meant to divert us from our spiritual practices—least of all a family, which takes up so much of our time and energy.

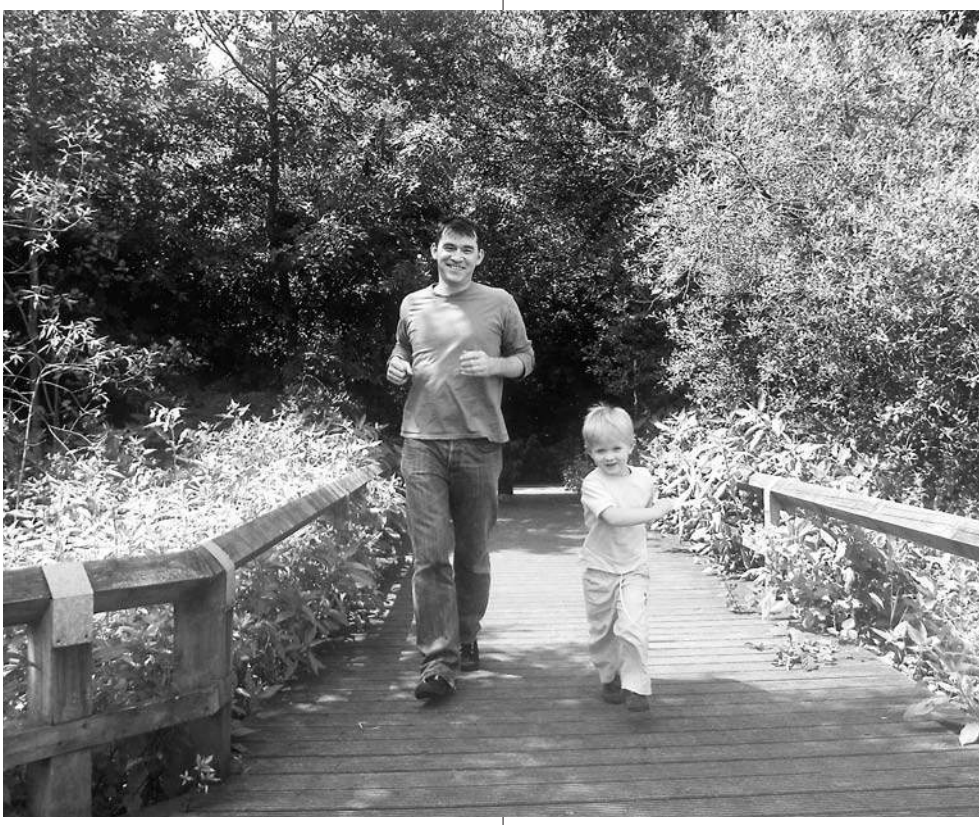
In India, there is a tradition that spiritual development belongs to a later stage of life—roughly after the age of fifty. First we have to live through the "householder" stage, bringing up and providing for our children, and living a worldly life. But once our children are grown up, we can turn our attention to the inner world. We can start meditating regularly and living more quietly and simply.

However, many parents find that—far from hindering it—bringing up children furthers their spiritual development. Seen in the right way, parenthood can itself be a spiritual path, bringing a heightened sense of love, wonder, and appreciation.

Part of the reason for this is that children are such strongly spiritual beings themselves. They naturally have many of the qualities that, as adults, we try to cultivate through spiritual development.

For example, children are naturally *mindful*. They always live fully in the present, and the world is a fantastically real and interesting

"Walking with my children has reminded me to stop and look," the author writes. "I've realized the joys of ambling along, staring at the sky . . . taking in the reality of the moment."



Steve Taylor

STEVE TAYLOR is the author of *Waking From Sleep*, described by Eckhart Tolle as "an important contribution to the global shift in consciousness." His latest book is *Back to Sanity* (Hay House). His website is stevenmtaylor.co.uk.

What could be spiritual about all those sleepness nights and dirty diapers? Quite a bit, it turns out.

place to them. As the developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik puts it in her book *The Philosophical Baby*, "Babies and young children are actually more conscious and more vividly aware of their external world and internal life than adults are." They have what she calls an "infinite capacity for wonder," which we adults only experience at our highest moments—for example, when a scientist is inspired by the wonder of the physical world or a poet is awestruck by beauty. As she puts it, "Travel, meditation and Romantic poetry can give us a first-person taste of infant experience."

I have three young children myself, ages one, three and seven. When I go walking with my baby son through the fields and paths close to our home, I'm always amazed at how long it takes us to get anywhere. What should be a ten-minute walk by the golf course to the nearest post office can last up to forty minutes. This isn't just because his tiny legs mean that he's a slow walker, but mainly because he stops every few seconds to examine everything. Trees, bushes, stones, leaves, wire fences, puddles, even discarded potato chip packets and soda cans—everything is a source of wonder. His world is filled with fascinatingly different textures, colors, shapes, patterns, smells, and sounds. He can spend ten minutes examining a leaf, staring at it, stroking it, brushing it against his face. One of the reasons it's difficult to get him out of the bath is that he loves to sit there and pour water down from a cup, transfixed by the bubbles, splashes, and ripples.

Normally I walk to places like an arrow heading to its target—focused on my destination, paying little attention to my surroundings, my mind on other things. But walking with my children has reminded me to stop and look. It's reminded me that almost everything is fascinating if you just take the trouble to pay attention to it. I've realized the joys of ambling along, staring at the sky, looking at the plants and bushes and trees around me, taking in the reality of the moment rather than thinking about the future or past.

Becoming Children Again

This illustrates one of the most positive effects of having children: they help us become children again ourselves. As Dr. Elliot Cohen—a psychologist at Leeds Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom who has a three-year-old son—told me: "There is a new life helping you to see the world anew. In the Jewish spiritual tradition, there is an idea that through having children, you become more child-like yourself. You see the world through the eyes of child, with a new freshness and intensity."

There is a similar idea in the Taoist tradition. The *Tao Te Ching*, an ancient Chinese text, advises us to "return to the state of the infant" and says that the person who "has in himself abundantly the attributes (of the Tao) is like an infant."

As Cohen told me:

> In Taoism, the ideal is to be as spontaneous and curious as a child, with that openness to experience. And the same applies on a physical level too. The aim of the Taoist cultivation practices—like Tai Chi and Chi Gung—is to help the body to become as supple and flexible as a child's body. Your body should reflect your mental attitude, with the same openness and flexibility.

Steve Taylor

"As anyone who has stayed up through the night with an ill child knows, parenthood is all about self-sacrifice," the author writes. Here, artist Adrian Ferbeyre reinterprets *The Giving Tree,* Shel Silverstein's beloved story of nurturing and sacrifice.

Adrian Ferbeyre (adrianferbeyre.daportfolio.com)

All the world's spiritual traditions tell us how important it is to transcend our own selfishness, to stop seeing ourselves as the center of the universe, and to stop trying so hard to satisfy our own desires. They advise us to help and serve others, so that we can move beyond our separate ego, and connect to a transcendent power. Buddhism even suggests that desire is the root of all suffering in our lives, and that the only way to become truly content is to overcome desire itself—literally, to stop wanting and to accept our lives and ourselves as they are.

The eightfold path of Buddhism aims to cultivate this selfless state, and ideally the path of parenthood can, too. It's impossible to be a good parent without being prepared to put your children first. As anyone who has stayed up through the night with an ill child knows, parenthood is all about self-sacrifice. Alison Gopnik captures it well:

> Imagine a novel in which a woman took in a stranger who was unable to walk or talk or even eat by himself. She fell completely in love with him at first sight, fed and clothed and washed him, gradually helped him to become competent and independent, and spent more than half her income on him. . . . You couldn't bear the sappiness of it. But that, quite simply, is just about every mother's story. . . . Caring for children is an awfully fast and efficient way to experience at least a little saintliness.

The poet William Wordsworth describes how children see the world "apparelled in celestial light," with "glory and freshness of a dream." He also describes how, as we become adults, this vision "fades into the light of common day." However, having children of our own helps us to reawaken some of this celestial light.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant, too, when he told his disciples, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." This makes sense if we think of the "kingdom of heaven" as a place not in the hereafter, but potentially in the world now. Heaven is the state of wonder and natural well-being that children exist in—and through being in their company, we can reenter that kingdom. ■

PLEASE READ

the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment at tikkun.org/ESRA.

If these ideas resonate with you, join the Network of Spiritual Progressives!

spiritualprogressives.org

Culture

The Sudden Angel Affrighted Me

God Wrestling in Denise Levertov's Life and Art

BY DAVID SHADDOCK

Twin commitments to simultaneously praise the beauty of the world and witness its horrors lie at the heart of poet Denise Levertov's writing, activism, and spiritual path.

One moment she would be deep in serious conversation on the nature of evil or the future of our planet; then she would suddenly see an iris bloom sticking through a broken fence and break into an improvised ballet step in response. Her essay on "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival" captures the interplay between her commitments to witness and praise: "If we lose the sense of contrast of the opposites to all the grime and gore, the torture, the banality of the computerized apocalypse, we lose the reason for trying to work for redemptive change."

These twin commitments brought Levertov, an English-born American poet, into intimate connection, as well as passionate conflict, with the Divine. In a very real sense, her faith life, her artistic life, and her political life were all of a piece, and all were informed with the kind of passion that kept Jacob up all night wrestling with an angel, demanding a new name for himself.

This winter marks the fifteenth anniversary of Levertov's death. She passed away on December 20, 1997, after a long struggle with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The United States Post Office recently issued a stamp commemorating her as one of the ten most important poets of the twentieth century, and the first of two critical biographies about her was released this past year, with the other due out this spring.

Although her first, more traditional book was published in England, Levertov came to prominence when she immigrated to America and adapted her English sensibility to the open forms and speech idioms that had been championed by William Carlos Williams. Her passionate denunciation of the Vietnam War, her active participation in antiwar organizing and protests, and her subsequent work on behalf of the environment earned her the devotion of a generation of activists. Her conversion to Catholicism in the last two decades of her life, along with her deeply moving religious poetry, earned her yet another group of devoted fans.

I was fortunate to have Levertov as a teacher, mentor, and great friend, so I am able to offer some insight into her life work by sharing my own reflections on our many personal discussions on politics, poetry, and God wrestling.

A Dynamic Relationship with the Divine

In modern theology, the term God wrestling (which Levertov herself was fond of) has come to mean a creative, dynamic, and above all personal relationship with God, the Bible, and religious tradition. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement, writes in his book *God Wrestling II*, "What went before we turn and turn like a kaleidoscope; with every turn there appears new beauty, new complexity, new simplicity."

God wrestling implies a hermeneutic theology. An absolute knowledge of God's will is impossible; what meaning we can glean emerges from our active engagement and interpretation. Borrowing a term from contemporary psychoanalysis, I would describe the God wrestler as having an *intersubjective* relationship with the Deity. Contemporary psychoanalysis, drawing from such disparate sources as the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, and contemporary child development research, describes meaning in psychoanalysis as an emergent property of the encounter between two differently organized subjective worlds—those of the analyst and the patient. By extension, for the God wrestler, religious faith emerges from the encounter between our subjective world and a God who is himself a subject: a feeling, fallible being who, moment to moment, is in an intimate relationship with us.

