

Tikkun

POLITICS + SPIRITUALITY + CULTURE

(tē·kūn) To heal, repair, and transform the world.

WINTER 2015

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OF RENEWAL**

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JUBILEE AND DEBT ABOLITION



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\$5.95 U.S.



THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM CONTINUES

Residents of Ferguson, Missouri, protest the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014.

Protests over the fatal police shooting of unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown have dwindled, and with them mainstream attention to the racism faced daily by African Americans nationwide. Mainstream discussions of the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his murderer have similarly faded. And despite the release of *Fruitvale Station*, the powerful film that conveyed the emotional impact and racial injustice of the murder of Oscar Grant, coverage of the issues raised by the murder and in the movie are fading, as well. We must not stop protesting and mourning. The killing of these three African American teenagers is just the tip of the iceberg of the harassment, jailing, beatings, and murders faced by African American boys and men across our country.

And so it has been for the past 150 years since the end of slavery. The United States has never seriously confronted its racism, in large part because our ruling elites count on racism to divide middle-income working people and prevent them from challenging exploitative systems in our society. Conservative leaders have become adept at manipulating working people's seething frustration

over the alienation and powerlessness they feel in daily life, their economic fragility, and their sense of not being adequately cared for or respected, converting these feelings into anger at African Americans, Latino immigrants, Muslims, and almost all people of color.

We at *Tikkun* call upon our elected representatives to institute a multi-level attack on racism, including a) teaching about contemporary racism and the history of anti-racist struggles at every grade level from fourth grade through high school; b) restoring affirmative action in college, graduate, and professional schools, as well as in corporations with more than 100 employees; c) imposing community control on police forces and enacting severe penalties against any police and their supervisors who engage in or tolerate racist behavior; and d) implementing a Domestic and Global Marshall Plan as articulated at tikkun.org/GMP to eliminate poverty (which falls unevenly across racial lines) in the United States and around the world. Please join us in pushing for this. We can't let racism out of our sights—it is too painful and too destructive to everyone's humanity.

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Online Exclusives

Tikkun is not just a print magazine—visit our blog at tikkun.org/daily and our web magazine site at tikkun.org. Each has content not found here. Our online magazine is an exciting supplement to the print magazine, and the daily blog brings in a range of voices and perspectives.

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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.

WHAT DOES AMERICA NEED IN A NEW LEFT?

I find it dismaying that writer after writer in your Spring 2014 issue on America's Left stated, almost as a matter of course, that any new Left would be "anti-capitalist." I sense that this is a reaction to a lack of integrity in the multinational conglomerates that currently dominate the world economy. I agree. There is a lack of integrity. But if there are to be solutions to the problems created by environmental degradation and climate change, where will these solutions arise, except from within the free-enterprise system? Because we have a free-enterprise system, we can choose to save with a local credit union rather than a multinational bank; we can choose to get food from a farmers' market or through Community Supported Agriculture; we can power our homes with solar energy; and we can patronize local merchants. Organizations like Green America and Transition US are showing us that as we support our local economies we create resilient communities where our dependence on multinational corporations is reduced and their power over us minimized. For now, I will continue to read *Tikkun*, but I will hope for some articles showing how men and women have worked within the free-enterprise system to create businesses that have integrity and a human face.

—Robert Lynn Kazmayer, *Greenwich, NY*

EDITOR MICHAEL LERNER RESPONDS:

Any society that adopts the new bottom line as articulated in the Spiritual Covenant with America (tikkun.org/covenant) and orients its economic, corporate, and political decisions toward maximizing love, generosity, and caring will be one that we enthusiastically embrace. There are members of the Network of Spiritual Progressives who believe that capitalist

societies could be made to embody our new bottom line and many who disagree. Read Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda's *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, Jerry Mander's *The Capitalism Papers: Fatal Flaws of an Obsolete System*, and Michael Edwards's *Small Change: Why Business Won't Save the World* for more on the obstacles to creating the caring society that we seek.

YOUR WORDS ON ISRAEL IN GAZA

As an African American and father of a former U.S. Marine, I must thank you on bended knee for standing up for all humanity and for peace. You make me so proud, as I am sure you make billions of others proud. One day—one day, hopefully, we shall all live as loving brothers and sisters. Until then, stay strong and take courage. I can only imagine the vitriol that comes your way. May the G-d of Heaven bless all your efforts. *Anachnu Acheem* (I studied Hebrew in college).

—Greg Johnson, *Washington, DC*

I share *Tikkun's* view regarding the moral imperative of recognizing the sadness of the suffering that occurs on all sides. About ten years ago a Palestinian co-organizer and I organized peace vigils in San Francisco's Justin Herman Plaza. The point of our vigils was not to place blame but to acknowledge the shared suffering and experience what it feels like to come together on this common and deeply human ground: that no one wants to live with such tragedy, to experience such pain and loss. And we acknowledge this as humans, whether we be Jews, Palestinian Muslims, Palestinian Christians, or anyone else.

In a similar vein, I ask that you hold in mind that U.S. involvement in other parts of the world, as unskillful or hurtful as it sometimes

is, can spring from positive, healing intentions. And sometimes intervention can be helpful or healing, too. This is a fascinatingly complex deal. In Syria, when we see one side being murdered with chemical weapons, the heart in us cries out to intervene. Is this wrong? Unclear. And then we read about some atrocities committed by groups within the opposition. How confusing. There can be an intention to intervene borne out of caring. There are very few black-and-white aspects here. Maybe the best we can do is acknowledge the shared suffering and continue to question when, whether, and how to become involved as a nation. Keep up the important intellectual and moral questioning, thought, and action!

—Larry Ebert, *San Francisco, CA*

HAMAS HAS PROVEN ITSELF A HINDRANCE TO PEACE

It has barely been a month since the Western world expressed its support for the formation of a Palestinian unity government. Since then there have been kidnappings, murders, hundreds of rockets fired at civilian towns, and huge levels of violence. An escalation is imminent. The U.S. State Department said they would be watching closely to make sure that the Palestinian unity government would uphold the principles of peace; British Foreign Minister William Hague said, "We have made clear that our continued support to the new government will rest on its commitment to the principle of nonviolence." How much more proof does the Western world need to acknowledge that Hamas isn't part of the peaceful solution to the conflict the world desires?

—Michelle Moshelian, *Givatayim, Israel*

EDITOR MICHAEL LERNER RESPONDS:

Some Israelis have the quaint fantasy that they can choose the policies of their enemies. Or demand to make peace only with people they

MORE LETTERS

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like. Wrong on both counts. If Israel wants peace, it should have embraced a reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority rather than thwarted it. Hamas is an expression of a national liberation struggle of the Palestinian people, and such struggles often involve violence against the occupiers. We oppose Hamas's targeting of Israeli civilians just as we decry Israel's massive killing of Palestinians and destruction of the housing, the economic infrastructure, and much else in Gaza. Hamas and Israeli right-wing ultra-nationalist extremists are *de facto* allies, each giving the other the excuses they need to continue to escalate violence. Only nonviolence and a genuine attempt to understand the other side's needs will lead to a lasting peace. That will never be achieved until Israel is willing to give up its right-wing government, end the occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza, and accept the terms for a lasting peace accord outlined in the Winter 2014 issue of *Tikkun* and more fully in my book *Embracing Israel/Palestine*. ■

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.

Tikkun

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PUBLISHER Duke University Press

905 W. Main St., Suite 18B, Durham, NC 27701
 Visit DukeUniversityPressJournals.atdukeupress.edu/journals.

Articles in *Tikkun* do not necessarily reflect *Tikkun's* position on any issue. *Tikkun's* positions are presented in our editorials. To submit a manuscript, visit tikku.org/submissions.

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Tikkun (Vol. 30, No. 1, ISSN 0887-9982) is published quarterly by Duke University Press for the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, 2342 Shattuck Ave., #1200, Berkeley, CA 94704, a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. © 2015 *Tikkun* magazine. All Rights Reserved. *Tikkun*® is a registered trademark of the Institute for Labor and Mental Health. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Tikkun*, 2342 Shattuck Ave., #1200, Berkeley, CA 94704. Periodical postage paid at Berkeley, CA, and additional mailing offices. For individual subscriptions, visit tikku.org/subscribe. For institutional subscriptions, visit dukeupress.edu/tikkun.

Individual subscription prices for 4 issues:
 US residents, \$29.00; all others, \$39.00. Institutional subscription prices: print plus electronic, \$115.00; electronic only, \$92.00; print only, \$108.00. Payment in US dollars required. For information on subscriptions to the e-Duke Journals Scholarly Collections, see dukeupress.edu/library/eDuke. For a list of the sources in which *Tikkun* is indexed, see dukeupress.edu/tikkun.

Printed in USA. ♻️ Printed on recycled paper.

Settler Judaism

The Destructive Idol Worship of Our Time

THE JEWISH PEOPLE'S OPENNESS toward the love-oriented, emancipatory, transformative aspects of Judaism is increasingly being subordinated to what I call "Settler Judaism," a Judaism that scoffs at universal values and human rights and valorizes power over others as the ultimate "realism" to which post-Holocaust Jews must be subservient.

Settler Judaism is the contemporary form of idol worship that has the greatest appeal to twenty-first-century Jews who see the world through the framework of the past suffering of our people. As I have explored at greater length in my book *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*, members of this emerging Jewish majority believe that loyalty to the State of Israel and its army is an appropriate replacement for service to YHVH (God)—the voice of Transformative Power that commands us to "love the stranger" and to pursue justice, kindness, generosity, and peace.

The recent intensification of violence in Israel/Palestine broke my heart, not only because of the disastrous consequences for Palestinians of the war in Gaza—including the deaths of over 2,000 Palestinians, the maiming of over 6,000 more, the destruction of most Palestinian factories and many hospitals and UN schools, the sudden homelessness of an estimated one-quarter of the population following a massive Israeli attack on apartment buildings, and the total

traumatization of the population—but also because Israelis and many American Jews, understandably fearful of the bombardment of Israeli population centers by Hamas, seem to have completely forgotten that it is Israel that is occupying Palestine and it is Gazans who have been traumatized by seven years of blockade of needed food and other basic materials. This is fanning global anger at Jews and is also undermining the credibility of Judaism for many ethically sensitive younger Jews.

This growing moral insensitivity derives from what I see as the implicit Ten Commandments of Settler Jews, which I draw from statements that I've repeatedly seen and heard made by people who embrace the worship of the State of Israel.

The Ten Commandments of Settler Jews

1. I, the State of Israel, am the state of all Jews in the world whether or not they know it and whether or not they live here now, because eventually they will and must return to Zion.
2. Thou shalt have no other states before me. Whatever serves the interests of the State of Israel must be given priority over whatever is in the interests of any country in which you reside, and you must zealously seek to shape that country's self-perception in ways that make other countries see advancing Israel's interests to be in their own self-interest.
3. Remember the suffering of the Jewish people and the way we have been oppressed. Allow that memory to blot out any ethical concerns that might arise about how Israel is treating the Palestinian people or any other non-Jewish elements among you. Do not use the same standards for ethical behavior in regard to Israel or its policies that you use in regard to any other country or to any other political, economic, social, or religious reality—remember our suffering! If we have to kill hundreds of thousands in order to ensure our right to remain in our ancient homeland, we shall do so and see ourselves as serving God in so doing. We will support or at least not publicly challenge those West Bank settlers who wantonly destroy Arab property, uproot Arab olive trees, assault Arab children, or otherwise act in ways that frighten Arab civilians, hence encouraging them to consider leaving what we call Eretz Yisrael haShleyamah and what they call Palestine.



A Palestinian man cries after identifying the body of a loved one killed in Israel's July 2014 attack on Gaza. "Settler Judaism" uses memories of past Jewish suffering to distract from Israel's abuses against Palestinians.

AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis

4. Thou shalt have no permanent borders. Wherever the government seeks to expand settlements any place in the world, that place shall be part of Eretz Yisrael.
5. Cast out the heretics among you—those who suggest that Jewish tradition and Jewish religious texts command behavior that conflicts with the ability of the State of Israel to enforce, retain, and expand its settlements and its borders, or with its ability to enact discriminatory legislation against nonreligious Jews, Palestinians, Christians, Muslims, or anyone else not considered “real Jews” by the State of Israel.
6. Do not criticize the policies or the practices of the State of Israel in the public realm, though you may do so in groups of three or less in your own home.
7. Declare as an anti-Semite (or a self-hating Jew) anyone who violates any of these commandments or who otherwise questions the righteousness of the State of Israel’s policies and practices.
8. Align with any state or political force that serves the interests of the State of Israel. Encourage these states to embrace a militaristic worldview so that they will be prepared to militarily and economically support the State of Israel.
9. Pray for the victory of the Israel Defense Forces and the internal security forces of the State of Israel in all of their dealings with others and in any struggle in which they are engaged. And slowly seek to make life in Israel and its territories so difficult for non-Jews (particularly Palestinians and Muslims) and for dissident critics that they feel unwelcome and unsafe and begin to move away.
10. Abandon any idealistic or utopian ideals and accept that the world is fixed in its ways and cannot change. Do not take seriously any part of Judaism that might incline you to believe in the healing, repair, and transformation of the world. Allow the actual behavior of Israel and the Jewish people to become the new criterion for what is right or wrong, good or bad. And ridicule as simplistic, unrealistic, utopian, or even anti-Jewish those who believe that the world can be based on love and generosity.

Finding the Words to Reject Settler Judaism

To the extent that Settler Judaism becomes the main voice of the Jewish people and its institutions, the traumas of the past win, and God’s attempt to draw us toward becoming a holy people loses. I am heartbroken at the way this worship of the State of Israel has replaced following the path of YHVH, the God of transformation and compassion.

In rejecting Settler Judaism, I want to simultaneously express sadness and compassion for those who have embraced it. And I’d like to ask everyone involved in *Tikkun* and the interfaith and secular-humanist-welcoming Network of Spiritual Progressives to join in efforts to develop psycho-spiritual techniques and processes that can eventually help

practitioners of Settler Judaism let go of the psychic wounds that lead them to embrace militarism and condone human rights abuses. I say this because I know with absolute certainty that the consciousness fostered by Settler Judaism is self-destructive and dysfunctional in the contemporary world. Settler Judaism generates the very anger at Jews from which it seeks to protect us. It contributes to the pool of violence, harshness, paranoia, and distrust that perpetuate human cycles of conflict.

What I have encountered since raising these issues last August is that as Settler Judaism becomes increasingly predominant as the public face of the Jewish people, more and more of the most ethically sensitive Jews are walking away from their Judaism altogether. This too is destructive to our people, because it then leaves only the most ethically challenged vying for leadership of the Jewish world.

Settler Jews Are Killing Judaism

Here is one of the hundreds of emails I received from such Jews (he asked me to omit his last name) who are in crisis because of the policies of the State of Israel:

I’ve been heartbroken by the lack of compassion I’ve seen from Jewish friends in America on the issue of Palestine, and I’m fearful that the public showing of vitriol against anyone who dares even try to open a wider discussion about Israel’s militarism will sow more anti-Semitism in the world. I’ve tried to start conversations on Facebook only to be attacked and accused of being a self-hating Jew. Sadly this often comes from young American Jews who otherwise would be generally progressive and liberal. They subvert the facts and fall back on accusations of anti-Semitism as a cop-out, a shield against confrontation with the uncomfortable reality that the actions of the “Jewish state” don’t square with their everyday morals. I’m a proud Jew, at least culturally. I refuse to let the State of Israel speak for me or the Jewish people. —Alex

For many of our non-Jewish readers, the goal of saving Judaism from the destruction it is undergoing at the hands of the Settler Judaism crowd may have little import. But the same struggle is going on inside every religion and every political movement—including within the contemporary Democratic Party in the United States, the Labour Party in England, the Social Democrats in Canada, the former peace movement in Israel, and many other places. All over the world, this struggle takes place between the “realists,” who insist on dominating others lest they dominate us, and the spiritual progressive consciousness that affirms that homeland security can be achieved through love, generosity, and real caring for the Other and for the earth. So let me again invite you to join the Network of Spiritual Progressives as a dues-paying member at spiritualprogressives.org and amplify the voices of those of us who support nonviolence, love, and generosity. ■

Silencing Dissent

How Biased Civil Rights Policies Stifle Dialogue on Israel

BY CHIP BERLET AND MARIA PLANANSKY



OUTRAGE OVER ISRAELI POLICIES toward Palestinians has continued to swell the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS). In response, critics of BDS are spreading rhetoric that is corroding support for civil liberties, civil rights, and free expression of ideas in the United States.

Controversies over U.S. policies in the Middle East are not new, but the current stance of some institutions claiming to speak for the U.S. Jewish community, combined with biased federal policies targeting anti-Semitism on U.S. college campuses, raises the specter of not just blacklists and political witch hunts but *de facto* government censorship.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) and the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights created headlines with policies that provide federal civil rights protection against harassment or discrimination targeting Jewish college students. Meanwhile Muslims, Sikhs, and students from other faith traditions did not receive the same level of attention. Under the Obama administration neither the commission nor the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has rectified this situation; and the gridlocked Congress has failed to hold hearings or pass legislation that would clarify and correct biased federal policies and actions. Meanwhile, pressure to silence criticism of Israeli policies toward Palestinians continues to grow, spurred on by growing public opposition to the Israeli military attacks in Gaza.

A recent incident casts a spotlight on the smoldering tensions that highlight the need to protect free speech: In June a gig by the musical group the Shondes was cancelled by the Washington Jewish Music Festival because they refused to sign what amounted to a loyalty oath swearing they had never supported the BDS movement. Two founding members of The Shondes, singer Louisa Rachel Solomon and violinist Elijah Oberman, in a public letter "in light of this blacklisting debacle," responded:

Sooner or later they will realize that increasing numbers of Jews oppose Israel's actions in our names, and many of those who don't endorse BDS unequivocally support open conversation of it. . . . What an irony that institutions whose missions focus on protecting Judaism's future are writing themselves out of it.

CHIP BERLET is the editor of *Constructing Campus Conflict: Antisemitism and Islamophobia on U.S. College Campuses, 2007-2011*. He has written about bigotry, civil rights, and civil liberties for over forty years.

MARIA PLANANSKY, the associate editor of *Constructing Campus Conflict*, created the timeline used in this article. She has worked as a researcher on bigotry and is now a teacher in Dakar, Senegal.

The blacklisting of the Shondes—a rock band that refused to sign a loyalty oath against the BDS movement—is just one instance of the broader silencing of dissent that is taking place in Jewish communities.



Members of Students for Justice in Palestine demonstrate against HR 35, a California state resolution that defines student-sponsored boycott, divestment, and sanction campaigns as categorically anti-Semitic.

Solomon and Oberman have described Judaism, activism, and music as “inseparable, essential parts of our lives” and have been opposing militarism and discrimination for years. In the wake of 9/11, they wrote: “We saw Arab, Muslim, and South Asian friends demonized and attacked. . . . We protested, organized, and tried to figure out what solidarity was.”

Civil rights, civil liberties, free speech, and academic freedom should not be adversaries. When they are in conflict, the ultimate victim is the free exchange of ideas that nurtures democracy itself.

Rights in Conflict

Since the 9/11 terror attacks, the silencing of dissent inside and outside the Jewish community has steadily increased. The issue of possible government censorship on campus was first raised in a public joint letter by Kenneth Stern, an expert on anti-Semitism with the American Jewish Committee, and Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors. Stern and Nelson warned that the civil rights policies of the federal government could

lead to censorship and the suppression of free speech on campus. Under pressure from right-wing ideologues, the American Jewish Committee retracted Stern’s signature and repudiated the letter. Stern and Nelson feared the potential outcome of biased and misguided federal policies aimed at campus clashes over Middle East policies, especially involving the BDS movement.

How did these biased policies evolve? During his presidency, George W. Bush appointed numerous right-wing ideologues to federal agencies in an attempt to sidestep congressional oversight of policies and implement so-called color-blind policies while gutting affirmative action programs. The Justice Department, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights were special targets for right-wing ideological cleansing. Under Bush, these federal agencies shifted their attention from Islamophobia and focused on the issue of anti-Semitic incidents on U.S. college campuses. This happened despite the education office’s stated goal of protecting “all religious minorities—not just Jews but also Sikhs, Muslims, and others—from discrimination at federally funded secular institutions of higher learning.”

The Stated Goals of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent federal commission established by Congress during the Civil Rights movement with the mission of pursuing a bipartisan agenda to protect civil rights for everyone. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the commission—which was still following a bipartisan approach—launched a series of efforts against Islamophobia.

For example, the commission convened its July 2002 meeting in Detroit, home to the largest Arab American community in the United States, to hear about post-9/11 civil rights problems faced by Arab Americans and Muslims in their respective states. In addition, state advisory committees held public forums and initiatives addressing the civil rights concerns of Arab Americans and Muslim communities in twelve states, from Alabama to Wyoming.

The commission issued a press release in which it reiterated “its commitment to protecting the rights of Arab Americans and Muslims.” Chairwoman Mary Frances Berry said that maintaining “a secure homeland does not justify discrimination against Arab Americans and others today, any more than World War II justified the internment of innocent Japanese Americans over a half century ago.” (*continued on page 55*)

A New Take on the First Commandment

Building the Religious Counterculture

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS

LIKE THE BIBLE ITSELF, the Ten Commandments are used and abused for a wide range of agendas. They function as a Rorschach test, separating conservative Christians (who want to use them as a banner of so-called traditionalism) from liberal religious people and atheists (who wryly demote them to the “Ten Suggestions”). But is anyone paying attention to what they actually *say*?

Back in May 2006, Lynn Westmoreland, a Republican Congressman who had been trying to get the Ten Commandments installed in courthouses nationwide told Stephen Colbert, “The Ten Commandments is not a bad thing for people to understand and to respect. What better place could you have something like that than in a judicial building?”

Colbert replied, “That’s an excellent question. Can you think of any better building to put the Ten Commandments in than in a public building?”

Westmoreland said, “No.”

Then Colbert asked, “What are the Ten Commandments?”

Westmoreland looked chagrined. “What are all of ’em? You want me to name ’em all?” He couldn’t do it.

It seems that, for Westmoreland, the Ten Commandments are primarily a cultural icon. Collectively they are one thing to him, and the cultural meaning of that thing far outweighs its content. He wants the Ten Commandments in public buildings because he—like all of us—longs to legitimate the values of his culture, which are not necessarily identical to the values of the Ten Commandments. If the content were what mattered, he would know what the content was.

“You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me”

A commenter on my Facebook page about the Ten Commandments wrote, “My least favorite commandment is #1. God sounds a bit insecure. Is he [*sic*] intimidated when it comes to competition? Why?” This seems to be the perspective of the modern progressive types of our day. For many of us, the Ten Commandments, particularly the first few, smack of oppression, misogyny, and tribalism. They smell musty and old. They sound cranky and inflexible. Some of them make sense to us; some seem arbitrary. But to the



A courthouse in Dixie County, Florida, displays the Ten Commandments outside its door.

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Imagine if we stopped praying to false gods like Apple, Armani, and professional football. Where might our prayers lead if we channeled our passions toward liberation? Illustration by Laura Beckman.

extent that we engage with them at all, we tend to see them as self-evident ethical guidelines that require no religious imprimatur. We reject their authority and, frankly, we dislike commandments in general.

Like the Facebook commenter, we tend to be especially wary of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” It represents what many of us think of as the worst of religion: the tribal infighting about whose god is best; the narrow-minded notion that there is only one way to truth and it’s my way; and the worship of an anthropomorphized god who needs reassurance of human loyalty. And there may be some validity to this. For people alive at the time this commandment was formulated, it may have meant exactly what it seems to mean—they had their particular god, who was superior to the other gods, so they were going to worship “him” and only “him.” So on its surface, the first commandment is clannish and seems to have no place in the modern world.

But I believe that there is more to the story. Beyond the two options usually offered—the Lynn Westmoreland option and the “Ten Suggestions” atheist option—there is an alternative for how moderns can engage with ancient Scripture. This third way is beautifully articulated by Dr. Eliezer Diamond, a professor of Bible studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, in “Torah Study,” an essay in *The Observant Life*. He suggests that rather than cut ourselves off from this rich trans-generational conversation, moderns can engage in a new way:

I would argue that . . . the *mitzvah* of *talmud torah* [study of scriptures] includes a version of the *mitzvah* of *pidyon shevuyim*, the traditional name for the commandment to redeem those held in captivity against their will. Indeed, by redeeming those passages and teachings of the Torah that are held captive by narrowness of vision, and by understanding that narrowness to be a function of the time and place in which they were formulated . . . we can breathe new life into texts that may seem dead to us.

In other words, the beautiful, truly inspired (and I would add countercultural) spiritual and political wisdom contained in the Bible is being “held captive” by the constraints of the time and place of its authors. It’s our job to redeem it, to excavate it, to set it free and give it new life, because it has wonderful things to teach us. The Bible’s wisdom can freshly challenge even the most progressive among us to go further in critiquing our current political and social order. I believe passionately in this project. Rather than rejecting the traditions that gave rise to our own, we can work to separate out what is truly inspired from what is just a product of a painful historical moment. And we should be very careful about what we consign to the trash bin of history because, of course, we too are subject to the constraints of our time and place.

The Liberatory Call of the First Commandment

What might it look like to set free what is captive in that first commandment, our least favorite of all? First, we want to know who the speaker is. Who exactly is the “me” in the statement, “You shall have no other gods before me?” In a preamble to the Ten Commandments, this question is answered: “I am YHWH your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.” YHWH is considered the most sacred name of God. But it’s not exactly a name; it’s a form of the verb “to be,” like “I am” or simply “being.” It’s a word that signifies the ground of being itself. Jews are prohibited from trying to pronounce the word because pronouncing it would limit it and make it finite. It’s the biggest concept in the world. Reality itself. So when you plug that concept into the commandment, it’s not a small, tribal god at all; it’s the totality of existence. “You shall have no other gods besides *that which is!*” (continued on page 58)

Between Paradigm Shift Judaism and Neo-Hasidism

The New Metaphysics of Jewish Renewal

BY SHAUL MAGID

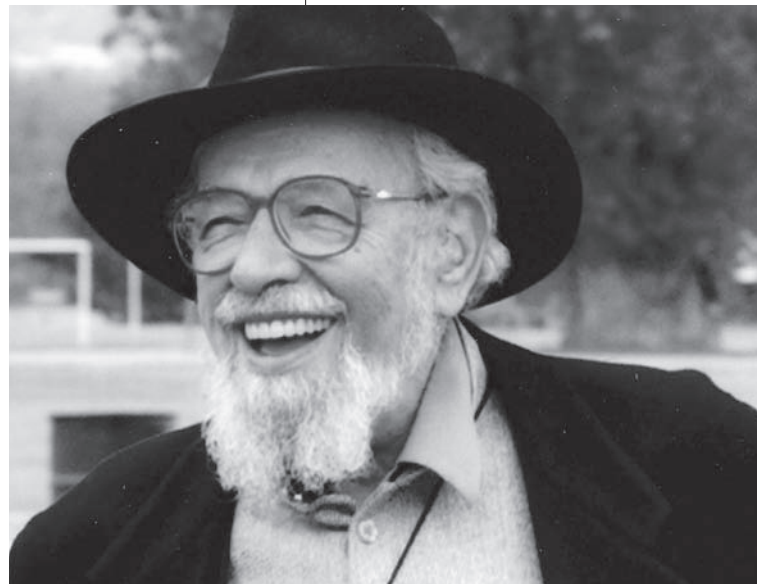
SINCE ITS EMERGENCE in the early 1970s, the Jewish Renewal movement has made a revolutionary break from past forms of Judaism. Led by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the movement's architect, Jewish Renewal communities have explored new realms of Jewish ritual and aesthetic innovation, gender inclusivity, progressive political activism, environmentalism, and interfaith cross-pollination. We have sought to usher in a new Aquarian Age of Judaism.