In order to fully encounter the Divine, we need to develop

Denise Levertov's faith, art, and politics were all informed with "the kind of passion that kept Jacob up all night wrestling with an angel, demanding a new name for himself," David Shaddock writes.

what Martin Buber famously called an "I/Thou" relationship with him. Buber drew on the legacy of Hasidism for his notion of what I am calling an intersubjective relationship with God, just as Levertov, from her earliest poetry, drew on the Hasidic tradition of her father, who, though a convert to Christianity, was the heir to a long line of Hasidic rabbis. One of the earliest Hasids, Rabbi Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, developed a religious practice that was a kind of divine psychoanalysis. He would go out to a deserted place in the countryside and pour out his stream of consciousness to God, not holding back any thought or feeling.

But if the term "God wrestling" suggests a spiritual path of angst and struggle alone, describing Levertov as a God wrestler would be a serious mischaracterization. As her friend Al Gelpi notes in the introduction to *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, "Her early poetry shimmered with the almost sacramental mystery of each perceived object." Underlying this poetry was her father's Hasidic tradition of the Shechinah, the indwelling presence of the Divine in all creation. The response to her perception of this "sacramental mystery" was praise, which Levertov called "the irresistible impulse of the soul" in her essay "Poetry, Prophecy, and Survival." The mystical perception of imminent divinity and the concomitant impulse to praise creation form a constant thread through Levertov's work, from her earliest poems written in England to her last, mortality-infused poems.

But to perceive Levertov as merely a mystic is to miss her engaged, iconoclastic, and prophetic side—a side where faith and passionate argument lived, however uneasily at times, in the same person. One can surely trace the roots of a faith based in wrestling with God to the example set by Levertov's "Jewish Christian" father, who, as she writes in *Tesserae,* as a young student experienced "a profound and shaking new conviction. This Jesus of Nazareth, 'despised and rejected of men' had indeed been the messiah!"

Levertov's father did not see himself as leaving the Jewish faith, but as extending it, offering his own insights and struggles to the tradition of interpreters and God wrestlers who came before him. As she writes, "it was not to be absorbed into a Gentile world that he had broken, in sorrow, with his mother and father, but to be, as he believed, more fully a Jew." The lesson that faith was based on personal experience and might lead one in a direction that completely defies the expectations of one's friends and family was not lost on his daughter.

Wrestling as Surrender

As Jacob wrestled the Angel of God to a draw and won his name, he was also wounded in the thigh. The one who wrestles with God (or the Goddess) will often come away both vanquished and enlightened. Though the questioning, prophetic voice is mostly absent from Levertov's early poems, the sense of being ravished or vanquished by an outside power is present. "Drown us, lose us, / rain, let us loose / so to lose ourselves" she writes in "The Way Through" from *Here and Now*, her second book. In "The Goddess" (from *With Eyes in the Back of Our Heads*), the key word is "lipservice." The poem seems a rather violent admonition against spiritual trifling:

> She in whose lipservice
> I passed my time,
> whose name I knew, but not her face
> came upon me where I lay in lie castle!
> Flung me across the room, and
> room after room (hitting the walls re-
> bounding—to the last
> sticky wall—wrenching away from it
> pulled hair out!)
> till I lay
> outside the outer walls!

By the time we reach "Caedmon" (in *Breathing the Water*), one of the poems in which Levertov announced her conversion to Catholicism, the story of the first English poet becomes a tale in which the subject is overwhelmed by a spiritual force with less violence but no less power than the Goddess:

> the sudden angel affrighted me—light effacing
>
> my feeble beam,
>
> a forest of torches, feathers of flame, sparks upflying

These powers are not enemies. Throughout Levertov's entire career, she maintained that, despite the violence of the encounter, the antagonist is not God, but untruth and self-delusion. Every one of her poems is an attempt to spring us (and herself) from "lie castle."

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The fierceness of the angel was matched by Levertov's own fierce spirit. In her finest poems she could turn her blowtorch ire to a fine flame of political outrage or spiritual courage. But she would never spare herself from the same scrutiny: "Lord, not you / it is I who am absent," she wrote in "Flickering Mind." This voice reaches its apogee in poems written during the Vietnam War.

Poems Against the Vietnam War

In 1969, when I first met Levertov, her husband, Mitchell Goodman, was under indictment with the pediatrician Benjamin Spock and others for having urged young men to defy the Selective Service draft. I was a student in her poetry seminar at Berkeley—a class that met at students' apartments to honor a campus-wide strike for a Third World Studies Department.

The horror of war was immediate and visceral for Levertov, who had worked as a nurse in London during World War II. War appeared early in her poems, as well, most prominently in "During the Eichmann Trial" from *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), which ends with the poet's description of Eichmann shooting a Jewish boy who had stolen one of his beloved peaches: "there is more blood than / sweet juice / always more blood."

But this was our war. The blood was on our hands. The lies told to justify the Vietnam War were our lies—and for those of us who, like Levertov, were caught up in the movement to stop it, it is difficult to convey, at a distance of forty years and untold more bloodletting, the way the war dominated our every waking (and dreaming) thought. As Levertov wrote in her 1972 essay, "The Poet in the World," "The spring sunshine, the new leaves: we still see them, still love them: but in what poignant contrast is their beauty and simple goodness to the evil we are conscious of day and night."

Levertov's increasing stridency in her poems and her willingness to voice the revolutionary rhetoric of the New Left was seen by some, including her friend and mentor Robert Duncan, as leading to a diminishment of her poetic power. Though some of the antiwar poetry seems, in retrospect, woodenly rhetorical, her best antiwar poems stand with her greatest work. The Dante-esque rhetoric of "An Interim" is very telling:

> While the war drags on, always worse
> the soul dwindles to an ant
> rapid upon a cracked surface;
> lightly, grimly, incessantly
> the unfathomed cliffs where despair
> seethes hot and black

Levertov's antiwar and political poems are acts of great courage: courage to let her outrage speak, courage to carry her poetic vision as deeply into the fallen world as humanly possible in an effort to poetically enact the resurrection of the human spirit from despair.

In "Poetry, Prophecy and Survival," Levertov wrote that "a

poetry articulating the dreads and horrors of our time" should be accompanied by "a willingness on the part of those who write it to take additional action toward stopping the great miseries that they record." There is an Isaiah-like feel to this admonishment against words unmatched by actions. She goes on to say that the poet and the prophet "may exceed their own capacities."

The prophetic voice that Levertov developed in her antiwar poems led her to exceed her own capacities—the unflinching witness they bore helped carry Levertov from a kind of diffuse, quasi-agnostic spirituality into her life as a committed Catholic. The early antiwar poem "Advent 1966" chronicles and foreshadows the inner dialogue between her voice of witness and the redemptive promise of Christianity:

> Because in Vietnam the vision of a Burning Babe
> is multiplied, multiplied,
> the flesh on fire
> not Christ's as Southwell saw it, prefiguring
> the Passion upon the Eve of Christmas
>
> but wholly human and repeated, repeated,
> infant after infant, their names forgotten
> their sex unknown in the ashes,
> set alight, flaming but not vanishing,
> not vanishing as his vision but lingering,
>
> cinders upon the earth or living on
> moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed;
>
> because of this my strong sight,
> my clear caressive sight, my poet's sight I was given
> that it might stir me to song,
> is blurred.

In the complex rhetoric of this poem, it is not only the poet's spiritual vision that is effaced by the horror of Vietnam. The horror has also impaired her ability to turn her poetic vision to the task of bearing witness to the carnage of war in its particular detail, leaving her transfixed by the endless iterations of carnage into a kind of insect-like consciousness. The poem continues:

> There is a cataract filming over
> my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect
> has entered my head, and looks out
> from my sockets with multiple vision,
>
> seeing not the unique Holy Infant
> burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption,

furnace in which souls are wrought into new life,
but, as off a beltline, more, more senseless figures aflame.
And this insect (who is not there—
it is my own eyes do my seeing, the insect
is not there, what I see is there)
will not permit me to look elsewhere,

or, if I look, to see except dulled and unfocused
the delicate, firm whole flesh of the still unburned.

The implicit wish here is to be granted a clear vision not of the redeemer, but of one unique Vietnamese child. If there is a promise of redemption in this poem, it is not in the suffering of Christ, but in the poet's bearing witness to the suffering of the Vietnamese people. Yet it is this moral, prophetic voice, speaking through her political poems, that was to lead Levertov to her transcendent, Christian vision.

The Lamb of God

Levertov's new Christian vision, in characteristic fashion, announced itself in a poem, the "Mass for the Day of St. Didymus." That Levertov had appropriated the form of the Catholic mass for her poem was of poetic interest to me; it was an important development in the ongoing dialogue between traditional form and "organic form" in her work. Here is a short excerpt from the poem's Agnus Dei section:

Come rag of pungent
quiverings,
dim star.
Let's try
if something human still
can shield you,
spark
of remote light.

Levertov read me her "Mass" soon after she had finished it. I can still picture the living room of her Stanford apartment, the late afternoon winter light. There was a hush in the room. She seemed both humble and transported as she read from her typescript pages. When she finished the Agnus Dei, I blurted, "Oh, Denise, that's your masterpiece." She shyly nodded and said, "I think it may be; I'm very pleased with how it came out."

At the time we didn't discuss the poem as announcing her religious conversion, but she later made that explicit in her essay "Work that Enfaiths." Her first acknowledgment to me of her newfound Catholic faith came sometime later in an offhand comment about how she had found the Anglican service somehow lacking in passion, and so had begun attending Catholic services. Her conversion was a process, not an epiphany. There are many parallels here to Levertov's notion of organic form in poetry: the Catholic Church had evolved or been "discovered" to be the exact right form that fit the emerging content of her religious life. This is more than an analogy—in *New and Selected Essays*, Levertov wrote that her poetry led the way in her religious life, and that her faith in God may be wavering, but that she does have an ongoing faith in what she calls, quoting Keats, "the truth of the imagination."

Denise Levertov attends David Shaddock's wedding to Toby Furash in 1984 in Stinson Beach, California.

David Shaddock

A God in Need of Love and Protection

In the years that followed the end of the Vietnam War, Levertov's political and poetic life became increasingly concerned not just for the survival of particular oppressed groups of people (though such events as the "Contra" civil wars in Central America certainly occupied her attention), but also with nuclear war and ecological holocaust—plagues threatening all of the world's inhabitants. As a poet writing about nature she was driven not just to write poems of what she described as "pure celebration," but also "inevitably to lament, to anger, and to the expression of dread." Although she was often her old, ebullient self, my sense is that the confrontation with the twin possibilities of nuclear and ecological annihilation darkened Levertov's mood considerably. Personal issues such as the end of her marriage to Mitch Goodman and her ongoing concerns for her son, Nikolai, who seemed rather adrift, played a part in this. But more and more our conversations concerned humanity's role in the fate of the planet. She began to talk about evil as an active force in the world, trying at every opportunity to corrupt and destroy God's work.