In the present moment, as we mourn the recent passing of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and reflect back on his brilliant contributions to the Jewish Renewal movement, we are also looking forward and wondering what the future holds. Will the revolutionary qualities of Jewish Renewal prove vibrant and lasting, or will this attempt to make a seismic break from the past eventually sink into an abyss of disappointment, as have so many other attempts to usher in radical transformation? A hundred years from now, what will historians see as Jewish Renewal's lasting contribution to the revival of Judaism in the twenty-first century? Will it be seen merely as an umbrella movement that grew out of the Chavurah movement in the early 1970s, when Judaism met the New Age in the generation of the counterculture? What can maximize the success of this attempt to jump ahead of history, to view our world as containing the possibility of a leap forward, a paradigm shift?

I believe that the future of this attempt at Aquarian Age Judaism will depend in large part on our continued exploration of the most paradigm-shifting aspect of Jewish Renewal: its radically new approach to Jewish metaphysics.

Why Metaphysics?

Back in 1970, in a commencement address to Hebrew College, Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi noted that past attempts at Aquarian Ages (attempts to view the present as a seismic break from the past), have all tragically moved from revolution to disappointment and even despotism. It is the historian, he argued, who can best serve as the gatekeeper to prevent these attempts at renewal from sinking into the abyss of



Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's innovative work on metaphysics is "at the heart of the most paradigm-shifting aspect of Jewish Renewal," Magid writes.

SHAUL MAGID is a professor of Jewish and Religious Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. His most recent book is *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society*. His book *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* is forthcoming in 2014. He is on the editorial board of *Tikkun*.



Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi leads a service for the B'nai Horin synagogue in Los Angeles, California.

despair. Below I challenge Yerushalmi's pessimistic claim about spiritual revolutions and the exclusive role of the historian to mitigate its negative consequences.

Aquarian Ages usually contain two overlapping but not identical components: the practical and the theoretical, or the ritualistic/activist and the metaphysical. Much has been written on the practical components of Jewish Renewal—its aesthetic and ritual experimentation and its progressive agenda of social activism. Indeed, much of the writing about the progressive social justice dimension of Jewish Renewal has appeared here in the pages of *Tikkun*, as well as in Michael Lerner's *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*. Less has been written about its meta-

physics. A deep exploration of Jewish Renewal's metaphysics, or theology, can contribute something crucial to the staying power and longevity of Aquarian or renewal movements and thus help avoid the pitfalls Yerushalmi described.

Contemporary Jewish Renewal can be divided into two basic components. The first component, which I call "second-wave neo-Hasidism," follows in the footsteps of first-wave neo-Hasidism popular at the turn of the twentieth century and consists largely of an adaptation, or revision, of Hasidism to conform to present-day sensibilities and beliefs. Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi was deeply engaged in this effort to adapt Hasidism to the New Age. One can see this in *Fragments of a Future Scroll: Hassidism for the Aquarian Age, Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, and *A Hidden Light*. As part of this focus, he also made great contributions to gender inclusivity, drawing together feminist Judaism with neo-Hasidism.

The second basic component of Jewish Renewal, which I call "Paradigm Shift Judaism," is a revolutionary break from original Hasidism, and even a break from neo-Hasidism, even as its roots lie in the Hasidic revision of the traditional Judaism of its day. Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi's innovative work on metaphysics—which has received less attention than either his early neo-Hasidic writings or his pastoral work—is at the heart of Paradigm Shift Judaism, and I contend that it is in Paradigm Shift Judaism that the real metaphysical innovation of Jewish Renewal resides.

Schachter-Shalomi developed a new metaphysical template drawn from, but not necessarily an extension of, the Jewish mystical tradition that has become what he calls "the new reality map" of Renewal spirituality. His metaphysical interventions are exhibited in works such as *Paradigm Shift, Credo of a Modern Kabbalist, Integral Halachah*, and *God Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown*. A closer look at these metaphysical explorations may help us avoid some of the hazards that accompany all Aquarian Age renewals and thus help Jewish Renewal have a lasting impact on Judaism in America in future generations. Moreover, tapping into these metaphysical insights will equip us to access the radical nature of the Paradigm Shift project.

Radical Theologies vs. New Metaphysics

There is a useful distinction to be made between radical theology and a new metaphysics or, in this case, between neo-Hasidism and Paradigm Shift Judaism. To my mind, before the twentieth century there were six major new metaphysical revisions of note in Judaism: those made by Saint Paul, Maimonides, the Zohar, Isaac Luria, Spinoza, and the Baal Shem Tov. There are many more figures who offered radical theologies, but new theologies can exist, and often do, within existing metaphysical paradigms.

One way to distinguish between a radical theology and a new metaphysics is that new metaphysical templates are, at the outset, almost always considered heretical. Maimonides's philosophical *Guide for the Perplexed* was considered heretical by many and even burned by the sages of Northern France. The Zohar and Isaac Luria's writings were considered heretical by many detractors. Spinoza was excommunicated. And the list goes on. New metaphysical templates are considered heretical precisely because they subvert what has existed in a fundamental, not merely a functional, way. They jump over and replace an existing paradigm. In that sense, they *are* heretical. They are also, using Yerushalmi's description, Aquarian. They are revealers of their own truth, often against the orthodoxies of their time. They claim a mantle of authority that is not solely bound to tradition. They are paradigm shifts.

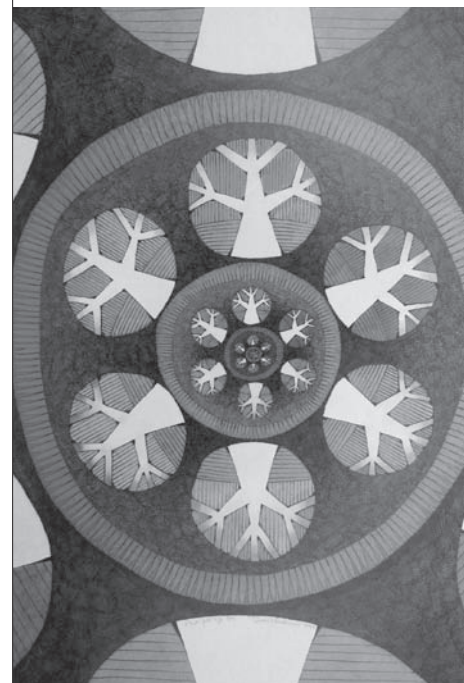
In the twentieth century, I think the most significant metaphysical interventions have come from Abraham Isaac Kook, Mordecai Kaplan, and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Accusations of heresy were pronounced for each one. In March 1932, Agudat Yisrael (then the political party representing the Haredi population of Israel) staged a mock trial in which Rav Kook was tried for heresy. A similar mock trial for heresy was staged against Kaplan in America. Yet Kook's work is now a canonical source for contemporary forms of Zionism, both humanistic and ultranationalistic, and many dimensions of Kaplan's reconstructionist Judaism have been adopted by a large swath of American Jews, from Modern Orthodox to Reform (and, of course, Reconstructionist).

Differences Between Neo-Hasidism and Paradigm Shift Judaism

In the context of Jewish Renewal, neo-Hasidism falls in the category of radical theology, whereas Paradigm Shift Judaism can be understood as a new metaphysics. Neo-Hasidism is revolutionary only in its radical revision of an existing paradigm. Both in its first wave at the turn of the twentieth century, with figures such as I.L. Peretz, Samuel Abba Horodetsky, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, Sholem Asch, Martin Buber, and Hillel Zeitlin, and then again in the postwar period in America, with the early work of Schachter-Shalomi, Arthur Green, Michael Lerner, and others, neo-Hasidism was a rereading and revision of the new metaphysics of Hasidism's founder, the Baal Shem Tov.

Much of second-wave neo-Hasidism is founded on Hillel Zeitlin's "new Hasidism," which Arthur Green translates and introduces in *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*. One can see the maturation of second-wave neo-Hasidism and its transplant to America in the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose influence on postwar American neo-Hasidism is considerable. Both in its secularized form in the first-wave and in its second-wave postwar instantiation, neo-Hasidism made no claim to a new metaphysics but rather interpreted Hasidism for a new age. Postwar neo-Hasidism shared much of the romanticism of the first wave now refracted through the American counterculture instead of the German and Russian romantics. One can readily see this neo-Hasidic romanticism in the three-volume *Jewish Catalogues* published in the early to mid-1970s.

Paradigm Shift Judaism originates from neo-Hasidism but moves beyond it in significant ways. It is revolutionary in its metaphysical assumptions, Aquarian at its core, and has no ambivalence about being identified with New Age religion. Paradigm Shift Judaism's revolutionary spirit is embodied in an entirely new metaphysical template built from Hasidism and Kabbalah, but it is in no way limited or bound to either. Neo-Hasidism is a radical theology and an aesthetic revision of an existing metaphysics that may serve as a bridge to Paradigm Shift Judaism. The two approaches certainly overlap in many areas (and Schachter-Shalomi was involved with both projects), but neo-Hasidism, in both its first and second waves, to my mind is not revolutionary.



The Wheel of Life
by David Friedman.

Rabbi Andrea Cohen Kiener leads a prayer at Kallah, a biennial spiritual gathering organized by the Alliance for Jewish Renewal, ALEPH.



Arthur Green captures the neo-Hasidic spirit best in a recent essay, “Awakening the Heart,” in the April 2014 issue of *Sh’ma Journal*:

A radical spiritualization of Judaism’s truth, begun within Hasidism some 200 years ago, needs to be updated and universalized to appeal to today’s Jewish seeker. This would offer the possibility of religious language that addresses contemporary concerns while calling for a deep, faith-based attachment to the essential forms and tropes of Jewish piety.

This aptly describes Green’s intellectual and spiritual project and I think it may also reflect Schachter-Shalomi’s earlier career. But Schachter-Shalomi’s thinking later moved beyond this neo-Hasidic adaptive approach to a Paradigm Shift model that is a revolutionary break with Hasidism. It is what Schachter-Shalomi calls the “fourth turning” of Hasidism, the first being the rabbinic *Hasidim rishonim* (first Hasidim) of late antiquity; the second, Hasidim in the German Rhineland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (out of which we have *Sefer Hasidim*); and the third being the Baal Shem Tov.

In some way neo-Hasidism adopts a Buberean reading of history as an ebb and flow of creative revision and religious conservatism. Paradigm Shift Judaism, in contrast, views history as rupture; epochs end and new ones begin. This is its Aquarian Age center. This is why, for example, for Schachter-Shalomi the kabbalistic creation myth of *tzimtzum* (divine contraction leading to cosmic rupture in the “breaking of the vessels”) is so central to his metaphysical worldview. Paradigm Shift is closer to a modern form of Sabbateanism (the heretical movement led by the mystical messiah Sabbatai Zevi in the seventeenth century), albeit without its overt, and tragic, messianism. Both Sabbateanism and Paradigm Shift Judaism view history as rupture rather than evolution, drawing more from the Lurianic vision of history developed by the sixteenth-century Safadean kabbalist Isaac Luria than from the more evolutionary model of Luria’s teacher and contemporary Moses Cordovero. Cordovero’s view of creation is a process of unfolding emanation. Luria’s view of creation is that it begins with rupture and then follows with reconstruction. I suggest that Cordovero’s view of creation coheres with the neo-Hasidic adaptive approach while the Lurianic view coheres with Paradigm Shift Judaism’s Aquarian approach.

The neo-Hasidism that begins in the late nineteenth century as a literary and artistic movement was all but erased with the Holocaust, but it was later resurrected in post-war America. For all its important innovative energy, I think neo-Hasidism remains on the margin of the paradigm of Hasidism. Paradigm Shift Judaism, on the other hand, stands on the other side of that paradigm. In many ways history has caught up to the paradigm of Hasidism, which can be seen in Hasidism’s increasing popularity

even among nontraditional Jews. Starting out as a maligned and “heretical” movement, Hasidism, often popularized and then modified, has become a dominant force in American Judaism.

As Jewish Renewal grows in America and as we begin to reassess its future in a post-Zalman era, it is important to see that its two main instantiations are related but not identical. From a communal, pastoral, and political perspective, the differences may be largely irrelevant. But it is important to see the differences nonetheless, especially since Jewish Renewal is increasingly becoming a topic of scholarly inquiry and is having an increasing impact on American Jewish life and practice. Such inquiry can play an important role not only in enabling adepts to better understand the implications and complexity of their religious lives but also to situate Jewish Renewal as a significant part of the twenty-first-century American Jewish landscape, both communally and theologically.

Examining the Truth Claims of Biblical Monotheism

So what is the revolutionary aspect of the metaphysics embraced by Paradigm Shift Judaism? After a careful and sustained reading of Schachter-Shalomi’s theological work I have arrived at the potentially controversial conclusion that Paradigm Shift Judaism’s new metaphysics may best be described as “postmonotheistic” rather than monotheistic.

It is conventionally understood that monotheism lies at the core of what we now call Judaism. Yet when we speak of monotheism today we often take for granted that monotheism simply means “one God” and rarely examine the contours of what “one God” means or whether, in fact, the Bible is accurately defined as having a theological position exclusively about “one God.” Nor do we take seriously the contours of monotheism’s opposite (erroneously called polytheism) and whether “many gods” is an accurate description of the nonmonotheistic alternatives. In fact, both monotheism and polytheism are terms that become operable only in the seventeenth century. The ancient Israelites obviously didn’t call themselves “monotheists,” nor did anyone really call themselves “polytheists.” Polytheism doesn’t really exist independent of monotheism; it is the monotheistic definition of the “other.”

In a controversial book titled *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, the contemporary Egyptologist Jan Assmann describes biblical monotheism through what he calls the “Mosaic distinction.” Assmann uses the concept of Mosaic distinction to describe what he sees as the most important aspect of the shift from “primary religions” (religions that evolved historically within a single culture) to “secondary religions” (religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that “owe their existence to an act of revelation and foundation . . . and typically differentiate themselves from [primary religions] by denouncing them as paganism, idolatry, and superstition”). Explaining this Mosaic distinction, he writes:

What seems crucial to me is not the distinction between One God and many gods but the distinction between truth and falsehood, between true and false gods, true doctrine and false doctrine, knowledge and ignorance, belief and unbelief.

Assmann suggests that secondary religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are revolutionary and practice a kind of erasure of what preceded them. This erasure is founded on nonrational and nontraditional sources of authority—revelation, incarnation, or prophecy. (*continued on page 58*)

As Jewish Renewal grows in America, will its revolutionary qualities prove vibrant and lasting? Here, Jewish Renewal practitioners learn together at the Kallah gathering in 2013.



Renewal Judaism

Building Closeness to God

BY ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI (ז"ל)



Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi reads a Torah scroll.

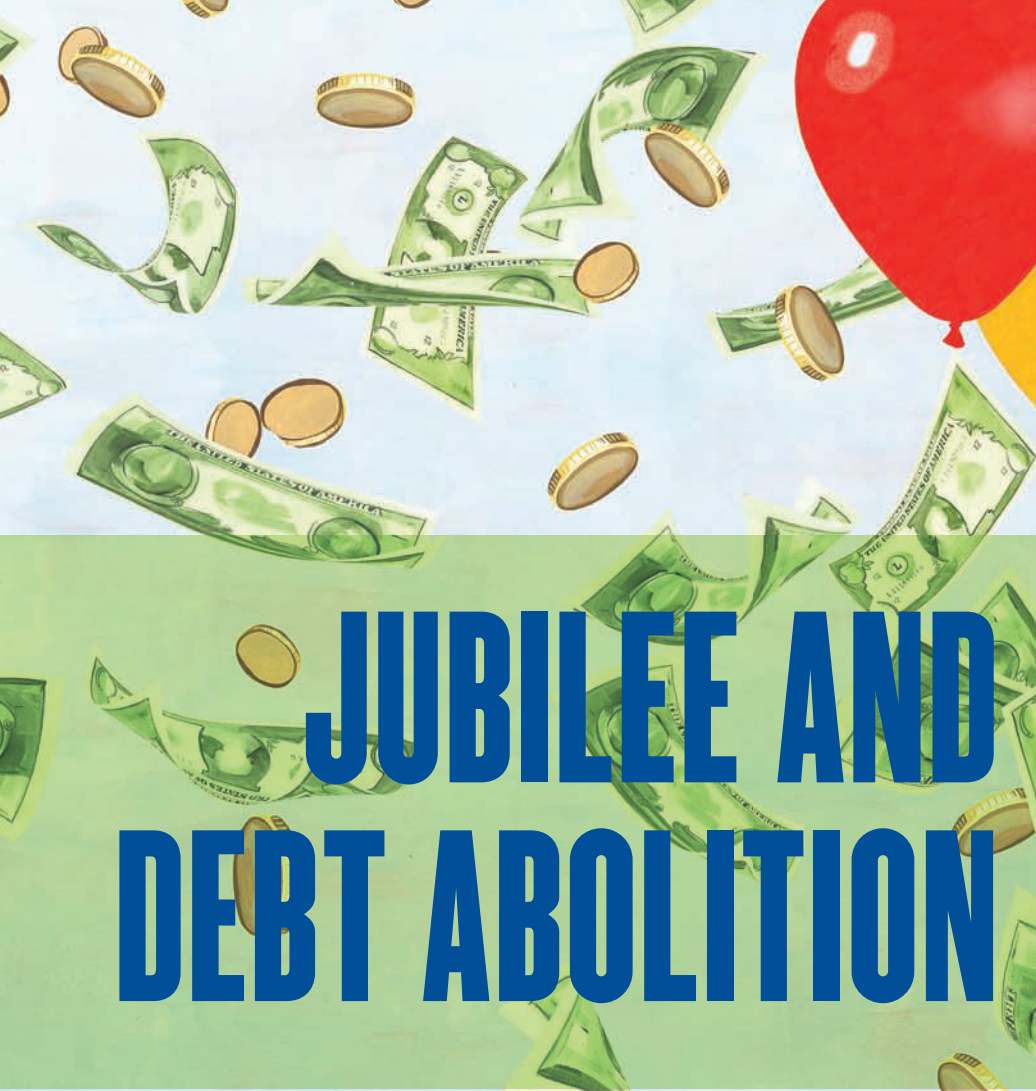
PROFESSOR SHAUL MAGID is certainly correct in placing me in the paradigm-shift camp of Jewish Renewal. As he begins his essay, “Between Paradigm Shift Judaism and Neo-Hasidism: The New Metaphysics of Jewish Renewal,” in this Winter 2015 issue of *Tikkun*, he mentions the “Age of Aquarius.” At the time when this phrase entered the general conversation, I was strongly taken by the shift from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius. It was for this reason that we called the flagship congregation in which we did much of our experimentation with liturgy and consciousness the Aquarian Minyan.

From the Age of Aquarius, I reached back to the Age of Pisces and the Age of Aries and the Age of Taurus. Entering each of those earlier phases of Jewish history, I began to see the pre-patriarchal sources of Judaism in Ebla and Ugarit. I realized that during the Age of Taurus, people were addressing the deity as a powerful animal. The food of such animals, their sacrifice, was a human being. This was the idea of the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac. That came to an end with the Age of Aries in which deities were seen as anthropomorphic beings whose sacramental food was the animal. This view lasted until the destruction of the Second Temple when we could no longer offer animal sacrifices. Our worship turned from offerings on the altar to the verbal offerings of prayer. The statement “In the beginning was the Word,” in the Christian Gospel of John (1:1), begins to make sense at the beginning of the Age of Pisces (when early Christians identified one another by the sign of the fish).

The paradigmatic shift from the Age of Taurus (deism) to the Age of Pisces (theism) represented a complete cultural overhaul of how the sacrificial, sacramental, and liturgical ways of serving gods were envisioned in these periods. Elsewhere, I have pointed out in the strongest terms how the Holocaust, the moon walk, and seeing Earth from outer space created an immense shift of consciousness for us. After these events, the reality map we had used up until that time could no longer be maintained. Since then, we have been forced to rearrange the way in which we integrate the *magisterium* of Torah with the emerging cosmology. Just as during the shift from Aries to Pisces we had to move from animal sacrifice to a verbal liturgy where we “pay for the bullocks with our lips” (Hosea 14:2), so too does a shift from Pisces to Aquarius demand a major shift from the usual synagogue service (where the verbal formula was “the coin minted by the wise”) to one of greater spontaneity and experienced feeling.

But we have not yet fully entered the Aquarian Age; for even though we are taking an Aquarian approach in the style of our worship, we still use the words and the patterns of the old liturgies. What is becoming clear is that the true sacrifice (*continued on page 62*)

RABBI ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI was the spiritual architect of the Jewish Renewal movement. He dictated this response to Shaul Magid’s article just days before his passing, and it was later edited for publication by Netanel Miles-Yépez, one of his students and close collaborators.

An illustration of various US dollar bills and gold coins falling from the top of the page. A large red balloon is partially visible in the upper right corner. The background is a light blue sky.

Medical debt. Student debt. Mortgage debt. Payday loans.

Debt levels have soared in recent decades, constraining our daily choices and the horizons of possibility in our lives. One in three Americans is currently being pursued by a debt collector, and the vast majority of debts result from an inability to pay for basic needs associated with health care, education, and housing.

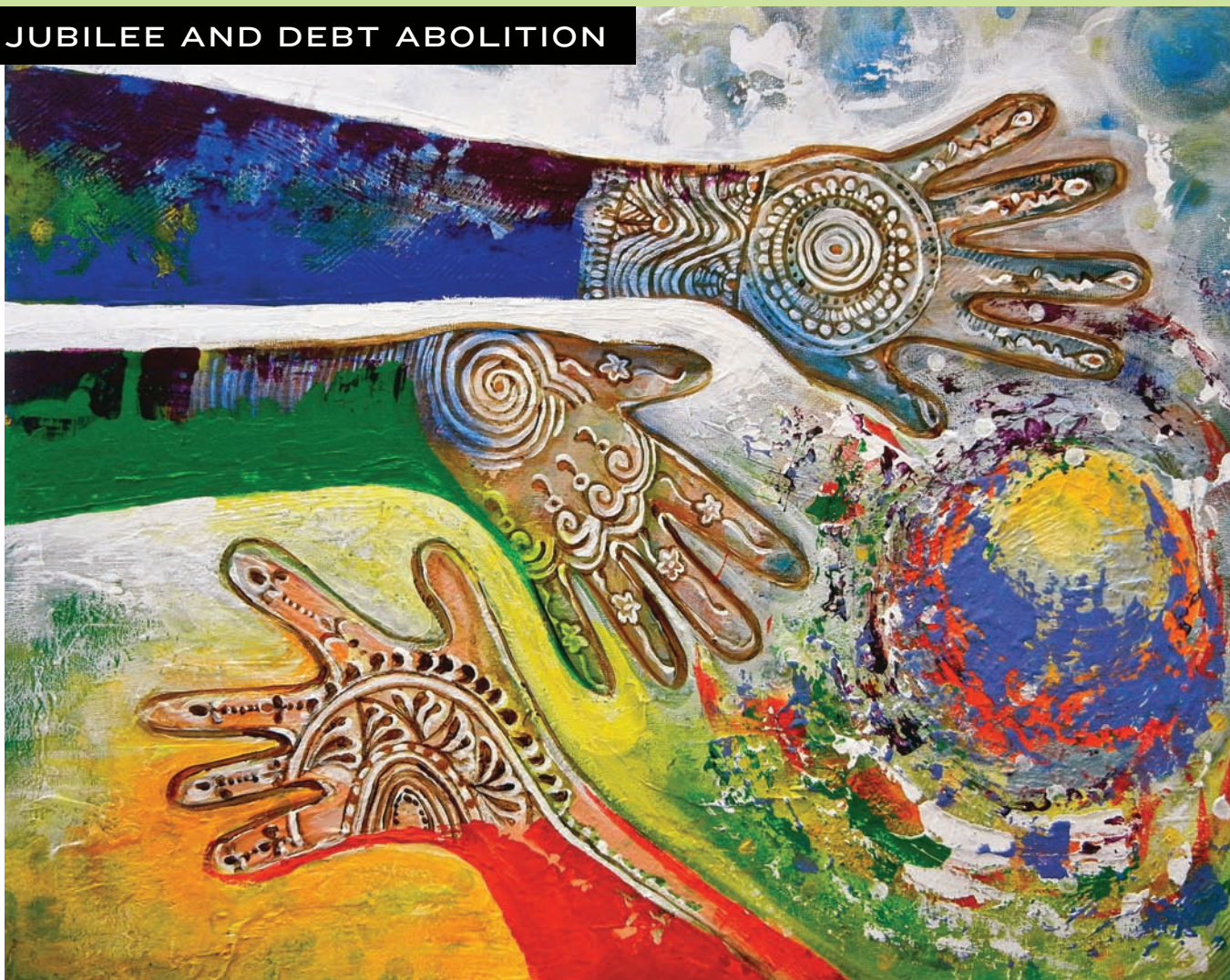
What would it feel like to live in a world not defined by this crushing experience of debt? Dare we imagine such a world?

The current economic system depends on our mass indebtedness, so we face intense pressure to see our debts as inevitable and unchangeable. In situations like this, engaging with prophetic spiritual visions can ignite our activist imaginaries, yielding thought experiments that reveal the tension between the way the world is and the way our world should be.

In this special issue, activists, theologians, economists, and philosophers come together to explore what it would mean to take seriously the Torah's call for the cancellation of all debts and a yearlong halt to economic production every seven years (through the observance of a Sabbatical Year) and the equal redistribution of property every fifty years (through the observance of a Jubilee Year). Some offer new ethical vocabularies to help us expose and abolish unjust structures of debt. Others report on exciting efforts already underway to reframe debt as a collective problem to be solved through mass mobilization and social transformation. Join us in this joyful and daring dream of Jubilee in the section that follows!

In addition, don't miss the powerful web-only articles on this topic at tikkun.org/jubilee.

JUBILEE AND DEBT ABOLITION



Heeding the Torah's call for a Sabbatical Year would bring us one step closer to truly caring for the earth. Painting by Sharon Gilbertson.

Sabbatical Year and Jubilee in Twenty-First-Century America

BY MICHAEL LERNER

THIS SECTION OF *Tikkun* on “Jubilee and Debt Abolition” is meant to function as a thought experiment, opening up conceptual space for thinking afresh about our world. By envisioning what it would be like to implement the periodic Sabbatical Year and Jubilee called for within the Torah’s laws on debt, we can experience the true tension between the way the world is and how it should be.

So start by stretching your imagination.

Imagine that every seventh year, most workplaces are closed so that nearly everyone in your society has a year of freedom and the earth itself is given a year for regeneration. The Torah calls this the Sabbatical Year. During this year, your basic needs for food and shelter will be adequately met. How will you spend your time and energy? What are you currently not able to participate in because you don’t have the time?

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER is editor of *Tikkun*, national chair of the Network of Spiritual Progressives (spiritualprogressives.org), and rabbi of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in Berkeley, California (beyttikkun.org).

Now imagine that all debts are forgiven every seven years. This is another aspect of the Torah-mandated Sabbatical Year. Will you avoid paying an outstanding debt before the end of the seven years? Or do you feel a commitment to pay back your loans as part of your desire to live with integrity? Do you feel differently about different kinds of debt?

At this very moment we are in the middle of a Sabbatical Year. The Jewish year 5775, which began in September, 2014, and runs through September 13, 2015, is, according to Orthodox Jews, who have kept track of this for the past 2,000-plus years, a Sabbatical Year. But currently the practices associated with the Sabbatical Year only apply to agriculture grown in Israel. Imagine if they were part of Western societies and applied to all work.

Next, join me in imagining that every fifty years, the wealth of individuals and nations will be redistributed to ensure that everyone has a roughly equal share. This is what it means to have a Jubilee. Now that you know about this periodic redistribution, will you feel less motivated to create, produce, and innovate, even if your work gives you opportunities to be creative and serve the common good? Don't answer according to what the media have told you other people would do—answer for yourself.