At first when Levertov spoke of evil, I thought that she was speaking metaphorically, but I came to see that she had adopted a dualistic worldview, with its concomitant requirement that humanity's role is to actively oppose the corrupting work of the Dark One. When asked why the church should have so often in history been on the side of the oppressors, she would reply that it was the devil's way to insinuate himself into good institutions and corrupt them.

Levertov's dualistic leanings had led her on many occasions to take political stands with absolute moral conviction. It was this tendency that led poet Robert Duncan to warn her, in a 1971 letter that marked one of the first salvos of their relationship-breaking argument, that "the poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it." Increasingly though, Levertov's opposition to the point of view represented in Duncan's more nuanced, if not exactly apolitical position, was based in her own literal religious convictions. Influenced as she was by the radical tenets of Liberation Theology, which located the battle between Good and Evil not in our souls but in the struggle of poor people against oppression, Levertov was now wrestling not with God, but for him.

At this point in her ongoing intersubjective relationship with God, Levertov had moved from an immanent God revealed in all creation, to God as an overpowering force, to a God who requires our moral witness to evil, to a God who gave us free will but who requires us to actively oppose the force of evil in the world. In "Agnus Dei," though, her relationship to God takes one last step: God himself requires our love and protection.

This final step in her conversion to Catholicism involved not a sense of being overwhelmed by a blinding force as had happened in her earlier poems, but by being struck with the profound sense of God's vulnerability and need for *us*.

In "Agnus Dei" she takes the metaphorical notion of God's radical innocence quite literally: he is an "infant sheep . . . having neither rage nor claws," wholly dependent on human kindness for his survival. And our relationship with this God-being is completely reversed. Rather than depending on God for any salvation or intervention, it is up to us to care for and nurture his radical innocence. If this is what the salvation of the world rests on, it is a dicey proposition—we humans have "icy hearts" and are "shamefaced" in our passive wish to be rescued, and the innocence of God is a "dim star." But it is on this remote possibility that Levertov bases her religious conversion: one that entails not just an "I/Thou" relationship with a God who will listen to our pleas and arguments, but a relationship like a mother feels for her infant—a total, protective commitment to this young and helpless life.

In the Jewish mystical tradition in which Levertov was steeped, there is an important antecedent to the notion of God's need for our intervention. According to the kabbalistic creation myth of the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, it was God's loneliness and longing that led him to create the world, which he did by first withdrawing to create a void, then filling that void with his divine love. Unfortunately the "vessels" into which he poured his divine love could not contain the force of that love; they broke and "sparks" of that love were scattered throughout the universe. It is mankind's job to liberate and reunite these sparks through love and ethical action, a process that can only be begun by us, without regard to the ultimate endpoint of redemption. Levertov and

The U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in 2012 to commemorate Denise Levertov.

I both were moved by this myth, with its story of a vulnerable God and his need for our help to reclaim his creation, as well as its implicit understanding that whatever "sparks" we could liberate from matter would never be enough to complete the task, but were nonetheless vitally important.

A Journey of Art and Faith

Once, when asked to contribute to an anthology of spiritual poetry, Levertov replied that she wouldn't know what to send, since all poetry, by virtue of its very existence, is spiritual poetry. At first I wondered whether she was just frustrated about being pigeonholed as a spiritual poet—I knew she loathed being pigeonholed as a Beat or a Black Mountain poet and didn't want to be known primarily as a woman or feminist poet. But as she continued, I realized she was being completely ingenuous.

A reverent belief in the primacy of the poetic imagination underlies what Levertov calls, in the introduction to her collection *The Stream and the Sapphire,* her "slow movement from agnosticism to faith," Levertov's faith life was inextricable from her writing life, and writing was for her a profoundly spiritual act. The act of discovery—both of the content and the form of a poem, was for her a revelation of the "indwelling presence" of God. Belief becomes an act of imagination in poems like "Passage":

> The grasses, numberless, bowing and rising, silently
> cry Hosanna as the spirit
> moves them and moves burnishing
>
> over and again upon mountain pastures

This openness to discovery was accompanied by rigorous attention to detail and an almost fanatic demand for lucidity in her poems. I can remember, at the beginning of our friendship, when I was primarily still in the student role, debating for an hour the placement of a single comma in one of my poems. Here too is a key to her faith life, and to her eventual conversion to Catholicism. No slop in her poems, and no vague or universal spirituality in her church.

United States Postal Service

The rigor that Levertov brought to her art informed her faith life in another way as well. Hers would not be an intellectual exercise, divorced from sensual, immediate experience. The idea that the rituals and teachings of the Church were just myths held little interest to her. In "On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus" she calls herself, quoting Marianne Moore, a "literalist of the imagination" and issues this call:

We must feel
the pulse in the wound
to believe
that 'with God
all things
are possible'
taste
bread at Emmaus
that warm hands
broke and blessed.

She is not, like an epiphyte, "nourished on air," nor can she "subsist on the light, / on the half / of metaphor that's not // grounded in dust, grit / heavy / carnal clay." Here she expands William Carlos Williams's famous "no ideas but in things" beyond an artistic dictum to a spiritual one. The blood of Christ's wounds must be real to the imagination's apprehension, not some mere symbol of human suffering.

Levertov is not aligning herself here with a fundamentalist belief in the literal truth of God's word in the Bible. It is not an absolute belief she is after here, but a poet's imagination of a miracle. She is bringing a poet's aesthetic to the religious experience. You can hear a bit of Ezra Pound in the background here, imprecating against "dim fields of peace." She wants, paraphrasing Marianne Moore, to have imaginary gardens with real miracles in them. The critic Northrop Frye wrote, in *Words with Power*, that "literature always assumes, in its metaphors, a relation between human consciousness and its natural environment that passes beyond—in fact outrages and violates—the ordinary common sense based on a permanent separation of subject and object." To cut the metaphor in half and savor only the subject, as the purveyors of religion as mythology would do, is no less a diminishment than the fundamentalist's trying to savor only the objective truth. The real miracle, Levertov is arguing, takes place in the field of the poem, where the subject is completely penetrated by the physical world and the physical world—while not losing a drop of its heft and feel—is lifted up, reborn from its inertness.

Learning to Live with Doubt

In writing this article, I have had the pleasure of rereading a great deal of Levertov's poetry and prose. I have dusted off old letters and heard her voice anew as I reread them. The gift that emerged from our spiritual discussions was permission—permission to believe and doubt in equal (or unequal) measure; permission to have as idiosyncratic or as literal a relationship with the teachings of organized religion as I needed; and permission to trust my own religious instincts.

There was one time, though, that our wrestling with God might have come close to wrestling with each other. I was noting, perhaps with a touch of envy, the increasing presence of the literal figure of Christ in her poems. I said something to the effect that your religion has its messiah, while mine is still waiting for him. She turned to me, very seriously, and said, "Well, David, do you want me to convert you?" She was completely in earnest. I was tense and defensive for a moment, as Jews often are in the face of such Christian "goodwill." Then I realized that I was in the presence of something very old and intimate in Levertov's experience: she seemed to be channeling her father, a man who she said was made of equal parts zeal and tenderness. This intimacy diffused the tension. I was, in fact, a bit tempted, but in the end I demurred, and the subject did not come up again.

In the last half of the 1980s, I encountered two very difficult experiences: my wife and I failed in our attempts to conceive a child, and my mother was killed by medical malpractice. Levertov was very supportive to me. In part through our ongoing dialogue and the life experiences we shared, I began to realize that faith does not require a moment of blinding understanding or enlightenment, but merely a commitment to be fully present to the experience of living—especially when it involves surrender to suffering, doubt, and longing.

Doubt and uncertainty for Levertov often took the form of questioning a God who could allow so much suffering and injustice in the world. Her "St. Thomas Didymus" describes seeing the father's spiritual agony over his son's suffering and feeling closer to him then "the twin of my own birth." The poem returns almost as a refrain to Christ's cry, "Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief." But faith does not alleviate affliction. Julian of Norwich, in Levertov's poem "The Showings," after "God for a moment in our history / placed in that five-fingered / human nest / the macrocosmic egg, sublime paradox / brown hazelnut of all that is," says "*deeds are done so evil, injuries inflicted / so great, it seems to us impossible any good / can come from them*" (emphasis in original).

Finding Peace

In 1982, Levertov moved from Boston to Seattle. As she settled into her new home, she delighted in the access that she, a nondriver, had to the shores of Lake Washington, with all of its sea birds and migratory birds. And she cherished the views of 14,000-foot Mt. Rainier. In her series "Lake Mountain Moon" from *Evening Train,* Levertov's view of the mountain, emerging and receding from the cloud cover, becomes a symbol of a faith life built around absence and presence:

Effacement

Today the mountain
is cloud,
pale cone of shadow
veiled by a paler scrim—

majestic presence become
one cloud among others
humble vapor
barely discernable,

like the archangel walking
with Tobias on dusty roads.

This sense of living at peace with the Angel of God was perhaps most apparent to me when she came for a visit directly after a weeklong retreat with Brother David Steindl-Rast in Big Sur. There was a light in her eyes and a sense of ease in her body. It seemed to me that she had found a deep peace and an abiding sense of the presence of the divine. She expressed this same sense of peace in "Primary Wonder" from *Sands in the Well*, the last book she published in her lifetime:

Once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void, and that O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed One, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.

Although I was present when she died, our last real visit was a few months before when I came up to Seattle and followed her up to Port Townsend, where she gave a reading. Though I had seen her latest work the previous summer, I was astonished at the number of new poems she read. These poems, later collected in the posthumous *This Great Unknowing*, were tinged with mortality, but not with despair. At her funeral, on a sleet-filled day at a Catholic church in downtown Seattle, her friends had to argue with the presiding priest—who maintained that a Catholic funeral mass was for the glory of God, not for the glory of the deceased, for whom we should rejoice that they are with the Lord—to allow a few of her friends to speak. We finally prevailed on him and were allowed to read a few of her poems. A bit of God wrestling at the very end!

In my poem "The Certainty of Return" from 1996, which used as an epigraph Levertov's lines "The certainty of return / cannot be assured," I wrote, "Your life in me . . . has been a trellis that my own life has grown on." Writing this essay has made me think again of that trellis, and of the fifteen years since she died. Despite the intervening years (during which I have often thought it was a blessing that she was spared living through September 11 and George W. Bush's wars of choice), I can still feel the structure-giving presence I meant to evoke with the trellis image. If she were alive, she would not be surrendering to despair, but urging a tendril of spirit to lift off the top rung, into the wind, poised between purchase and uncertainty. ■

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BOOKS

A Poet's Meditation on Force

Army Cats
by Tom Sleigh
Graywolf Press, 2011

REVIEW BY DAVID WOJAHN

In *Army Cats*, American poet Tom Sleigh takes on the topic of the 2007 Lebanese Civil War not as an excuse for wanton journalistic rubbernecking, but as a catalyst for a series of troubled meditations on the nature of "force" within contemporary culture.

Let me explain what I mean by force. To do so requires a look back at the groundbreaking work of philosopher and activist Simone Weil.

Writing in the first year of World War II, in an effort to show that Hitler's rise to power was not the anomaly that other intellectuals claimed it to be, Weil composed one of the most famous meditations on violence ever written, "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force."

Early in the essay, Weil defines what she means by "force":

> To define force—it is that *x* which turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to its limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all. This is the spectacle *The Iliad* never wearies of showing us.