This thought experiment is useful because right now our society is created in a way that plays to our smallest, most fearful, and pettiest selves. It plays to our fear that there is not enough and urges us to hoard resources such as money, food, and land. In our current system, some of these fears are well founded: a few people in our society have way more than they need, while many others are not able to obtain what they need. To protect themselves, the few on the top create systems and structures that perpetuate existing inequalities.

What if we created a world based not on our fears but instead on the desires of our highest, idealized selves? What if, as the Torah prescribes, we forgave all debts every seven years, observed a Sabbatical Year every seven years, and redistributed wealth every fifty years? These practices would play to our most generous, loving, and compassionate selves, rather than to our fearful selves.

Please join me in this thought experiment. At least for a minute, let yourself imagine that it is possible.

Imagine a Campaign to Implement the Torah's Revolutionary Economics

Imagine biblical fundamentalists uniting with environmental activists and spiritual progressives in a coalition to institutionalize the Torah's most revolutionary economics. Such a coalition would be capable of so much! Together we could abolish debt, redistribute wealth, and transcend the logic of global capitalism.

A campaign to reinstitute the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee could create an amazing opportunity for a left-right

coalition that could fundamentally transform and transcend the global capitalist system. Just as the traditional, weekly Jewish Sabbath rules allow the many people who observe them to turn from seeing the earth in purely instrumental terms and respond instead with awe and wonder at the miraculous universe, a societal-wide Sabbatical Year would allow people to transcend narrow utilitarian approaches to nature and reconnect us in ways likely to make us all environmentalists. We're not about to achieve these goals in the next decade or two, but the process of campaigning would powerfully reframe what progressives are really about, present a critique of capitalist values in a totally unexpected and profound way, and help make environmentalism far more accessible to many Americans.

The Torah is very clear in its call for the observance of a Sabbatical Year. Check out Exodus 23:10–11, which says, “In the seventh year thou shalt let [thy land] rest and lie fallow, that the poor of thy people may eat.”

Similarly in Leviticus 25:20–22 these commands are repeated and expanded to make clear that the Sabbatical Year is simultaneously a year of rest for the people who normally toil on the land, a bonanza for the poor, and a vital rest for the land itself. And there is this edict in Deuteronomy 15:1–3:

At the end of every seven years, thou shalt make a release. And such is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release that which hath been lent unto his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed.

According to the Torah, after seven sabbatical cycles (forty-nine years) came the Jubilee. In it all wealth (in the form of land ownership, which was the primary form of wealth in the ancient world) was redistributed to restore the original equal distribution of land among the families and tribes of Israel. As Dayan Isidor Grunfeld relates in his book *Shemitah and Yobel*, the purpose of Jubilee was to avoid the accumulation of land (wealth) in the hands of a few; Jubilee thus prevented the creation of a landless proletariat. In addition, it prevented Israelites from acquiring the arrogance to which rich landowners were often prone.

The Torah asserts that people who resist this redistribution of land are in the wrong: God says, “The whole earth is mine,” so humans obviously have no standing to assert a “right” to ownership of land. Thus, the Torah refutes early capitalist ideas such as philosopher John Locke's claim that when a landowner “mixes his labor” with the land he gains a “right” to it. Rather, the Torah makes clear that there is no right to private property, and God counters the arrogance of landowners by reminding them, “You are only sojourners on this land.” No matter what legal arrangements landowners dream up to keep land under their personal control, they are still subject to the Jubilee, which was announced by the blowing of the Shofar on Yom Kippur with the pronouncement,



Sloping by Carry Akroyd.

“Thou shalt proclaim freedom in the land to all its inhabitants” (a pronouncement later inscribed on the Liberty Bell).

Historians debate whether these practices were ever fully implemented. But the debate in the Talmud that led Rabbi Hillel to intervene with a ruling that allowed debts to survive the seventh year—thereby subverting the Torah command—is some indication that at least the release of loans was in fact practiced. And Hillel’s subversion, famously called *prozbol*, was subverted in turn by the practice of setting up interest-free-loan committees, which persists today in most major Jewish communities, including those in Tel Aviv, San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Panama, Ottawa, Johannesburg, Rio de Janeiro, and many more locations around the world.

The Torah explicitly forbids lending money for interest to “your brethren,” and who fits into that category is a matter of richly debated interpretation. Most liberal and progressive Jews believe that our “brethren” includes all people on the earth; many conservative Jews like to hold on to a narrower picture, sometimes pointing out how few non-Jewish countries came to our aid when Jews were being wiped out during the Holocaust.

All these practices are manifestations of trust that there will be enough wealth to go around if we restructure the world in accord with the principles of generosity, love, and caring for each other and the earth. In other words, these practices are

spiritual progressive acts, reflecting a shared faith that if we create a moral universe, the environment will be repaired by a humanity united through a shared ethical commitment to the well-being of one another and of the earth.

From our standpoint as spiritual progressives, a campaign to bring back the Sabbatical Year, the periodic forgiving of all debts, and the Jubilee is exciting because it challenges what counts as productivity, efficiency, and rationality in our society. The old bottom line of capitalist society defines these concepts in terms of the maximization of money. There’s no clearer way to see the ideological nature of contemporary economics than to recognize that there is no objective proof that maximizing money is efficient, rational, or productive—economists just accept that premise as a matter of faith. Some have argued that economists’ embrace of this premise is not a faith commitment, but rather a practical recognition of the alleged psychological truth that money is what most people “really want.” However, that is an unsubstantiated claim. If you ask random people to rank the priority they place on money, love, health, joyful relationships, world peace, the survival of the planet, a sense of purpose, and a fulfilling connection to the spiritual reality of the universe, you’ll find that money doesn’t usually win first place.

Taking the Thought Experiment Further: Imagining the Everyday Details

“Wait,” you might challenge, “even if people value loving relationships and meaningful projects over money, this idea of a Sabbatical Year is never going to work. We need everyone doing what they are doing now in order for us to survive.”

The fun part of this thought experiment is wrestling with this idea that all the work that’s being done is necessary for our survival. To assess whether that’s true, let’s divide the world of work into three categories:

1. Work that is necessary only because we live in a capitalist system, but does not fulfill any fundamental human needs. This includes advertising, sales, profit-oriented investment and banking, and the production of nonessential toys, gadgets, and a wide variety of consumer goodies.
2. Work that is done to produce goods that are sometimes helpful or pleasing but that need not be produced every single year—for example, new automobiles, new styles of clothing, perfumes, DVDs, CDs, televisions, computers, smartphones, and most other electronics. Would it really violate anyone’s fundamental needs if new versions of these products were not produced for just one year out of every seven?
3. Work that is absolutely essential to human wellness and survival. I’d include in this category any work involving health care, the production of medically necessary drugs, the production and distribution of food, the production

and distribution of energy, sanitation, and public safety. Of course, since the goal of a Sabbatical Year is to minimize the number of people working, these services must be made free for everyone, thereby eliminating the need for billing or insurance work to be associated with them. Those who work on the Sabbatical Year to provide these essential services could be paid a higher-than-usual salary subsidized by the society as a whole and then given eighteen months of sabbatical during the six years when everyone else is working. To make this work, we would need to train many more workers to do this absolutely essential work.

Observing the Sabbatical Year would create time for communities to discuss the coming six years, developing proposals on how to structure the economy, the operations of corporations, the education system, health care, the legal and social service systems, and all forms of governmental services and policies.

Throughout the six years leading up to each Sabbatical Year, food would be canned, frozen, or otherwise preserved, to prepare for decreased food production during the Sabbatical Year. Volunteers of all ages would be invited to spend part of the Sabbatical Year working on farms to develop a less alienated relation to their food sources and contribute to the well-being of the society. During this time, all essential goods and services would be free and allocated as needed to everyone on the basis of their needs. Consumer goods would still be purchasable from large consumer stores, but there would be no profit-making.

During the Sabbatical Year, some individuals would choose to explore new fields of work through training courses and volunteer work. Retirees and people who take so much joy in their work that they would choose to continue to do it during the Sabbatical Year could serve as mentors to these individuals. Voluntary adult and child education could be provided by responsible volunteers as well. Others would use their time to vacation, travel, read books, watch movies, play, relax, cook, garden, make love, and learn to play new instruments. I believe that plenty of people would volunteer to help each other with these projects because they love sharing what they know with others. Yet others would use this time for meditation and other forms of spiritual or religious practice. And it is my guess that many people would also use this time to learn to recognize each other as embodiments of the sacred and to try to develop the empathic and compassionate skills they need to be more loving and to generate more love from others!

I know this vision sounds unrealistic, and I'm sure that you can think of all kinds of problems with this—but help me out. Let's think through how we could make it work. Send me your soaring dreams and visions, as well as your practical ideas for baby steps we can start taking in this direction. I'll try to paint an even fuller picture of this dream in a *Tikkun*



The Sabbatical Year would allow us to transcend our utilitarian orientation toward nature.

issue a year or two from now, once I've had time to absorb all your objections and your good ideas. In the meantime, we can also digest and discuss the many approaches to debt and Jubilee offered in this issue of *Tikkun*.

Even if we never implement the Sabbatical Year or the Jubilee, the act of thinking through these possibilities is worthwhile because it helps develop a new consciousness in our society. When we allow ourselves to think through what we would be willing to give up in order to have every seventh year off, we are one step closer to living in the joyous simplicity that is necessary to save the earth from being further ravaged by our excess consumption of the world's remaining resources.

When we allow ourselves to think in terms of eliminating all debts, we take a major step toward being able to think outside the box of contemporary capitalist thought. Many people believe that "socialism doesn't work," but we can tell them that this is not socialism—it is spiritual progressive biblical economics, without any religious requirements attached. It is a way of getting beyond an instrumentalizing way of looking at the world, at work, and at other human beings, so that we can see the beauty that surrounds us. It's not a bad way to open up a discussion that most people are afraid to enter when it is presented in terms of capitalism and anti-capitalism. This is one way of thinking that a local chapter of the Network of Spiritual Progressives could help encourage. So join us as a dues-paying member at spiritualprogressives.org. Or come intern or volunteer with us at our office in Berkeley, California (more info at tikkun.org/interns). Put your money, your time, and your energy behind this kind of visionary thinking! ■

Adapting Ancient Ethical Principles in Modern Times

BY DAVID KORTEN

THE BIBLICAL DREAM of Jubilee—the periodic forgiveness of all debts and equal redistribution of land—has the power to inspire contemporary activism, but it would be misguided for us to try to revive biblical Jubilee laws in a literal way. By focusing on the ethical intent behind these laws, rather than on their prescriptive content, we can generate creative new ideas for wealth redistribution in our current era—ideas such as modifying estate tax rules or creating trust funds to accomplish the ethical aims of Jubilee.

Simplistic Rules Won't Serve Us

There are various reasons why the Bible's edicts on debt and redistribution could not be implemented in the modern world. In fact, it is difficult to see how even the relatively simple societies described in the Bible could implement ideas such as the complete elimination of interest, total forgiveness of debt, equal redistribution of land, and the shutting down of economic activity for a year. For any society to periodically shut down and radically restructure financial accounts and property rights every few years would be impossibly disruptive. The enforcement of such narrowly defined prescriptions in complex, densely populated, and interconnected contemporary societies would require a brutal police state and generate corruption, hardship, and violence beyond any conceivable benefit.

Nevertheless, the ethical principles behind the Jubilee laws are relevant to all societies in all times and are well worth serious consideration. Simply stated, a healthy society must maintain an equitable distribution of wealth, assure all people access to a means of making their living, and address our periodic need for time away from labor for personal reflection and renewal.

The key here is a significant difference between sound principles and the blind imposition of simplistic rules.



What if every baby had a state-mandated trust fund? Our society's wealth could provide an umbrella of safety and a feeling of freedom for every child. Illustration by Olivia Wise.

Periodic Wealth Redistribution

How might we update the Bible's call for the periodic redistribution of wealth? Where wealth has become excessively concentrated, as in the contemporary United States, a form of Jubilee would make good sense—not at a single moment in time, but at the end of each lifetime. To this end, there is considerable merit in the proposal put forward by Jonathan Rowe in “Every Baby a Trust Fund Baby,” an article in the January 2001 issue of *The American Prospect*.

Rowe proposed a substantial estate tax that would go to a special fund much like Social Security. The fund would create an individual trust account for every child born in the United States. Every time a child completed another year of education, the fund would transfer more money into his or her account, plus an additional amount upon the child's graduation from high school. Upon either graduation from high school or the account holder's twenty-first birthday, whichever came first, the account holder would have access to the funds to use for college, buying a home, starting a business, or starting a retirement account.

If properly structured, Rowe's proposed method could be a fair, equitable, and beneficial way to break up large fortunes to the benefit of all at the end of each lifetime.

Profit and Interest

A similar elaboration and update is in order if we are to take up the Bible's proscription against charging interest. People who spend less in order to save for (*continued on page 63*)

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Jubilee on Wall Street

Taking the Bull by the Horns

BY SHANE CLAIBORNE

SOMETIMES FOLKS SAY, “But the Jews never really practiced the Jubilee.” We Christians have never really practiced the Sermon on the Mount very well, either. Nonetheless, God’s intention is clear, despite our failure to obey. Jubilee was still God’s dream, and it’s our job to keep the dream alive.

We are living in a time of unprecedented economic disparity between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots.

The stats are mind-boggling.

Just consider this:

The richest 20 percent of the world owns 80 percent of the world’s wealth.

The poorest 20 percent of the world owns 1.4 percent of the world’s wealth.

The richest 1 percent of the world owns 40 percent of the world’s wealth.

The average CEO in the United States is making 380 times the pay of the average worker. That means the average worker needs to work an entire month to make what the CEO makes in one hour.

A *Forbes* study recently showed that the world’s richest eighty-five people now own the same wealth as 3.5 billion people.

Eighty-five people own as much wealth as half the world.

A world in which a handful of people live however they wish while masses of others live in poverty is a fragile world. And a world where three people own the same resources as the combined economy of forty-eight countries is a dangerous world.

That’s the bad news. But here’s the good news: God did not mess up and make too many people or too little stuff. There is enough—so long as we share it. As Gandhi said, there is enough for everyone’s need but not enough for everyone’s greed.



“Bills fell from the sky ... and coins covered the streets,” Claiborne writes. “Sister Margaret blew the shofar.” Illustration by Olivia Wise.

When you look at our world, it doesn’t take long to see how sensible God’s idea of Jubilee is. It’s a divine interruption to the patterns of inequality—redistributing property, forgiving debt, setting slaves free, and letting the earth rest. It is God’s emancipation proclamation.

But what would Jubilee look like today?

Planning for Jubilee

Ten years ago, my radical faith community, The Simple Way, decided to do a little experiment: a Jubilee celebration on Wall Street. And folks from all over the country joined us.

We had \$10,000 that had formerly been invested in stocks and was now meant to be given away to those in need. We thought, “Where better to give it away than on Wall Street?” It was a year after September 11 and nine years before the Occupy movement. We agreed to throw the party on Wall Street, deliberately bringing the poor and rich face-to-face to expose the economic patterns of the world we live in.

So we set the date and started conspiring. And then we realized we needed a few things, such as a ram’s horn. How can you have a Jubilee without a shofar? As we asked around, our eighty-year-old Catholic nun, Sister Margaret, chimed in with a smile, “I’ve got a shofar. I will bring it.” And she did.

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"Jubilee was God's alternative to the empire, to Wall Street, and to the patterns of injustice," Claiborne writes.

All the other details were worked out and soon the special day was around the corner.

We invited homeless folks from all over Manhattan to join us at the main entrance of the New York Stock Exchange at a specific date and time.

We had a gift: \$10,000. We had withdrawn the money in small change and bills (by the way, \$1,000 worth of nickels is a lot of nickels!). And thousands of the dollar bills had "love" written on them.

In the early morning hours, the money was disbursed among dozens of people who would play various roles in this theater on the streets. Some were on bikes, some dressed as tourists, and others dressed as business folks. Briefcases, backpacks, fanny packs, and even coffee mugs were filled with money—over 30,000 coins that would be dumped on cue.

We trickled in from all directions unassumingly, and homeless folks from all over New York City met us on Wall Street.

As the opening bell rang on Wall Street, we made the Jubilee pronouncement:

Some of us have worked on Wall Street, and some of us have slept on Wall Street. Some of us are rich people trying to escape our loneliness. Some of us are poor folks trying to escape the cold. Some of us are addicted to drugs, and others are addicted to money. We need each other and God, for we have come to recognize the mess that we have created of our world and how deeply we suffer from that mess. Now we are working together to give birth to a new society within the shell of the old. Another world is possible. Another world is necessary. Another world is already here. Today is a day of Jubilee.

And Sister Margaret blew the shofar.

Bills fell from the sky (we had folks stationed on balconies), and coins covered the streets. The sidewalk turned silver. There was dancing, singing, smiles, and laughter. It was brilliant street theater, an economic flash mob, a little act of divine mischief. But something in us felt like there was more, something deeper—even holy—that happened that day.

I remember seeing one homeless man with tears in his eyes say, "Thank you—now I can get my prescription filled." A street sweeper passed by, flashed a dustpan full of money, and smiled, "It's a good day at work today!" One stockbroker came outside because he saw that what was happening outside was more interesting than what was happening inside, and then he bought bagels and started handing them out. Even the police, who had been ordered to stop the festivities on some obscure "parading without a permit" violation, said, "You need to have one of these parties outside the police station." It was contagious. We captured some of the contagious good feeling on video—visit tikkun.org/video-jubilee and you can see for yourself.

Joyful Imaginings

I learned a few things from our Jubilee experiment.

I learned that we need joy in the movement, and imagination. As Emma Goldman liked to say, "If I can't dance, then it's not my revolution." One thing many liberals and conservatives have in common is that they have lost their joy.

We also need imagination. We can't just protest the stuff that's wrong. We also have to imagine how things can be made right again. Gandhi talked about the "constructive program." So his movement started making their own clothes and marching to the sea to get their own salt. They were building a new society in the shell of the old one. They had imagination.

Jubilee was God's constructive program. It was God's alternative to the empire, to Wall Street, and to the patterns of injustice. Jubilee provokes the imagination. The best critique of what is wrong is the practice of something better. After all, the word "protest" originally meant "public declaration." It wasn't just about being against something, but it was about declaring something new and better. "Protest" shares the same root as "testify." We can't just protest—it's time to *protestify*.

Nearly every day I hear of new declarations of Jubilee. In an experiment called Common Change (commonchange.org), folks around the world are pooling money like the early church and bringing needs that arise before the group, now sharing hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Another group of 20,000 Christians is committed to covering each other's medical expenses amid America's health care crisis, sharing 15 million dollars a year in medical bills, over 500 million dollars over the years since the effort's inception. Then there are small experiments such as cul-de-sac

toolshares where neighbors share tools or lawn equipment. One suburban family created a scholarship fund for at-risk youth, matching dollar-for-dollar the money they spent to send their own kids to college. A congregation created a Jubilee fund to match the capital campaign on their new fellowship hall, so as they built their building they created clean water for a village of people overseas. That's what it can look like to love our neighbors as ourselves today.

It's Not About Guilt

But here's something important: it is not about guilt. As a Christian, I know that God is on the side of life. Jesus came proclaiming life, not guilt. Good news really is good. This is the good life. Someone once said to Mother Teresa, "I couldn't live like you if someone paid me a million dollars." And she responded by saying, "I wouldn't do it if someone paid me a million dollars either. I do it because it is what I am made for." In the end what we are talking about is the life we are made for. We are talking about joy, love, and freedom.

I will never forget learning this lesson from a homeless child in Kolkata, India. I was there working with Mother Teresa and her crew of sisters and volunteers. Every week, we'd throw a party for children who were homeless and had to beg to survive. Each Tuesday we would get about a hundred of them together, throw a party, play games, and eat a big meal. One week, one of the kids I had grown close to told me it was his birthday, so I bought him ice cream. He was so excited that he stared at it, mesmerized. I have no idea how long it had been since he had eaten ice cream. But what he did next was brilliant. He yelled at all the other kids and told them to come over. He lined them up and gave them all a lick. His instinct was: this is so good, I can't keep it for myself. In the end, that's what this whole idea of generosity is all about. Not guilt. It's about the joy of sharing. It's about realizing that the good things in life—like ice cream—are too good to keep for ourselves.

And a child shall lead us. May we keep the Jubilee dream alive, by the way we share, by the way we love, and by the way we interrupt the filthy rotten system and make sure that everybody gets a lick.

Everyday Acts of Jubilee

One of the most important things that happened as a result of the Wall Street Jubilee a decade ago is that "Jubilee" became a part of our language, our vision, and our DNA here at The Simple Way. We are always looking for ways to proclaim Jubilee by redistributing resources, forgiving debts, releasing the oppressed, and caring for the earth. In addition to our everyday revolution on the north side of Philly, we now have a Jubilee Fund to support local revolutions around the globe, as we share thousands of dollars annually with hundreds of groups who embody the spirit of Jubilee. But beyond



The Jubilee is not about guilt—it's about joyful redistribution through giving.

our work here at The Simple Way, we want to see the spirit of Jubilee spread across the earth.

We want Jubilee to spread from Wall Street to Main Street, to your street and my street. So here is the invitation: we are inviting people all over the world to simultaneously, wildly and wonderfully, orchestrate acts of Jubilee.

Maybe you will hide money in alleyways and park benches. Maybe you will drop rupees or rubles or rials from a hot air balloon. Maybe you will take a homeless person to lunch or learn to quilt with an old woman. Maybe your religious community will match every dollar it spends on buildings with a dollar given to the poor. Maybe you will divest from stocks that exploit and invest in micro-finance grants that enrich. Maybe you will get your office to sponsor a well for people who need clean drinking water, or maybe you will get your dorm buddies to buy mosquito nets for people who might otherwise die of malaria. Maybe your college will create a scholarship for low-income youth. Maybe your neighborhood will pay off someone's house before foreclosure. Maybe your business will forgive someone's debt. Maybe you can get your pastor to switch salaries with the janitor or get your CEO to pay all your company's employees the same wage for one year. Maybe America will forgive all third-world debt owed to it. Maybe. It's up to us. It's up to you. God is already on the side of Jubilee. God might just be waiting for us to enact it. Be the change.

Let's practice Jubilee every day. ■

Reimagining Jubilee

A Political Horizon for Our Times

BY PAMELA BROWN

HISTORIAN PETER LINEBAUGH traces the first known African American usage of the concept of Jubilee to an 1834 edition of a children’s magazine called *The Southern Rose Bud*. The description of slave children singing a hymn reads: “Don’t you hear the Gospel trumpet sound Jubilee?” From this we know that by 1834 the idea of Jubilee was well known to the slaves—even children. And while the intent of the Bible’s call for Jubilee and the possibility of its implementation have both been debated over the decades, one thing is true: the hope of Jubilee has animated the struggles of the enslaved, the oppressed, and the exploited for hundreds of years.

The hope of Jubilee continues to run parallel and in juxtaposition to the long history of disparity, racism, and servitude—not only as a horizon to look toward, but as a state of being. I want to propose that we might take up the concept of Jubilee as a moral and political path toward a broad restructuring of our society. Further, eradication of all debts and an end to current property ownership arrangements offer a way toward ending the racial divides on which our socioeconomic system is based.

The Housing Act and the Rise of Debtocracy

Debt has a history. In 1934, one hundred years after the first printed mention of Jubilee in that children’s magazine, the Housing Act was signed into law. This moment marks the beginning of the transition toward the conditions of “debtocracy.” The Housing Act was a Faustian bargain by which jobs were created by stimulating the construction industry in exchange for the codification of a partnership between Wall Street and the government, whereby the taxpayers took the risk, and the banks took the profit. Rather than ending up with a democracy, we ended up with a debtocracy in which banks came to control labor—and the aspirations of



Anti-foreclosure activists demonstrate outside a Wells Fargo shareholders meeting in San Francisco. In the lead-up to the 2006 financial crisis, 59 percent of black borrowers received predatory mortgages versus 16 percent of white borrowers.

laborers—through debt. Since the Housing Act of 1934, personal debt has become ubiquitous, and the deepening burden of debt has become increasingly oppressive, binding citizens into futures beyond the horizon.

Before 1934, mortgages were typically short-lived, lasting only about five to seven years. In addition, they generally required a significant down payment and often a balloon payment of a large outstanding amount at the end. Making homeownership more accessible expanded the construction industry, putting people to work while also giving them the income to purchase homes. Since only about 40 percent of the population owned property in those days, this prompted an enormous expansion to homeownership rates of about 60 percent in roughly thirty years.

But, there was a catch. Banks did not want to take the risk of lending larger amounts of money for longer terms. They wanted quick profits at low risk. The Housing Act of 1934 solved this problem in two ways. First, it paved the way for Fannie Mae to purchase and securitize mortgages such that banks did not have to keep mortgages on their books for the long term. This allowed banks to extend loan terms first to fifteen years, and then to thirty years. Second, it created a mortgage insurance system though the Federal Housing

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Administration so that the taxpayers became the guarantors of much of the mortgage debt. As part of policy, the Federal Housing Administration also created redlining maps to ensure that homeownership was not opened to African Americans. It was this policy and partnership that created the housing market boom and the growth of the white middle class.

The Reality of the New Deal

Often the New Deal is viewed as a period when government worked. Yet, this is a problematic assertion. The success of the New Deal was predicated as much on the system not working for black people as it was predicated on it working for white people. The Civil Rights movement was not only in response to Jim Crow, but also in response to the ways in which blacks were excluded from the New Deal in terms of jobs and housing. A key part of the segregationist political project was Federal Housing Administration redlining, which ensured the development of the segregated communities we continue to live in today.

Prior to the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, more widely known as the Fair Housing Act, African Americans had little recourse against housing discrimination. The Fair Housing Act marked the culmination of the African American demand for full citizenship and the first opportunity for African Americans to take part in the ethos of the American Dream. The African American dream became framed around the tacit agreement to give blacks access to education, and an even playing field on which we could compete fairly and make economic progress over generations.

Not so surprisingly, it was during this same period that the Higher Education Act—almost a replica of the 1934 Housing Act—was passed. The Higher Education Act created Sallie Mae as a governmental agency designed to create a secondary market for student debt in the same way as Fannie Mae did for housing. And it also created a taxpayer guarantee for student loans. Some call this socialism for the banks, capitalism for the people.

Given the rapid expansion of homeownership due to the Housing Act, it is implausible to believe that a rapid expansion in higher education would not occur if the same policies were applied to the education industry. Furthermore, since increased debt was the result of the Housing Act, it is also implausible to believe that the rise in student debt was not foreseeable. College education had always been based on family wealth. And so, it was also foreseeable that those with the least wealth would accrue the most debt. Continued racial inequality through debt and credit were built into these key policies.

Racism in the Credit Industry

Economic forms of Jim Crow continue to exist throughout the credit industry today. A study conducted by Ethan Cohen-Cole of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston shows

that the same individual living in an 80 percent white community would receive about 7,000 more dollars in credit than the same individual living in an 80 percent black community. Available credit is a significant factor in credit scores. Further, even forty years after the Fair Housing Act, according to a national study, in the lead-up to the 2006 financial crisis 59 percent of blacks received predatory (“designed-to-fail”) subprime mortgages with unfavorable rates and terms, versus 16 percent of white borrowers. In New York City, even at the income level of 150,000 to 250,000 dollars, 63 percent of African Americans received subprime mortgages, versus 20 percent of whites. The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study also showed that there is no evidence of differences in financial literacy. Partially as a result of mortgage discrimination, the racial wealth gap has quadrupled in the last generation. Today, middle-class African Americans have fewer financial resources than whites living below the poverty line. This growing inequality is accompanied by a 45 percent downward mobility rate for African Americans born into the middle class, who are tumbling into poverty.

Today 75 percent of students at top 200 colleges are from families in the top 20 percent income bracket. And whereas 80 percent of white kids go to top 500 colleges, 75 percent of black kids go to schools outside of that category. Yet, 81 percent of black students graduate in over 30,000 dollars of debt. And although there has been (*continued on page 63*)



“Partially as a result of mortgage discrimination, the racial wealth gap has quadrupled in the last generation,” Brown writes.