Warfare for Weil is not a continuation of politics by other means but a grimly relentless process of dehumanization, unchanged since the time of Homer. Anyone who sees it otherwise is dismissed by the author as a "dreamer." Weil does not care to offer a nuanced mediation on the role of violence in human nature, and she surely would not view technological progress as having done anything to change the state of things. (What better exemplifies Weil's notion of force than an American drone—piloted many thousands of miles away by a twenty-two-year-old in California—unleashing its missiles on an al-Qaida safe house outside Karachi?)

Weil scholars often cite "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force" as prefiguring the turn toward mysticism and spirituality that characterized her late work, but the basic stance of the essay is one of simple astonishment and disgust at the relentless magnitude of the human capacity for violence. In other words, Weil writes in the tradition of the Jeremiad rather than that of the epic. So too does Tom Sleigh in this new collection of poems. Weil and Sleigh both also remind us that astonishment and disgust can be powerful rhetorical tools when artfully employed.

The initiating subject matter of *Army Cats*, Sleigh's seventh book, is the most recent of a seemingly endless series of internecine conflicts that have plagued Lebanon for much of the last half-century. Working as a journalist based in Beirut during the summer of 2007, Sleigh was able to witness the escalation of the turmoil firsthand, yet the poems of *Army Cats* do not focus on the war's political implications. We do not hear of Hezbollah's attempts to unseat the elected government of the country, or of the bloody siege of Nahr al-Bahred Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli; we are instead offered a series of portraits and snapshots, pictures of the war's human cost rendered in sometimes excruciatingly intense close-ups. Here is the closing of a poem entitled "Refuge":

. . . her face twisted up
by scars is a face of scars that's only hers
her face that I look at as she smiles first
indulgently, then back at herself as child
beseechingly asking mom for approval.

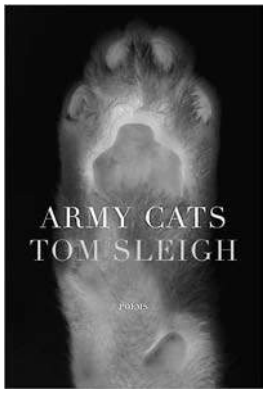
The woman she will be tells her that she's pretty
such a pretty girl, and the child she is
as the mother knows it too, she nods her head
and for that moment the three of them agree.

This is harrowing description; the use of repetition, enjambment, near-rhyme, and (especially) the bravura syntax of the opening sentence combine to an effect of sorrowful claustrophobia. We can no more stop looking at the girl's disfigured face than the speaker can. And the tension of the poem is only released via the grim irony of the speaker speculating upon the girl's future—"the woman that she will be tells her that she's pretty."

In another poem, a military mechanic attempts an emergency repair of a decrepit French tank, "nothing / like the ones the Americans deploy." Here is the concluding passage:

He runs two fingers
up and down it, then feels where rust,
mixed into an oily paste, shines like bloody flux
he gently dips his fingers in, sniffs and tastes.
Clanging back his tapping on the armor plate,
as he listens to her talking on his back in the dirt, screwing in
the spare parts, the tank says what tanks always say,
Fix me, oil me, grease me, make it fit,
confirming what he knows about the French.

As with "Refugee," there's a visceral and kinetic immediacy to this passage that is typical of Sleigh's work. Even more notable, however, is the unsettling personification of the closing lines; the tank and the mechanic are frozen in a kind of erotic embrace; the scene is part Ovid's *Metamorphosis,* part *Robocop*, and altogether strange, a startlingly imaginative example of the process of Force turning individuals into "things."



The poems set in Lebanon, which are found mainly in the first section of *Army Cats,* focus on the psychological effects of warfare on ordinary individuals and recall the work of America's great poetic chronicler of such trauma, Randall Jarrell. But Sleigh eschews Jarrell's sentimentality for an almost pitiless objectivity. And Sleigh well knows that the desire for objectivity also holds its dangers—not least because it can easily devolve into a stance of mere gratuitousness. As the speaker of a monologue entitled "Reporter" confesses: "I shrink myself / to nothing just to feel history and my nothing/come together in the most beautiful fucking / you can't quite feel." There is a sadly long tradition of American writers visiting war zones in search of *content*: one thinks of Stephen Crane in the Spanish-American War, of Hemingway in the Spanish Civil War, and more recently—in the 1980s—of author Joan Didion's and poet Carolyn Forche's dispatches from the civil war in El Salvador. Sleigh surely follows in this tradition, but differs from his predecessors insofar as he is much more concerned with matters of personal and aesthetic accountability.

Violence is of course seen as one of force's handmaidens, but so too is technology: the volume's longest and most risky piece is a four-page prose poem describing a YouTube video—the "sound quality and the resolution are poor"—purporting to record the execution of Saddam Hussein.

Sleigh goes on to imagine that the cell phone recording this event is held by none other than William Shakespeare, and develops this outlandish conceit with considerable brio. The tone is more earnest than comic. When the video fails to capture the spectacle of Saddam's body dangling from gallows, Shakespeare—the consummate professional—sees an aesthetic opportunity:

> Later, after viewing the video back in his room, Shakespeare concludes that the overall effect is crude, but the scene builds well, the rhetoric carries the day, and that the blackout is an excellent device—more effective, in the end, than the actual showing of the body. After all, everybody has seen hundreds upon hundreds of corpses, if not in real life, then on TV, at the movies, in books, in plays, No, a corpse doesn't have the dramatic force it used to have . . . and he remembers back to when he was a boy working as a butcher, exercising his father's trade, that when he killed a calf he would do it in high style, and make a speech. And everyone would laugh, the calf would be skinned out, the meat salted—and the next one would stumble up, be tied down, and made ready for the knife.

As the collection goes on, and the subject of Lebanon is replaced by more various concerns, the sort of grotesque anachronism and outlandish juxtapositions found in the Saddam/Shakespeare poem become a prevailing motif. Sleigh's range of reference and allusion has always been formidable, and the poems of *Army Cats* are no exception: there are references to gladiatorial contests, to writers such as Primo Levi and Robert Graves, to a Russian space suit set adrift from the International Space Station (stuffed with old clothes and containing a radio transmitter), to the Greek magical papyri, to rock eccentric Frank Zappa, and to jazz great Charles Mingus. There are of course many other contemporary poets who Cuisinart allusion in this fashion, but such writing for the most part derives from skill at Googling rather than from serious research or necessity. This is not the case with Sleigh, partly because he interweaves his work in this mode with poems that can be disarmingly personal. "Triumph," a poem for the speaker's mother, manages to be offbeat and clinically precise at once, much in the manner that Robert Lowell portrayed his own parents in *Life Studies.* Here's a characteristic passage from "Triumph":

> —The old drama queen. But she's also got that mad nobility
> in her voice that makes me imagine her
> riding like a Greek general on a horse through
> everything she's been through, my father's death,
> her children's cutting silences, her hardscrabble childhood
> on the farm where they lived on 50 cents a day . . .

Another reason for Sleigh's success with his project is that his command of technique is impeccable. Again we're reminded of Lowell, for it is work of vernacular immediacy that manages to be unobtrusively formal in its ultimate design. The collection is packed with sonnets and near-sonnets, sly use of off-rhyme, and a muscular free verse strongly informed by pentameter. Witness a compressed little tour-de-force baldly entitled "To Death":

> You won't wipe away my joy
>
> in my seaweed skin, my hunched neck,
> my folds and creases you hide in
> even as I throw my arm around you and lie
> my leg sweaty and cooling next to yours.
> I know you make my face more
> interesting on me on this beautifully
>
> lit stage made to look like an open
> field where I wander in your theater
> of fantasies touching god knows what
>
> in this delirium of bodies
> in this noisy club where everybody's
> drinking and that's you leaning over
>
> secretly spitting in everybody's drink.

Sleigh has been publishing formidable poetry for almost thirty years, and among American poets of his generation there is no one better. He has arrived at this status in no small measure because few of his generational peers have been as willing to so successfully address large and abiding subjects as well as intensely personal ones. And that he accomplishes all this with a seething clarity of vision that never lapses into grandiosity makes his accomplishment all the more noteworthy.

At the end of her *Iliad* essay, Weil compares the pitiless spirit of Homer's depictions of warfare to the message of the Gospels. But Weil's conception of piety is one of exceptional rigor, involving the most difficult of reckonings, and the most hard-won consolations. Art, too—at least the art that is apt to endure—cannot offer easy reckonings or tidy consolations, either. "Nothing is so rare as to see misfortune fairly portrayed," Weil notes. Tom Sleigh understands this concept as well, and thus *Army Cats* is nothing less than a triumph. ■

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New Poems in an Ancient Language

Approaching You In English
by Admiel Kosman
Zephyr Press, 2011

REVIEW BY DAVID DANOFF

THE CONTEMPORARY Hebrew-language poet is entering a crowded arena. Psalmists, prophets, compilers of scripture, *paytanim*, and two thousand years of subsequent scholars, legists, rabbis, and poets—they've all been there before, they've all done it already. Where does one begin? So many ordinary words carry powerful ancient echoes, so many images or phrases are inseparable from their roots in the sacred texts. And meanwhile, other swaths of vocabulary stand out as modern coinages or foreign borrowings. To use a simple word like "wall" or "water" or "bread" is to summon ancient ghosts, who may or may not be wanted. And then, when the next word is "telephone," a different kind of obtrusive echo occurs, and the problem becomes how to reconcile levels of language from radically different places, periods, and styles.

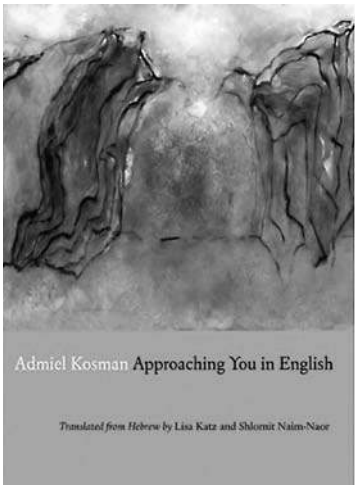
Using such a loaded language, a poet can hardly avoid taking as one of his subjects the tradition itself and his own fraught relationship with it. This presents certain obvious difficulties, such as: how does one write simply about ordinary life? But it also offers opportunities: for irony, wit, subversion, and the built-in dramatic tension that comes from juxtaposing ancient with modern, serious with vulgar (or playful, or banal). The struggle with the past is intrinsic to the language, so the struggle itself might as well be brought front and center.

In his new book, the Israeli poet Admiel Kosman shifts his voice adroitly between ancient and modern, while never seeming quite settled in either. There is a persistent restlessness; nothing is ever straightforward or taken for granted. The poems wrestle with God, spiritual practice, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the place of a poet's work in society, the relationship between masculinity and femininity, and the baggage of tradition borne by the Hebrew language itself. Spanning Kosman's thirty-two-year career, the book contains selections from the nine volumes of poetry he has published in Hebrew, and it brings them to English-speaking readers for the first time in translations by Lisa Katz with assistance from Shlomit Naim-Naor. Hebrew and English texts are presented on facing pages (or, should one say, *opposing* pages?).

Wrestling with Tradition

Although only a few of the poems seem explicitly personal, let alone autobiographical, Kosman's background is clearly relevant to the tensions embodied by the work. He was raised in an Orthodox family, attended Orthodox schools, and continued to study at a yeshiva during his army service. He later studied graphic design and pottery at the Bezalel art college, but then dropped out of art school and instead pursued a Ph.D. in talmudic studies at the traditionalist Bar Ilon University. He continued to teach there for many years, eventually directing the Faculty of Hermeneutics. Then, in 2003, he moved to Berlin, where he became a professor of Jewish Studies at Potsdam University and the director of the Abraham Geiger Reform Rabbinical Seminary. In addition to publishing poetry, he has published three volumes of "post-modern interpretations of midrash," with a focus on gender roles and identities.

The traditionalism in Kosman's background is evident not just in his deployment of allusions and quotations from the Bible, and not just in his



knowledge of the rituals and liturgy of Judaism, but also in the seriousness with which he approaches these things. A number of the poems are addressed to God, and they seem to really mean it (at least, mostly). Prayer is repeatedly invoked or enacted. The ideas of blessings and curses, of redemptive sacrifices, of the soul, and even of angels aren't just figures of speech or archaisms in Kosman's poems; they're living concepts, they're painfully real.

But at the same time, there's always the undercurrent of irony, the self-conscious struggle with the tradition. The title poem, "Approaching You in English" (which, interestingly, was written in Hebrew), depicts a speaker who fluctuates between meekness and audacity. He begs God to accept his prayer, even in something other than the sacred tongue, and he does so very humbly—but he also seems almost to be daring God not to.

> Can You hear me this time? In the language of non-Jews? Can You understand
> me, tongue-tied, stammering in obscure speech to a foreign audience?

He is at once self-abasing, yet also proud to be venturing outside the

tradition (even while writing in Hebrew, all the same), to be staking his claim within the wider, non-Jewish world. Will God go along with it? Will He prove flexible and forgiving enough? Well, the next poem, which may or may not also be a prayer addressed to God, is entitled "The One Who Needs a Psychiatrist." It contains punchy lines such as: "You should know, it's okay, yes, it's really okay / to express an opinion, even if it's against you, I'm sorry to say," and "It's true / that I offend you / here and there. So what."

Serious and Sensual Play

For all the seriousness of his task, Kosman isn't afraid to get his hands dirty or to show a less refined side. He can be playful, aggressive, casual to the point of seeming flippant, giddy, prickly, slightly crude, and sometimes (deliberately) childish. In quite a few of the poems, spirituality and sensuality are bluntly mixed. For instance, there is the poem "A New Commentary, With God's Help," which declares with a wink and a scattering of double entendres:

> I'm writing now, with God's help, a
> new commentary on your breasts,
> a blessed composition. I have humbly
> gathered different interpretations
> from everything at hand. A nice
> midrash, a tender anthology
> bound between my two lips.

At times this feels like the work of a naughty schoolboy, but it can also take on more seriously subversive implications. Consider the poem "I Suckle Your Oral Law." Are lines such as "The sweet teaching / on your lips, religious honey, / I suckle, sentence by sentence, slowly, / slowly" meant to be playful, or mocking? Is Kosman just indulging an "oral" fixation, punning and having a little fun, making the rabbis look ridiculous?

No, there's a serious redefinition at work, a reorientation of terms and roles. The oral law, after all, is distinct from the written law because it has to be transmitted person to person, individually, even physically, via spoken words, personal interaction. And the poem suggests it is from this "breast of religion ... the beads on your skin, / the deep crevices," the personal, the tactile, the intimate, the glandular, that the "true law" comes. Addressing a "you" who may be God or a teacher, a parent, or some generalized figure of the tradition itself, the poem insists that the heart of the Jewish tradition comes not from its texts, its laws and elaborate codifications, but from direct sensual experience and intimate transmission, from person to person.

And also, from a woman's body. The surface joke of "I Suckle Your Oral Law"—as well as much of its deeper, subversive point—derives largely from the reversal of gender roles. The authority figure—the teacher, the sage, the lawgiver, the rabbi—is female! This is one of Kosman's favorite themes, running through many of his poems. He embraces a fluid sense of identity. The Self and the Other, he insists, are not divisible; the man can't be separated from the woman, nor the Jew from the Muslim, nor the human from the Divine. And it's foolish—and destructive—to try to do so.

This fluidity carries into the style of Kosman's poems, which tend toward the loose, the casual, the improvisatory. In a recent podcast interview with the *Forward*, when asked about his compositional process, Kosman insisted: "There is no process. I never wrote any poem in my life. I never sat even a moment in decision to write anything," adding: "The poems from very early childhood came to me as they are, exactly as they are. I am called to the poem to do what I have to do." This may be disingenuous, but it also rings true when one has tried to puzzle out the sense of structure or design in Kosman's work.

He favors the organic over the organized, spontaneity over planning, the living over the lapidary. This seeming artlessness is not without precedent, of course, especially in the past century's haul of world poetry. But when brought into conjunction with the evident seriousness of Kosman's approach to Judaism, to the Hebrew language and its traditions, and to his extremely serious and deeply felt ideas about humanism and identity, such a casual manner carries interesting ramifications. The casualness itself, in fact, becomes a way of making a broader point.

In "Lament for the Ninth of Av," there is a contrast drawn between "the body" and "words ... etched in stone." The etching of words in stone was done "violently," and it is implied that this is the root of the violence commemorated by the day. Kosman is a man who has devoted much of his life to words, to the history and inheritance of the language, to the subtleties of meaning conveyed through texts. And yet, in the end, one feels he prizes the life of the body more than words, however beautiful or beautifully etched, and he is wary of the damage words can do.

This may seem odd for a poet. But then, it's clear that Kosman has never given up the struggle with those words: the struggle to use words to render the world more completely, more warmly, and with more fairness and truth; to make the words do less damage and more good; to find new textures, new registers to explore, new ways to mix the colors of the language. Whatever nonchalance he may affect when he discusses his approach to writing, the signs of a struggle are abundant, and the seriousness of his purpose cannot be doubted. These are poems that won't stop squeezing new life and new effects from the ancient language. ■

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The Magic of Organizing?

The Inquisitor's Apprentice
by Chris Moriarty
Harcourt Children's Books, 2011

REVIEW BY DAVID BELDEN

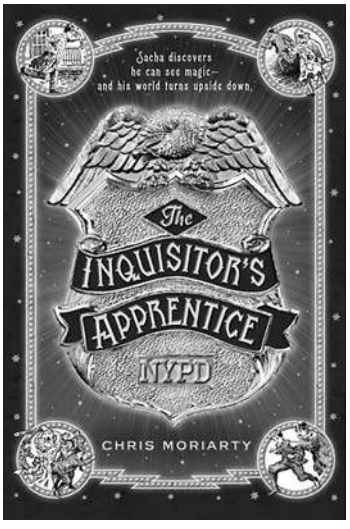
Any *Tikkun* readers delighted by Harry Potter will enjoy picking up this book. If you have ever idly wished someone would conjure up a tale for kids that would impart a Potter-esque magical glow to progressive politics and Jewish culture, and maybe even New York, then take note. This book succeeds at two out of those three.

Adult sci-fi author Chris Moriarty has given us a cross between Potter and E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime.* In her early 1900s New York City, Sacha, a thirteen-year-old Jewish immigrant boy, has to battle magical forces wielded by robber barons. Can his grandfather, the rabbi from the old country and an expert on everything kabbalistic, including dybbuks, help? Will his unwelcome sidekick, Lily, daughter of the über-wealthy high-society Astral family, be of any use? Why has Inspector Wolf, a mysterious NYPD Inquisitor, hired him and Lily as apprentices in his epic battle with James Pierpont Morgaunt for the soul of the city? Will the evil genius who is trying to kill Thomas Edison manage to blame it all on the Jewish kid and start a pogrom right here in the new world? Can the good guys who don't wield magic, including Houdini and Teddy Roosevelt, have any impact? And why is Emma Goldman absent from this novel?

In Harry Potter, the wizarding world and the world of Muggles—the ordinary, boring, unmagical people—are at first kept separate, barely impacting one another. Author J.K. Rowling's portrayal of the Muggles so captures the contempt that typical bohemians, Beats, hippies, Deadheads, and such have had for the stodgy bourgeoisie that I always took her magical folk to be an extrapolation of the counterculture. While the evil magicians eventually cause havoc in the Muggle world, the good ones only want to stay safely separate from it.

In Moriarty's book, there aren't two worlds, only one. Magic isn't a counterculture. It is everyone's folk culture. At first it seems that it is a culture in the process of being banished as the machine age gathers speed, as in so many modern fantasy stories, from Peter Pan onward. But unlike in those stories, where the advance of capitalism, productivity, rationalism, and money spell the death of spells, in this story it turns out that the baddest barons are the biggest magic users of all. They are trying to monopolize magic!

Unlike Doctorow, who portrayed J.P. Morgan with some human sympathy, Moriarty paints J.P. Morgaunt (only the bad guys get their names magicked) as pure evil: "He's killing New York," says Houdini. "He's sucking the magic out of it, and if we don't stop him there'll be nothing but an empty shell." But the nonappearance of Emma Goldman is telling. Goldman does show alongside Morgan, Houdini, and other historical figures in *Ragtime,* E.L Doctorow's fictional story of a Jewish immigrant family trying to make it in New York that seems to have been a major inspiration for Moriarty. But neither Goldman nor any other Left organizers appear in *The Inquisitor's Apprentice.* The only ones who can really stand up to Morgaunt are magically talented individuals like Wolf and, we hope, Sacha. Organized labor is nowhere to be seen. This is a shift from history to romantic individualism. Is there no magic in popular campaigns against big money? Is children's fiction too conservative for that?



So no magical glow is infused into progressive organizing, but what about Jewish culture and the Big Apple? I'm no expert on stories of magical New York. I'd be delighted to know if any can hold a candle to Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale,* which I found stunning in its ability to evoke myth and magic of true originality without recourse to the usual casts of fantasy novels. But this one makes a good attempt, mainly because it is rooted in genuine Jewish immigrant experience. The members of Moriarty's Jewish family are the best characters in her book, described with love as well as with respect for the culture and the Kabbalah. The most moving moment in the book, for me, was one that had nothing to do with magic, but with a Jewish woman coming to accept the loss of family members back in Europe. Sacha's mother practices small magics, such as asking the baker for a magical Mother-in-Latke in the hopes of landing her daughter a good husband. Mrs. Lassky, the baker, says, "A perfect son-in-law I can deliver. But a perfect husband? There is no such thing!"

As a principled kabbalist, Sacha's grandfather opposes magic entirely. When it is explained to Sacha that

asking God for small favors is hardly the kind of relationship a close friend of God's would stoop to—that we kabbalists "are God's *real* friends"—we get a sudden glimpse of a genuine and deep mystical tradition and a tussling relationship with God entirely different from almost anything in the Christian tradition.