You Are Not a Loan

Strike Debt and the Emerging Debtors Movement

BY HANNAH APPEL

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to understand debt as a systemic problem in contemporary capitalism? Basic statistics give us one answer: Medical debt—people unable to pay their medical bills—is the number one contributor to bankruptcies in the United States. Outstanding student debt is over \$1.2 trillion, and nearly one million student debtors default on their loans every year. Across the country, people continue to lose their homes to predatory lending, foreclosure, and refinance schemes. The low-income neighborhoods disproportionately affected by these schemes are also often saturated by fringe finance—payday lenders, check cashers, rent-to-own stores, and pawn shop loan operations—where interest rates can range from 200 to 1000 percent and more. One in three Americans is currently being pursued by a debt collector.

Of the hundreds of millions of indebted Americans, only a small fraction of us are indebted because we buy luxuries we can't afford. Rather, we incur debilitating debt to pay for basic needs—education, housing, and health care. And every debt exacerbates the others: We take out second mortgages to pay for a family member to go to college, or for medical procedures. Families use credit cards to buy groceries because other bills have drained their bank accounts. Credit scores and consumer reports then ensure that people with lower scores pay higher interest rates, thus reproducing cycles of debt and inequality.

Despite this mass indebtedness, people continue to deal with their debt in isolation and often in shame. Strike Debt—a nationwide movement of debt resisters with which I work—receives countless emails from individual debtors, each narrating a story of seemingly exceptional exploitation and pathos: chemotherapy treatment made mortgage payments impossible, and the house was foreclosed on as I lay in bed; my student loan debt ballooned as I worked an unpaid internship and a part-time minimum wage job, and I



Debt doesn't need to be isolating—it can be a platform for collective action. The first step is coming out about our debts.

can't pay off even the compounding interest. *These stories are not exceptional, but ordinary.* We fail to realize our shared predicament because debt remains private, shameful, and guilt-ridden. In order to see debt clearly, we have to reframe it, not as an issue of individual isolation and shame, but as a platform for collective action and political mobilization.

Rethinking Debt: Collectivity, History, Morality

What might it mean to experience and analyze debt collectively? One concrete strategy is to hold debtors' assemblies at which participants "come out" about their debt. Since its emergence in 2012, Strike Debt has been organizing such assemblies in San Francisco, Oakland, Portland, Philadelphia, New York, and beyond. When people talk openly about debt, and begin to share associated fears, anxieties, and confusion, we begin to see our shared burdens as a potential source of shared power. For instance, we realize that we are all debtors, whether or not we have personal loan agreements. As infrastructure crumbles in our cities and towns, as music and art programs are cut from public schools, and as the social safety net rips open wider, we cannot pretend that some of us are debtors while others are not. In my home city of Oakland, California, the 2012 annual debt service was 20 percent of the city budget. We have to bring austerity politics, municipal debt, and even sovereign debt into the same analytic and political frame, not to conflate them with individual debt, but to see how debt is currently used as a tool to ensure that profit moves to the richest while risk and precarity move to the poorest. Debtors' assemblies allow us to dwell together in debt as an immersive, systemic problem, which, in its ubiquity, holds the seeds of its own solutions.

It is not a coincidence that household debt has skyrocketed alongside the exuberant growth of Wall Street

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finance. Whereas industrial production required more and more people to join the labor force, the production of financial products requires more and more forms of indebtedness. Consider a simple example: General Electric used to make light bulbs and washing machines. It still does, but now the corporation's GE Capital branch (which engages in commercial lending and leasing, consumer financing, energy financial services, real estate, and retail financing) generates roughly one-third of the corporation's revenue. As capital increasingly turns to financial products to generate profit, political theorist Robert Meister notes that the financial sector now mediates our access to the means of subsistence—food, shelter, medical care, and education—through debt.

Finally, we must also rethink debt by moving our moralizing impulses from the debtor (who is often imagined as irresponsible or a drag on the economy) to the creditor. The recent financial crisis demonstrated clearly that banks are not ashamed of their debts. They treat them as mere contractual agreements to be renegotiated, written off, restructured, or securitized and sold to others. Banks also understand their debts as political power; they exercise this power not only to put taxpayers on the hook for their bad debts, but also to secure federal government protection through the threats of “too big to fail” or “systemically important financial institutions.” Banks are also implicated, of course, in our vicious cycles of household debt. As New York University professor Andrew Ross has pointed out in his recent book *Creditocracy and the Case for Debt Refusal*, debtors are most profitable to creditors when they remain in debt. People who carry balances and make small payments are known as “revolvers” in the industry and are the most sought-after customers. Those who can afford to pay monthly balances in full are known as “deadbeats.” The creditors’ goal, arguably, is to extend everyone’s debt service forever.



Wearing “hello, my debt is . . .” nametags, activists take part in a Debtors Assembly in East Oakland, California.

In sum, debt is systemic—a widely shared status, reinforced and reproduced from our most intimate emotional understandings of ourselves, through our powerful and arrogant financial institutions, to the largest structural and historical political-economic changes of the last thirty years. What is to be done?

Debt Abolition and Resistance

Alongside the imperative to rethink exploitative debt is the imperative to resist and re-imagine it. Along with Strike Debt, the Jubilee Debt Coalition, Jubilee South, the International Citizen Debt Audit Network, the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt, the Gulf Labor Coalition, and the Plataforma Auditoría Ciudadana de la Deuda, are a few of the other groups doing resistance work. Emerging from Occupy Wall Street, Strike Debt’s Rolling Jubilee project and *Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual* have been some of the most visible resistance projects in recent years.

The Rolling Jubilee, “a bailout by the people for the people,” can be understood as a hack of existing debt infrastructures—the byzantine but profitable paths through which distressed consumer debt travels. To explain: defaulted debt gets sold to debt collectors on secondary markets for pennies on the dollar. In other words, if a hospital sells a \$1000 unpaid medical bill to a debt collector for twenty cents on the dollar, or \$200, the debt collector makes its profit by demanding the full amount from the creditor. If the medical debtor ends up paying the full \$1000, in addition to penalties and fees (as most people do), the debt collector’s profit will be more than \$800, or over 300 percent. To create the Rolling Jubilee, an arm of Strike Debt jumped through the regulatory hoops to be certified as a debt collecting agency, and then crowd-sourced over \$700,000 to buy \$14.7 million (so far) in defaulted medical debt. Instead of harassing individuals to collect it, as debt collectors do, Strike Debt abolishes it.

While the Rolling Jubilee provides relief to a handful of people struggling with medical debt, it is not a systemic solution. Rather, it is a spectacular tactic—literally a spectacle. It draws attention to the ways debt circulates far beyond the creditor-debtor relationship to include secondary markets, debt collectors, tax write-offs, and beyond. Debtors often imagine our debts as an almost personal relationship between debtor and creditor: The creditor lent to me, and I am not only contractually but also *morally* obligated to repay. But in today’s financialized economy, the great majority of our debts cannot be characterized as intimate relationships between debtor and creditor, but rather, as small pieces of tradeable assets and larger financial products. The Rolling Jubilee begins to pry open the creditor-debtor relationship, showing debt’s many potential forms which, to date, only creditors have been able to exploit. In addition, by showing people that the market value of their debt can be as little as 2 percent of its original “value,” the Rolling Jubilee

empowers debtors to resist paying 100 percent or more on often odious debts.

The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual, originally released in September 2012 as a 120-page pamphlet and updated into book format in 2014, is a collectively written, chapter-by-chapter guide providing detailed strategies for fighting common forms of debt and laying out an expansive vision for debt resistance. The manual is freely available online at strikedebt.org/drom, and Strike Debt is dedicated to putting the book in anyone's hands, regardless of ability to pay. Those who can pay retail price (sixteen dollars or above) subsidize those who cannot.

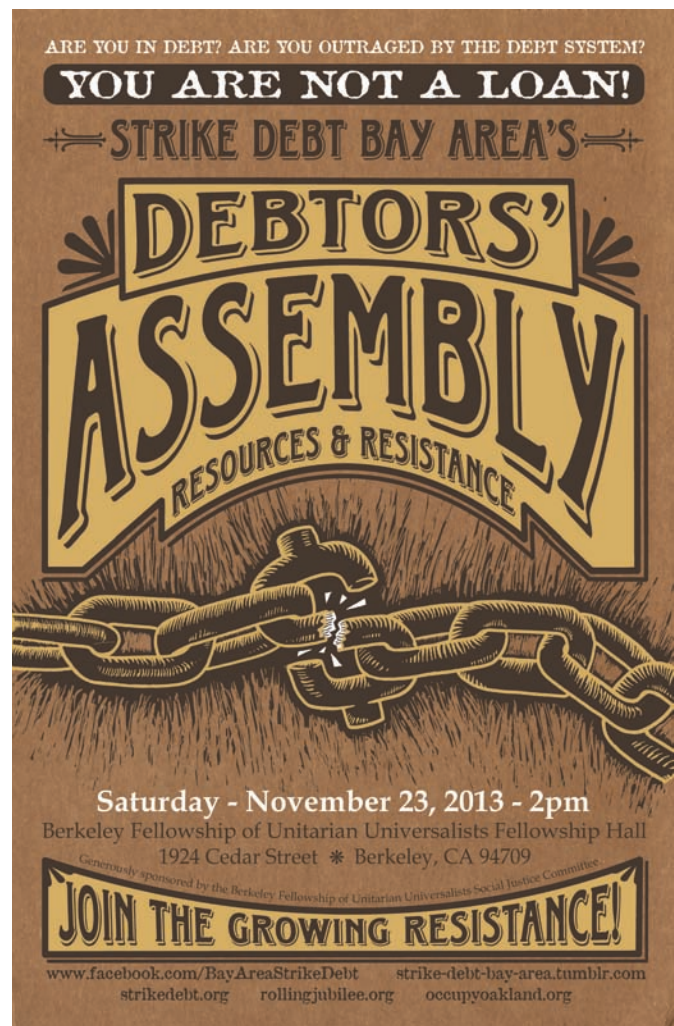
Both the Rolling Jubilee and the *Debt Resisters' Operations Manual* lay the foundations necessary for a debtors' movement. But neither, by itself, helps to organize collective action. We need a stronger collective organizing tool. Enter the "debt collective."

The Next Step: Building Debt Collectives

The need for a debt collective grows from our awareness that every month, student debtors, medical debtors, mortgage debtors, and others make payments under often egregious conditions set by creditors, with little power to bargain or negotiate. Indeed, today's radical power imbalance between debtors and creditors is one of the primary means by which a disproportionate share of the nation's wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. The goal of the debt collective is to change this basic equation by creating and empowering a constituency of debtors for organization, advocacy, and resistance.

Built on the model of a labor union, a debt collective would offer diverse organizing possibilities in an era of austerity, unemployment, and workplace precarity. It would organize debtors into groups capable of collective bargaining and leveraging the credible threat of debt strikes, as Paul Hampton explores in this issue of *Tikkun*. It would also serve as a platform for articulating a positive vision of a sustainable economy in which credit and debt become socially productive.

Organizing debtors is complex, and the barriers to organizing a debt collective are high. There are no shared factory floors. People in debt to the same institution are geographically remote and disconnected from one another. Many debtors don't know who profits when they pay their debts, or who stands to lose if they don't. Debtors struggle to distinguish originators, aggregators, guarantors, and servicers. For instance, most student debtors think they have Sallie Mae loans because Sallie Mae is their servicer. But many are actually in debt to Citibank, Chase, Deutsche, or the Department of Education. And of course, once our student loans are repackaged as asset-backed securities, they are dispersed further still.



To begin to overcome this dispersion, the cooperative power of a debt collective will rely in part on a web-based technology that would present a clear picture of creditor-debtor relations. This tool would make it simple and secure to collect data from debt collective members, with permission. For example, if I have student debt serviced by Sallie Mae, I can join the Sallie Mae union. Organizers could use that information to develop regional or lender-specific campaigns against predatory creditors. A platform to gather and analyze debtors' voluntarily supplied data enables us to develop new sites of collaboration and resistance toward a more just distribution of essential resources. Debtors can harness our collective power both to demand large-scale debt renegotiation and credibly threaten mass refusal of illegitimate debts.

One outcome of successful organizing could, of course, be a debt Jubilee—the forgiveness of all debts, or certainly those deemed to be odious or contracted in bad faith. But we can't stop there. Debt Jubilee would be a significant victory, but only on the way to what Hampton refers to in this issue as counter-power: a durable shift in the distribution of political and economic power such (*continued on page 64*)

Power Without the King

The Debt Strike as Credible Threat

BY PAUL A. HAMPTON

WHILE MOST CONTEMPORARY talk of Jubilee carries religious connotations, the first mass debt cancellations were likely born out of secular power consolidation. Economist Michael Hudson traces the earliest Jubilees to pre-biblical times, in periodic “clean slate” decrees issued by Bronze Age kings. While immediate motivations for the abolitions varied from instance to instance, an important common thread is that the rationale was most often material, rather than a spiritual ethic. In his *Bible Review* article on “The Economic Roots of Jubilee,” Hudson argues that the seeming magnanimity of these decrees was usually a product of “enlightened self-interest.” Clean slate decrees helped the rulers to maintain a stable empire in which the king was the primary locus of power and debtors remained loyal recruits for military campaigns. If the king did not release debtors from their obligations, then the debtors could threaten to gather together and release the king’s head from his neck.

In game theory, this is what’s known as a “credible threat”: the potential for pursuing action that by its mere plausibility shapes the strategies of others. In modern times the credible threat has largely evaporated, leaving debtors without tactical recourse in a deeply asymmetric struggle. This playing field cannot be leveled by appealing to legislators with moral arguments. This playing field can only be leveled when debtors develop and wield their own form of counterpower: the credible threat of revolt.