Still, if you want a really good fantastical political tale of a North America with kabbalists and a dybbuk, *and* organized resistance to big corporations, the only one I know of that I can wholeheartedly recommend is Marge Piercy's *He, She, and It*. Buy that one, borrow this one from the library. ■

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ROUNDTABLE (*continued from page 14*)

FRAAD: I'm with Amory. There are ways that Americans do mobilize, and the one that I had written about for *Tikkun* before is that in every little town across this country there's an AA meeting and there are twelve-step programs all over the place. If you could change the idea of those groups such that, instead of having to count on the higher power being in heaven, they focused on the power in people reaching out to each other on whatever basis of belief they want—not only on a personal level but on a social and political level—you could probably combine the twelve-step model with a social movement. But in another way, what they hold out for the Left is a nonhierarchical accepting listening; a consciousness in which there is no one "right line for everyone," except the bigger goal of liberation. They help us envision a higher goal than just our own freedom: the freedom to connect, the freedom to be part of something nurturing, a model of a society in which we all could have a chance.

The Dangers of a Two-Stage Process

LERNER: There are two proposals on the table here that we're talking about. One is to back an amendment to the constitution that will overturn *Citizens United* and focus on the role of corporate citizenship and unlimited use of corporate money in politics. The other is the ESRA, which includes everything that Move to Amend wants but whose central focus is on getting all private money out of elections, so that all funding for state and national office come from public funding (in equal amounts to each major candidate).

The ESRA would further require media to give free and equal time to all the major candidates and would then require that corporations with incomes over one hundred million dollars a year get a new corporate charter once every five years. To renew their charters, corporations would have to prove a satisfactory history of environmental and social responsibility to a jury of ordinary citizens. Moreover, corporations could not move their assets out of the country before paying the people of the United States for any damage that such a move might incur. The ESRA would also require schools to teach environmental and social responsibility, which would help all students develop the ability to cooperate with each other and enhance our capacity to be caring for each other and for the earth.

When Peter suggests a two-stage process—that we see Move to Amend's more limited effort to transform the role of corporations in American culture as a first step that could make way for more radical transformations later—I don't have a theoretical objection to that. But on a practical level, this two-stage approach doesn't make sense to me. I have pleaded with David and others in Move to Amend to include the ESRA in their public education efforts, not as something that they are putting on the agenda at the moment but as part of the education that they're doing—but I have found that has not happened. The problem with the logic of the more narrow amendment is that people involved in trying to secure its passage will worry that articulating a second step might undermine the focus on it. I see little reason to believe that Move to Amend would, in any serious way, educate people on any of the issues not directly connected with the amendment that they want to put forward.

I disagree with Peter's optimistic assessment that somehow this amendment will get passed within the next few years, thereby leaving the space for a newly energized social movement to go on to the next stage. In my view, there isn't a chance it's going to be passed in the next few years, and it will take at least the entire time that is legally allowed for an amendment to be considered; and in that period of time, people will become deeply exhausted in that struggle and, win or lose, will not be energized to take on another constitutional amendment that deals with the broader picture that ESRA addresses.

After the 2012 election, I predict people will want to take on money as a corrupting force in politics more broadly because they'll see how a handful of billionaires can have as powerful an impact on an election as any corporation. (Just look, for example, at the billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who has given ten million dollars to the Romney campaign and funded some Congressional candidates too.) Even if this exhausting struggle is won for the narrower Move-to-Amend focus, those seeking to democratize our system will soon realize: "Wait a second, what did we accomplish? We got one source of money out of politics, but there's

another huge source of money. Why didn't we include that in the first place?" I believe that the long-term impact will be debilitating rather than exhilarating or empowering to take on the supposed next stage that addresses what I think should be addressed right now—money out of politics.

FRAAD: I think that's certainly a wonderful thing to put out there, because people ought to have that vision.

LERNER: So Peter and David, who don't agree, please take apart what I've said and show why it's wrong.

The Case for Taking on *Citizens United* First

COBB: I agree with you absolutely that Move to Amend is only a beginning, and I think it's important to recognize that the written Constitution is "the supreme law of the land." It codifies the social contracts, and so clearly we all know it's a racist, classist, sexist, and ecologically destructive concept that needs to be renegotiated. And I also think it's important to understand that the supreme law establishes governing principles. It does not legislate specific policies. My critique of what you're proposing is that it's actually legislative and political in nature. It goes way beyond what government principles ought to be.

The original constitutional framework only codified rights for a small number of rich white men who own property. They're the only ones who could even assert any rights under that doctrine. Our history of the United States is a series of struggles by actual human beings to be able to define themselves with any constitutional rights. I applaud that history and I think of myself historically within this context as a beneficiary of and a participant in the next stage of the struggle. I also think that it's worth pointing out that the current constitutional framework really limits government. That's all it does; there are no affirmative rights. It protects property rights over human rights and can't even conceive of ecological rights of nature—we're trying to move in that direction. In this historical moment of deference to the court, it's not only inappropriate, it's also ahistorical.

Every other social movement before us understood that the courts were, for the most part, the institutions of the ruling elite, and legal activism was part of their struggle: it wasn't just a political or economic struggle—it was also legal. Honestly I think Move to Amend is the first example in my lifetime where I've seen that articulated, and I think that being too critical of it in its early nascent stages is dangerous.

I completely agree with Harriet and Amory about how we need to hold up models that work. I work in an explicitly feminist worker's collective where we make all the decisions democratically. We build community support of agriculture and independent business alliances and community currency projects. Move to Amend is *not* the only work that we are doing. We do think that this is the best broad approach; it is working and it's engaging people in the struggle for systemic change in ways that I've never seen before. It's not just that we're creating local affiliates or have hundreds of thousands of people participating, it's that we have people *right now* canvassing people *right now* petitioning at farmer's markets—people *right now* doing workshops on the social-legal-historical context of the role of corporations within corporate capitalism. I've never seen that happen before, I've never been part of it, and I'm incredibly excited by it. I hear the critiques that you offer about not going far enough, but we're actually getting people in motion now and from my perspective, I want to keep building that.

GABEL: Here's a metaphor: the mountain climbers. We throw our hook up to the top of where we're trying to get to leverage us; that top is an embodiment of our vision of a loving, caring, socially connected, cooperative world—environmentally embracing, appreciative of the earth, spiritually, and deeply existing with one another. However, the question now is where we are . . . each climber is wherever he or she is on the effort to get there. A key question on the role of reform is how and to what extent we are approaching our ideal (the mountaintop) in order to not just be wandering around the mountainside. To approach the ideal, we need to mobilize human beings from a state of passivity into a state of activity. To me, the strongest point in defense of Move to Amend's approach is that the *Citizens United* decision provoked fairly large masses of people who weren't already involved in politics and who don't already think the way that many progressives do to realize the absurdity of the idea that corporations are people and therefore have the right to spend massive amounts of money on democratic elections.

So to me, in some circumstances a reform effort can be very close to a full embracing of the ideals. Maybe ESRA's not a full embracing of the ideals, but it's closer to it. It's more meaningful. It more clearly brings the ideals into view. But the effort to overturn *Citizens United* is actually capitalizing on where people are right now. Many won't fully grasp all the amendments that are mentioned in ESRA—they might have a million questions about it. But they are ready to say that the *Citizens United* decision is an absolute outrage and they refuse to passively accept it the way they feel forced to passively accept so much of what's handed down to them from the existing hierarchy structure and the power of authority.

My feeling is that by overcoming *Citizens United*, people could possibly feel mobilized to climb higher and imagine the world differently. And that's why, to me, the overturning of that decision is an important step on the mountain. Its mobilization potential and its reversal of the passive acquiescence in the ideology and the mystification generated by the Supreme Court and other dominant

institutions is very important. Many state legislatures have already passed opposition to *Citizens United*, whereas it's less likely that they would mobilize to that extent around all the dimensions of the ESRA. So the question then really is: What will turn passive into active? What will engage people to bring them out of their hopelessness, their lack of imagination, their lack of desire, and the repression of their desire? What can mobilize them into thinking they can retake public space? To me, that's the great thing about this Move to Amend movement. We should all be wholeheartedly in support of that dimension of the effort.

When Are Small Steps the Right Choice?

LERNER: If I understand Peter correctly, the most important thing to do is to move people from inaction into action and into hopefulness again. That was the same argument that many people offered for why we should be excited about Obama in the beginning of the 2008 election—that he was in fact raising hopes, mobilizing people in new ways. Many conceded that Obama's limited, Democratic Party vision wasn't likely to make significant transformation in society, but they thought that progressives could build on the way he mobilized people after his election. I don't think there's anybody here on the call that thinks that that worked out so well as a strategy. People were mobilized, but then when Obama betrayed their hopes, they did not take their mobilization to the next step and become an independent force—instead they despaired and became inactive. It's similar to how some in the Civil Rights Movement argued against radicals in the Black community by saying, "Once we win these basic legal protections, then we can talk about the systemic ways in which racism operates, but if we raise that now we'll lose the battle for civil rights." But after that battle was won, the people who had been educated to believe that the courts and the law would be the arena in which racism would be defeated did not go on to a second stage because nothing they had learned had prepared them for the far more difficult battle to challenge the racist institutions and practices built into the very structure of capitalism. So most people simply stopped being involved, and the civil rights organizations dramatically lost their momentum.

The other experience that I recall was the arguments that took place between liberals and radicals in the antiwar movement of the sixties. Toward the end of the 1960s, some liberals were saying, "Our demands should be stop the bombing of Vietnam and have a bombing freeze." Some of the more radical activists said, "No, our task is to articulate why the only solution to the problem is an end to the war and not a bombing freeze, even though the bombing freeze will somewhat improve the lives of people in Vietnam and will certainly be easier to pass through the Congress at this point." I think that the more radical strategy that we took was the right one. So I think it's the task of spiritual progressives and progressives more generally to use this moment to put forward a larger vision, explaining why overturning *Citizens United* really doesn't get us where we need to go.

COBB: I do think your assessment of Move to Amend is fairly uncharitable and, from my perspective, inaccurate. There are two legal doctrines in place. They are linchpins not just for how the corporate capitalist system has stolen our sacred right to govern ourselves but also for the legal system's legalization and legitimization of that theft. We would actually overturn both corporate constitutional rights and the doctrine that money is speech. We are opening up dialogue in the seven regional convergences that are taking place for people to imagine and discuss: Does Move to Amend go far enough? Should we have affirmative rights to health care? Affirmative rights to education? Affirmative rights to enough food to eat and having enough shelter? And so forth. These are positive rights that are nowhere in the existing framework. Those conversations are beginning to take place; some folks are resistant, some folks are intrigued. That's how movements work. We are starting to create these processes, and I'll continue to try to create those spaces for deliberate conversations for people who are actually engaged in the Move to Amend affiliate structure and so forth.

GABEL: Let me say this, David, in defense of what you're doing: If this is a successful movement, if more state legislatures jump on, or city councils, you're taking on something more than just *Citizens United*. You're taking on a big chunk of the way that—going back thirty or forty years—the Supreme Court and other institutions have validated the undermining of the democratic process itself, the undermining of a simple idea of popular democracy, through the notion that corporations are human beings with free speech rights. Challenging that notion is one important step toward reclaiming public space for actual human beings. The ESRA articulates one important thing we should say in that space, but for people to hear it, we have to seize this moment, created by the *Citizens United* decision, to reclaim that space as ours.

LERNER: Yes, I don't mean in any way to be putting you down just because I disagree with the particular strategy to be used at this particular moment. Thank you for all the work you're doing, David, both now and in the past.

STARR: I feel like this is a debate over program and not over what is the best way to build the power to get any of it to happen. The question should be how to get people excited about a vision of an economy that's not based on "making it"—that's a stretch right now. If we're dependent on corporations to provide jobs, how pissed off at them

can we be? And if we're dependent on them for all of our material needs, how can we challenge them? What is the economy like if we strip away the racist corporations? Would we still have cell phones? The aspiration to become wealthy is the only vision of liberation most people have. Why? Because we don't have a cultural vision of a society that's egalitarian and pleasurable. Figuring out how we're going to talk about that is the hard work we need to do. It's a lot more fun to debate, "Do we like this manifesto or that manifesto?" It's not fun to talk about how we are going to take on these ideas that are deep in our culture and are standing in the way of whatever we want to do. But that's the strategy conversation that we really need to be having.

LERNER: Thank you all for being on this conversation. ■

KURTH (*continued from page 16*)

helping the poor, fostering democratic input, and making a living instead of a killing ought to fit many progressive agendas.

Some of the modern co-ops that I have belonged to in years past have acutely failed to embody these progressive ideals. At the Berkeley and Oakland co-op supermarkets of the early 1980s, many staff didn't know or seem to care whether the grapes were produced under unionized working conditions or not, prices were low, and products were mediocre. My disappointment built up until one day, with guilty relief, I switched to the well-stocked, faux-friendly aisles of Safeway, which was unionized at least.

I had better experiences previously in Madison, Wisconsin, where I was involved in both food and housing co-ops. The Mifflin Street Co-op and its cleaner sister, the Langdon Area Grocery Co-op offered healthy, affordable choices not available at nearby mom-and-pop stores or even far-away supermarkets. Above the Langdon Area Grocery Co-op was a housing co-op that became my home. I can't say it was always clean (the Sparticist Youth League didn't always wash the dishes), but it provided decent, convenient housing I could afford. When I went to UC Berkeley for grad school, my co-op points transferred, so I could once again get affordable housing near campus in a very well-run co-op that's still thriving today.

In the present day, some co-ops have managed to steer between mess and mainstream to fulfill their tremendous potential. In my search for practical examples that could work for people everywhere, not just on the fringe, I found a very interesting one: Eco-Care, an environmentally friendly housecleaning co-op run by immigrant women and based in Morgan Hill, California, south of San Jose.

Interestingly, though the co-op movement historically had no special link to environmentalism, Eco-Care includes environmental commitment as one of its key tenets. Perhaps this shows how flexible and individualized co-ops can be.

Lupita Serrato, Eco-Care's operations manager, helped found the co-op back in 2001. Here's what she told me about the story of its founding:

> I used to work cleaning homes on my own. Then I started taking English classes at the Learning and Loving Education Center in Morgan Hill with Sister Pat Davis. There I met a group of women who were also taking English classes and were interested in starting a housecleaning business, since that's all we knew how to do. So Sister Pat contacted WAGES (Women's Action to Gain Economic Security) in Oakland. We met with them and they helped start our co-op.

Eco-Care began with nine women, and Serrato said the most difficult challenge was interpersonal relations (a challenge we also faced in my housing co-op). "It has been difficult to work with thirteen women, who are all owner/worker because everyone has a voice in the business," she told me. "We have a board meeting every month where we go over our finances, discuss and solve our problems, as well as celebrate our birthdays."

In response to my question about what people should keep in mind when starting a co-op, she suggested: "Getting along. Not allowing your ego to take over. Knowing when to speak and when to listen. Respecting everyone's opinion. Thinking as a group and not as an individual." When asked about values, Serrato was quite down-to-earth: "Our value as a co-op is to help as many low-income Hispanic women as we can." How many mainstream businesses enact such interpersonal ideals?

Besides the daunting area of the interpersonal, one common practical problem faced by co-ops is undercapitalization. Serrato mentioned that in addition to taking out a $20,000 loan from Lenders for Community Development (which her co-op repaid in three years), she and the other members also raised $10,000. "Our whole families helped," she said. "We car washed, had garage sales, made and sold tamales. We bottled and sold olive oil. We picked walnuts. Packed and sold them."

Nurturing New Co-ops

Researching Eco-Care led me to Women's Action to Gain Economic Security (WAGES), the nonprofit incubator of co-ops that helped Eco-Care and several other cleaning co-ops get off the ground. WAGES recently launched yet another green cleaning co-op, Home Green Home, in San Francisco—a joint venture with a for-profit business, Seventh Generation, which makes green cleaning products and is now headed

by a former Pepsico executive. In 2009, Eco-Care and three other cleaning co-ops formed an Eco-Friendly Cleaning Co-op Network in affiliation with WAGES.

Like savings and loans associations, WAGES began as an effort to empower the poor. That it has achieved success working with women whose English skills are limited and who have had limited access to education is a testament both to the abilities of the women involved and to the trial-and-error persistence of the founders who experienced, in microcosm, almost every obstacle the co-op movement has faced for decades. One co-op failed when a contingent of co-op members took it over and made it for-profit, offering to hire their former partners at a reduced wage. Another co-op failed because members couldn't get along due to differing values. Yet another chose a business (party supplies) that didn't match the talents, resources, and backgrounds of the participants. Still another difficulty arose in finding an appropriate role for management and an appropriate legal structure. I came away very impressed with WAGES' commitment and untarnished vision.

One of the most interesting aspects of WAGES is the way it has formed partnerships with other community organizations (some of which surprised me) in order to gather the daunting array of financial, managerial, and legal resources that were needed. Among them were large corporations like Cisco, a prominent Palo Alto law firm, a legal advising firm (Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati), various foundations, and a special "bank" called Lenders for Community Development. In co-ops, it seems, "it takes a village."

It also seems to take a certain maturity. WAGES discovered that in order for its budding co-ops to succeed, members needed significant interpersonal communication training, which WAGES arranged through a Bay Area nonviolent communication organization. WAGES also found that groups of women who shared cultural values and were acquainted with one another before starting a co-op were more likely to succeed than a group of strangers with diverse values. From an idealist perspective, one might wish for greater diversity, but at least in this case, diversity had its limit if co-ops were to endure.

Preventing the Slide from Co-op to Cartel

From Eco-Care, to REI (the popular outdoor clothing and gear store), to savings and loans associations, the world of co-ops is a vast one, perhaps too large to form a meaningful core identity. Are co-ops good places for progressives to work, shop, and donate? It depends. As Gary Dorrien pointed out in "A Case for Economic Democracy" (an article in *Tikkun*'s May/June 2009 issue), because of many co-ops' high entry fees, low mobility, and commitment to staying in business despite the inability to pay competitive wages, "merely expanding the cooperative sector is not enough."

Faced with an unsatisfying service-industry job, many people might well think about the potential of co-ops, but these mixed results raise the question: how can we keep a co-op from becoming a cartel? What we're really asking is how we can keep our egos and vested interests from wrecking any movement whose mission is to be of service, to repair and transform the world. I'm willing to bet that everyone reading this article has had a dispiriting experience with a group whose aims were lofty.

How do we keep the spirit alive? I personally experienced a shift when I turned from what I was *fighting* to what I was *supporting*. I noticed that I had used up my lifetime supply of self-righteousness and was well into deficit spending. I can't say I have a balanced budget yet, but it seems to help if co-ops and other organizations are not focused solely on the heinousness of some bad guy or group, be it capitalism, the military, Scott Walker, or right-wing Israelis. I have to ask myself, and it might be useful for co-op members or founders to ask: Why do I support co-ops? Why do I support any good thing, whether that be gay marriage or student loan forgiveness? Isn't it because I hate to see injustice and suffering? Isn't it because I sympathize with people who are struggling and hurting and I want to help?

A second attitudinal shift that may help is for people in co-ops to exhibit basic friendliness and supportiveness. Why is it that righteous groups, including some co-ops I've visited, can sometimes give off an "I don't care" or even hostile vibe? Are we holding out for just the right kind of people to help? Are we waiting for the perfect customer who looks and dresses and acts just like our type, meanwhile overlooking the people in front of us who all seem so insufficient in one way or another? I'm not a big fan of the saying, "charity begins at home," because sometimes it ends there too, but if a group such as a co-op can't be kind and pleasant, at least half the time, to its own members who share common goals, what does it really have to offer the larger world? Maybe the little daily actions that take place within a co-op—simple friendliness, tolerance, and welcome—are just as important to its continuity as its loftier long-term aims to subvert market injustices or the powers of greed. It is these expressions of compassion and care that help a group, whether it be a co-op or a church, sustain itself over the long haul. Among the many Madison co-ops that came and went through the 1960s to the 1980s, one that still existed in 2011 was Friends Co-op—and when I saw the sign still hanging there, I wondered whether friendship had been the reason for its longevity.

Besides attitudinal change, there are also many practical structures co-ops can embrace to fight the temptation to slide into political apathy or cartel behaviors. For example, they can build in regular, frequent self-assessments

among members to discuss in a democratic way how well they embody their values. Caring rituals are helpful too (for example, how the Eco-Care members celebrate each other's birthdays). If external obstacles exist, co-op members can lay out the political work that needs to be done and let their customers know they need help in changing laws and social policies.

It's good to know that great co-ops exist. In many locales, progressives who need products, services, or a livelihood have a true choice for environmental good and economic democracy. ■

AHMED (*continued from page 25*)

an infinite obligation: other people's traumas, precarity-inducing misfortunes, addictions, and struggles will never cease, especially in the city.

In that sense, then, the citied Muslim jurists are providing citizens of the city with a gift—the gift of superiority, of self-righteousness that allows citizens to, once having given their fair share to society, turn away from the persistent claims of others. This gift is taken at a steep price. If responding to the face of the Other makes us moral agents, then responding only to the demands of the state creates a complacency that threatens to deaden conscience. Complacency is a common trope in citied Islamic jurisprudence, especially with respect to tyrannical leaders. Still, if the state is doing its job, citizens can be content in their society and explain away poverty as a personal predilection that can be dealt with if and when the individual afflicted ever decides to turn to the state for help.

And so, using Cohen's method (and assuming that I have not misused it), we are presented with two visions of proper citied life. In the rabbinic vision, strangers and the needy require individuals in a community to come together to care for them, and the level of that care circumscribes the level of justice in the city. In the citied Muslim jurist vision, strangers and the needy are wards of the state, and taxes absolve individuals from obligation to their care. The first vision describes obedience to God as an appeal to marshal our personal resources for the common good in a society that is in desperate need of repair. The second is a vision of a functional welfare society, where obedience to God is more or less confined to the realm of personal piety. When I think about proper religiosity, justice, and good works, I think the rabbinic vision is more valuable. But when I think of the kind of society worth working toward, I think of the citied Muslim jurist vision. The first is better for my personal conscience; the second is better for the actual people that my conscience is supposed to serve. I am personally very content to live in Vancouver, luxuriating in my ambiguous problem of conscience in the face of the Other. I'm truly grateful, however, that Aryeh Cohen is in Los Angeles, doing the work of religion, calling others to obedience to God through service to mankind, and unearthing the deep logic of repair that will be required to fix a broken world. ■

REHMANN/KAHL (*continued from page 48*)

and in ideological practices and rituals. Religious apparatuses (like ideological apparatuses in general) are not simply the *instruments* of a ruling ideology, but also the *sites* in which the ideological struggles around hegemony take place. Their critique is therefore to be fine-tuned so that it does not attack those who fight in these institutions under difficult circumstances for social justice and progressive change.

As Louis Althusser pointed out in *For Marx*, ideologies have "very little to do with 'consciousness,'" but are to be understood as a lived reality, "fundamentally unconscious," mostly of pervasive images and therefore never purely instrumental. This means that the traditional Enlightenment idea that the intellectual needs only to demonstrate the "falseness" of a worldview to make it dissipate and to bring in the correct class consciousness misses the depth of such a lived reality. In a similar vein, Bourdieu argued that the social order is inscribed in our *habitus*, a set of dispositions anchored in our bodies. Denouncing the "sigh of the oppressed creature" in terms of a false consciousness is just a rationalist fallacy. Progressives need to understand and to acknowledge that people's relationships to reality are differently structured. To transform them is not so much a question of the "correct" ideas but of creating meaningful common practices.

Dogmatic accounts that define, once and for all, what religion *is* miss the point from the outset: religions are not to be defined by a fixed and homogenous *essence*, even if their official doctrines say the opposite. Both religion and spirituality are fields of social contradiction and struggle and therefore dependent on the ever-changing relations of force. As progressive and critical Bible exegetes have demonstrated in abundance, the foundational Scriptures themselves are not exempt from these struggles—they are traversed and riven by them. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament might be seen as prime examples of what Freud called "compromise formations." This means that a critique of religion consists primarily in the effort to decipher the social antagonisms and struggles in the religious field. The main task of progressives is to connect the "sigh of the oppressed" with a critical analysis of class, gender, and racial domination and to enter into solidarity and

> There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands.

Since the producers have no democratic control over what is being produced, how it's being produced, and how the surplus is being distributed, the products of their labor pile up on the other side of the barrier—they become the wealth of the capitalist owners. The products turn into an alien power that is being used against the producers by replacing them with new technologies, by firing them, by impoverishing them, by making them "superfluous." According to Marx, this irrational system that periodically destroys its own wealth by disastrous crises is finally to be overcome by an "association of free people."

We can see now that, through several methodical shifts, the young Marx's critique of religion has found a new object, one could even say, its proper object, namely the capitalist mode of production and circulation. It is here that Marx's critique of fetishism intersects with the theological critique of *idolatry*, i.e., of the "structural sin" of an exploitative and oppressive system and its legitimizing ideologies. Marx himself explains in the third volume of *Capital*, that the capitalist system develops its own "religion of everyday life," which becomes so natural that people "feel completely at home in these estranged and irrational forms." A critique that follows Marx's move from the religious "halo" to the "vale of tears" has to look first and foremost at the alienating, inverting, and mystifying mechanisms in the economic deep structure of today's high-tech capitalism, its market-religion and spirituality. The "spirit" of the fetish or idol has a power and attraction that captivates people's minds and souls across the boundaries of churches, religions, and ideologies, as the spirituality of the "prosperity gospel" or of "civil religion" amply demonstrates.

Deciphering the Social Contradictions

But what does this mean in regard to a progressive approach to religions and spirituality? Given the important role of religions in the framework of neoconservative and reactionary ideologies, it would be self-defeating to abandon the task of critically scrutinizing their obfuscating and distracting functions. Liberation theologians in Latin America and elsewhere have been modeling such critiques of false religion and idolatry for decades already. There is indeed a lot of "opium" to be countered, and by no means only in religions. But this critical discernment must not be done in a way that denigrates the "sigh of the oppressed" and the ethics of solidarity that are articulated in religious terms, nor the peculiar forms of religious articulation as such. Rather, this critical discernment must be focused on the way specific religious institutions, groups, or ideologues concretely contribute to the hegemony of the ruling order—how they hide the reality of social injustice and divert the sufferings of the oppressed.

Furthermore, a progressive approach to religion must not ignore the basic insights of ideology theories that have been developed within Marxist theory. One of them is that a concept of ideology that is fixated on ideas alone, on the problem of "false consciousness" or "inverted ideas," is missing the main point, namely the specific *material* existence of ideologies, their institutional anchorage in the hegemonic apparatuses of civil society (*continuned on page 69*)

Instead of waging the old battles between atheism and religion, let's find a common ethical and spiritual core. Can't we all agree on Marx's categorical imperative "to overthrow all relations in which the human being is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being"?

Brooke Anderson

community rather than simply casting a critique from outside and "above." This is what religious progressives are already doing, often more sensitively and effectively than their secular counterparts.

Toward a Spirituality of the Commons

There are many examples of both Christian-Marxist and interreligious dialogues and cooperations. One of the most important experiences is this: as soon as people of different worldviews and religious beliefs come to share the same social concerns and to engage in common social practices, they find out that the existential problems they are struggling with have much more in common than one might gather from their different discourses. The difficulties of maintaining hope in the midst of defeats; the necessity of finding some collective and individual coherence in the midst of contradictions; the problem of agency when there seems to be no way out; the importance of faith in its original ancient meanings of trust, faithfulness, truthfulness, reciprocity, and mutual reliability; the desire for love, recognition, and a meaningful life—all of these concern secular and religious movements alike. Instead of waging the old battles between atheism and religion, secularism and faith, or reason and spirituality, progressives (both secular and religious) need to learn the skills to mutually translate the different discourses. They might even find a common ethical and spiritual core, similar to the one the young Marx described as the "categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which the human being is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being."

This is where a resistant and liberationist spirituality takes root. We call it the *spirituality of the commons*. Directed against impoverishment, privatization and competition, such a spirituality helps people create and sustain connections of solidarity with one another and with nature. As the Network of Spiritual Progressives formulates, it is based on the recognition "that our well-being depends on the well-being of everyone else on the planet and the well-being of the Earth." It draws upon, among other sources, the "spirituality of combat" that religious activists developed on the countless stages of struggles for social justice across the continents in the past.

The spirituality of the commons is anticipated by the "grand narrative" of liberation in the Hebrew Bible stretching from the Exodus out of slavery to the promise of a new creation. It is strangely reminiscent of the early Christian movements (before their adaptation to and co-optation by the Roman imperial state) that were inspired by the Pentecostal "spirit" of a new global language to transcend not only ethnic and religious but also economic and political boundaries in a worldwide solidarity movement from below. It also reminds us of Paul, the spirit-driven organizer of highly diverse countercultural communities throughout the Roman Empire who aimed at replacing the self-destructive patterns of competition and war-making with love and mutuality in new practices of material and spiritual sharing. This "spirit" is the lifeblood of radical counter-imagination, of transformation and persistence throughout human history. It was present at Zuccotti Park in 2011, it will re-emerge whenever social movements look for unity and coherence through diversities, and it has the potential to liberate human minds and imagination from the iron cages of the status quo.

What about Marxist "eschatology"—the goal of a radically transformed society? We certainly do not know and cannot anticipate in detail what kind of cooperative forms of culture and spirituality the members of a society without antagonistic classes, state domination, or patriarchy might want to develop. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels described the goal of a developed classless society in terms of an "association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." They expected that there wouldn't be a need for ideology or religion in the sense of a "voluntary" subjection to social domination. To the extent that the state and its ideological apparatuses have "withered away" and "the antithesis of mental and physical labour has vanished," they write, people won't need an "illusory community" that hovers *above* the actual social life.

This is not to be confused with the assumption that *all* illusions and projections would be replaced by complete transparency. This is itself no more than a rationalist illusion rendered obsolete by Freud's discovery of the unconscious. It is not about "rationalizing" our lives. Life, relationships, and love will certainly, to an extent, remain enigmatic and mysterious in many respects. Humans will continue to wrestle with the finitude and fragility of our existence on this planet. There will be death, disease, and crises of all kinds as well as a longing for "flowers," even if the chains of old are gone. The point is not to naively depict a world without problems and humans becoming "perfect," but rather to imagine how to develop a new wisdom to deal with the contradictions of life, to develop a new capacity to set free the enormous potentials and mysteries of human spirituality, hope, and solidarity that are at present predominantly (but never entirely) administered and shaped by markets, profit interests, and ideological powers.

What mainstream religions (and ideologies in general) conceive of as "vertical" relationships to higher authorities and values can also be reclaimed and redefined as "horizontal" relationships among cooperative equals and with nature. According to *The Principle of Hope* by Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, progressives should value and co-inherit the spiritual treasures both

administered and preserved by religion. They can do this by transforming the religious "drive upward" into a "drive forward," by transforming religious transcendence into a "human venturing beyond self" or an "act of transcending without any heavenly transcendence but with an understanding of it." In this perspective, Bloch writes, "God" can be understood as "the hypostatized ideal of the human essence which has not yet become in reality."

It may be a surprise for many to hear that similar perspectives have been developed within theology as well, most famously by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in a fascist prison cell and shortly before his execution outlined his vision of a "religionless Christianity." "Authentic transcendence," according to Bonhoeffer, does not mean "a 'religious' relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable," but rather "a new life in 'existence for others.'"

We can happily leave it to later generations to decide how they will name and describe the spirituality by which they celebrate and sustain community with each other, with life, and with nature. They may experience it as liberation *from* religion or *of* religion (i.e., from the strictures of capitalist alienation), depending on how they understand the term. They will certainly not hesitate to "inherit" and claim back all spiritual and cultural potentials they find suitable, whether preserved through religious or nonreligious traditions, through literature, poetry, music, or dance. What is relevant is not the terminology, but the possibility that the people finally assume the democratic power to make decisions about their conditions of work and of social life—without the intervention of superordinate powers and apparatuses. We are convinced that in this process they will be able to develop a spirituality of the commons that expresses and celebrates their new capacities to act, to connect, to enjoy. ■

Morning Blessings

For Rabbi Burt Jacobson

Blessed is the dog's tongue
Shamanic prayer flag
Binder of vapor
Harbinger of light's arrival.
Blessed is the brain stem
That battled entropy
All night on my behalf.
Blessed are my nether, pleasure parts
That double as effluent outlets.
Blessed are you, Ya, granter of civility,
In whose name the trash trucks
Are held in abeyance until the sunlight
Girds the plum trees.
Blessed are the medicines,
Polyglot organic molecules,
That soothe or jumpstart
My various organs, that find
My son at sea and return him
Safely to port.
Blessed is the tickle of air across cilia
And the redwood, my redwood,
Whose oxygen flows through
My blessedly still-open arteries.
Blessed is the dream of an endless
Concrete corridor, perhaps cell blocks
You were never sure
That dissolves to unreality upon waking.
Blessed is my message-free cell phone
Assuring me that no one died, that there was
No crippling plane crash while I slept.
Blessed are my books, the window,
The furnace kicking on.
And blessed is consciousness itself
Recursive synapse that discards
The neural dross and brings me the world,
Just as it is.

—David Shaddock

An Alphabet

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