This sort of threat needn’t entail physical attacks on lenders or legislators (though the balancing potential of the proverbial “pitchforks and torches” should never be underestimated). Instead, debtors can establish their willingness to withdraw compliance. They must demonstrate that they can stop paying, en masse. Oil tycoon J. Paul Getty captured this succinctly when he said: “If you owe the bank \$100, that’s your problem. If you owe the bank \$100 million, that’s the bank’s problem.” Taken alone, debts are individual problems. But when lumped together, they are a systemic threat. The threat of mass debt refusal may not only bring about a contemporary Jubilee, but could also change the terms of future debts—and perhaps much else.



Rejecting Market-Based Solutions to the Debt Crisis

There is certainly no deficit of calls for a democratic solution to the debt crisis. The majority of these calls, however, rely on a painfully narrow definition of “democracy,” referring only to the kind of democracy practiced by an electorate represented in legislative bodies. Commentators ranging

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Taken alone, debts are individual problems. But when lumped together, they are a systemic threat. The threat of mass debt refusal could usher in a contemporary Jubilee. Illustration by Caitlin Ng.

from the editorial board of the *New York Times* to progressive activists with the Campaign for a Fair Settlement have pleaded for legislation that will change the terms of debts or even write down their principal. Even the usually sharp and radical-minded magazine *The New Inquiry* made an uncharacteristically liberal suggestion that decisions about the debt crisis be “made . . . through the ballot box.”

What most of these earnest commentators miss is that the lenders’ and legislators’ crisis is not the same as the debtors’ crisis. To power, the crisis is not that lives are being ruined by mountains of debt, but rather that the streams of revenue on which the economic institutions depend might dry up or at least fail to sustain their current pace of growth. In other words, to power, the only concern is making debt “affordable”—and thus permanent.

As long as “affordability” is the only pressure, legislators and lenders have no incentive to respond to anything else. Debtors can change this by affecting revenue for reasons other than being strained past their ability to pay. By voluntarily withdrawing payment until the debtors themselves have the ability to shape the institutions to which they are in debt, debtors can alter this balance and create power for themselves. But if they don’t, then the only crisis that will be solved is the one seen by currently existing forms of power.

This is why the proposals under consideration by lawmakers—for instance, regarding higher education—are focused entirely on marginal changes. In the past two years, state and federal legislatures have proposed several initiatives concerning the massive—and still growing—student debt problem. These proposals, such as the “Pay It Forward” plans to tie repayment to a fixed percentage of graduates’ incomes, Elizabeth Warren’s various interest rate ideas, Obama’s recent expansion of income-based repayment programs, and the forthcoming “value-based” ratings of colleges are focused exclusively on increasing the sustainability of debt repayment. Their goal is not to change the burden placed on debtors. It’s to ensure that debtors can provide more reliable revenue streams. Rather than limiting the debt burden, these proposals are aimed at *extending* it as far as it can go, at finding the maximum amount the debtor *can* pay. Every single one of these proposals is a mechanism for changing higher education to fit the demands of creditors, rather than the other way around.

It might seem inevitable that such is the character of ideas that spring from the lenders themselves. As the *New York Times* editorial board noted, apparently without irony, when supporting value-based ratings: “The federal government also has a compelling interest in getting the best possible return on its \$180 billion annual investment in higher education.” It would be easy to presume that this financial interest is largely what shapes the government’s decisions. But it would be a mistake to ascribe these failures of imagination to simple corruption. Each of these initiatives exhibits a hallmark of the progressive wonk playbook: implementing market-based approaches and tinkering with them at the margins, without ever casting a critical eye to the assumptions on which free-market ideology is premised. In this case, each of these legislative solutions embeds the idea of the basic needs of life as an *individual* burden, a transactional good.

Rather than tinker at the margins, we have to bring back the formative idea that certain things in life—education, health care, shelter, and food—can and should be provided outside market mechanisms and thus outside the grasp of odious debts. But without a credible counterpower, there is no incentive to consider nonmarket approaches.

The Red Herring of State Control

Some argue that the state should serve as a countervailing force to market pressures. But a cursory analysis reveals that state-sponsored institutions are just as susceptible to transactional thinking as are private corporations. Take for example higher education. The state university systems are imposing an enormous and still-increasing debt burden on individuals, under the argument that students, rather than the taxpayers as a whole, must necessarily shoulder the rapidly increasing cost of the services they’re using. But UCLA education scholar Bob Samuels, the nationwide movement



of debt resisters known as Strike Debt, and others have reported that, if existing federal money spent on higher education were directed away from loan subsidies and for-profit institutions, the federal government could make all public colleges tuition-free at little to no additional cost (and perhaps even a savings). These commentators have shown that education debt at public institutions is a choice, a priority of the current configuration of power.

Unfortunately, these analyses are often interpreted too literally as suggesting that the federal government should simply subsidize or take over higher education. While incrementally preferable to the current situation, this is not a desirable final outcome of a debt strike, because state funding is not divorced from market ideology. The “value-based” ratings program is just the most recent example of how even the state views education as a transactional good. As Strike Debt’s Ann Larson and Henry Ostrom wrote in their April 2014 web-only *Tikkun* article, “Life After Debt: Why America Needs an Anti-Capitalist Left,” aiming for state control as the final outcome would represent an utter failure of the debt resistance project. Instead of simply handing over the provision of basic needs to the state, a successful debt resistance movement could open space to re-envision what it means to

provide things such as education as something other than certification for employment.

Evaluating how federal money is allocated quickly undermines the common misconception that individualized debt burdens are *necessary* to support public services. The simple math illustrates that the problem is one of priorities, not practicalities. But the argument is not that the federal government needs to employ policymakers with a firmer grasp of arithmetic. The more subtle but also more important takeaway is that these priorities are not those of any particular individual in power. They are the priorities of power itself, of the incentive structures that currently exist. This is why moral appeals are not likely to be an effective route. All the incentives for legislators and administrators are aligned in favor of market-oriented policies, and there exists no tangible countermechanism outside this logic. The threat of debt refusal is meaningless if it does not undermine *all* avenues for the imposition of market logic.

Building Counterpower

Is a biblical-type Jubilee even plausible within current conditions? There’s some question as to whether it ever has been: some historians contend that the biblical Jubilee codes (written centuries after the original debt cancellation decrees) were never actually followed. It appears that even if they were, it wasn’t so for very long. In his article on “The Lost Tradition of Biblical Debt Cancellations,” Michael Hudson writes that of all the biblical laws, “it appears this most radical one [the decree of Jubilee] . . . became the first to be cast aside.” The reasons for this shift were myriad, but Hudson gives primary place to a change in the character of armed forces. Whereas previously armies had been composed largely of “land-tenured cultivators,” around the turn of the millennium, wars began to be fought by paid mercenaries. (Incidentally, it is likely that these mercenaries used their wages to pay off private debts—further incentive for the king to preserve existing debts.)

According to Hudson, around this time the moral argument behind the Jubilee was reinterpreted as praising the virtue of the giver for redistributing his gains rather than as an assertion in favor of an equal distribution of the means of production (land and freedom). In other words, it was reinterpreted as justifying mere charity rather than radical realignment. Once Jubilee was insulated from the threat of counterpower that birthed it, the very notion of debt cancellation was lost and replaced by an individual drive for spiritual cleansing. As a means of attaining virtue, charity is the path of least resistance; it does not threaten existing power relationships. To be charitable, one doesn’t have to give up one’s land, just a portion of its fruit. And this defines the situation in which we currently find ourselves. So rather than simply encourage a restoration of a certain strain of morality, which can always be reinterpreted to suit other incentives,



The Rolling Jubilee is a good consciousness-raising tool—it buys debt for pennies on the dollar and then abolishes it. Now activists are taking the next step: organizing toward a debt strike.

perhaps we should emphasize a return to establishing the credible threat that led to the first Jubilees.

A debt Jubilee, or something like it, is necessary, both in this present moment and as a lasting institution. However, release will not come from a higher power. If we want to abolish debt, we'll have to do it ourselves.

Organize to Strike Debt

One way to achieve mass debt abolition is to start with the realization that Getty provided over a century ago: while a small debt can be crippling to the debtor, a large debt can be crippling to the lender. Individually, we owe the bank tens or hundreds of thousands, and so these debts are our millions of individual problems. But together, we owe the banks hundreds of billions. Collectively, we are the bank's problem.

The “debt collective” described by Hannah Appel in this Winter 2015 issue of *Tikkun* is a first step toward this goal. By targeting debt refusal against particular lenders or even individual financial instruments, debtors could exact specific concessions. Significant success might be achieved without even a single new default, but rather by organizing those *already* implicitly refusing. For example, millions of student debtors are already in nonpayment. Many of these debtors haven't been written off by the system: their debts are repackaged and resold on the secondary market, and derivatives are issued against these instruments, multiplying their financial impact. They are considered uncollected but eventually productive assets. The potential exists for a broadly impactful debt strike that could be realized simply by publicizing and politicizing the existing *de facto* refusal. If these debtors were to assert that they might *never* pay, they could wield influence comparable to those currently in payment.

What might a debt collective demand? Because of the limited horizon for imagination offered by the current conditions of possibility, the first demands will surely be narrow and reformist, along the lines of extant legislation: principal write-downs, interest rate reductions, or even just payment plans. While the gains might be incremental, the fact that

debtors would even be in the position to achieve them would be a potentially revolutionary shift.

But in the long term, any debt collective must have as its goal the establishment of a credible and systemically damaging threat of refusal. To constitute a threat to the debt system as a whole, the threat of debt strikes must eventually be used to win shifts in the *form* of the debt, not just in its parameters. If these collectives rest after achieving only tweaks to interest rates and payment plans, or even upon establishing state control of basic needs, they will have won little worth fighting for.

In the end, though, it's not for activists and commentators to prescribe what debtors can and should demand, but rather to help build a structure that allows debtors to make their demands more forcefully. At the moment, what the debtors demand is less important than the fact that they are in a position to make demands at all.

In this way, perhaps a debt strike is best viewed not as a means to a particular end but rather as an aperture, a moment in which new possibilities can be imagined and new approaches experimented with. This is the fundamental way in which the concept of Jubilee-achieved-through-debt-strike diverges from the original conception of Jubilee-from-above (under which the institutions of government grant freedom from debt). In the latter form of debt abolition, the power relationships that engendered the debt in the first place remain intact and perhaps even strengthened, as was the intention of the original Bronze Age decrees.

What makes a debt strike so different is that it need not preserve existing power relationships. After a truly successful debt strike, we are not only free of debt, we are also free of our reliance on the institutions, structures, and imposed priorities that put us in debt in the first place. This is not, however, a given. After a debt strike, organized debtors may establish that our debts are now negotiable, but it will still be necessary to assert that our lives are not. What comes next? The great democratic promise of a debt strike is that the answer to that question may, finally, be up to us to decide. ■

Buddhism and Debt

BY ALEX CARING-LOBEL

THE INCOMPARABLE LOFTINESS of the monk figure—placid and disinterested, having renounced desire—leads many to think of Buddhism as a religion detached from all worldly concerns, especially those of economy. But Buddhism has always addressed a continuum of human flourishing and good, creating what has been referred to as an “economy of salvation.” Metaphors of economy—even of debt—abound in Buddhist texts and, in many ways, Buddhism came to be fundamentally shaped by economic conditions and considerations of the era in which it originated.

Depending on material support from moneylenders, the Buddhist establishment from its outset did not seek to hamper the business that made it possible. Devout merchants (*setthi*) and householders (*gahapatis*)—controllers of property, moneylenders, often even usurers—were the primary supporters of the early monastic community. Giving material support (*amisa-dana*) to the monkhood thus ranks in Buddhist doctrine as *the* most effective way for laypeople to generate positive karma, even above following the five moral precepts that define the Buddhist way of life. Out of a concern for its own survival, Buddhism could not condemn the acquisition of wealth, but it could provide principles for its dispensation—namely, giving and generosity (*dana*). To these ends, the Buddha celebrated wealth creation alongside a call for its redistribution.

The New Market Economy

In order to understand the subtleties of Buddhism’s approach to wealth accumulation, poverty, and debt, we must first have some understanding of the market economy from which it arose. The introduction of the widespread use of coinage to India just a few decades prior to the Buddha’s birth around 500 BCE disrupted existing social orders and also inspired a philosophical renaissance driven by spiritual dropouts like the Buddha, who sought to respond to the new economy.

One of the Buddha’s most poignant accounts of worldly life speaks to the social alienation inherent to economic competition and the accumulation of private property. It remains pertinent to this day:



Buddhism’s appearance of detachment can be deceiving—in reality, Buddhist spiritual texts are deeply concerned with worldly economies.

Seeing people floundering
Like fish in small puddles,
Competing with one another—
as I saw this,
fear came into me.
The world was entirely
without substance.
All the directions
were knocked out of line.
Wanting a haven for myself,
I saw nothing that wasn’t laid claim to.
Seeing nothing in the end
But competition,
I felt discontent.

Widespread use of currency led to a flattening of reality that rendered all goods and services commensurable, nourishing a tendency toward abstraction for which we owe much of our philosophical inheritance today—from Pythagoras in Greece, to Confucius in China, to the Buddha in India. The reformulation of economic relations brought about by monetization triggered previously unheard of levels of social mobility, and mobility’s attendant individualism.

The Buddha skillfully encouraged some of the new social values that emerged from these economic changes. For example, he encouraged the individualism that subverted family structures (monks were “home-leavers”). But he also sought to undermine other emerging values associated with psychological states that fuel the acquisition of capital: desire and greed. The Buddha condemned acquisitiveness at

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the same time as he supported capital accumulation, specifically for its potential to create and multiply merit through generosity. In this way, Buddhism advocated a “Middle Way,” the simultaneous negation of the extremes of asceticism and indulgence. Spiritual health and material well-being were, in the words of economist E. F. Schumacher, natural allies.

The Buddha diverged from other religious thinkers in his embrace of the new market economy. Confucians in China and Brahmins in India strongly resisted this economy, denouncing the economic activities of businessmen and merchants as threats to the moral order of society.

Perhaps the Buddha embraced the new market economy in part because it supported his rejection of the Brahmins’ mythical justifications for the stratification of caste. Rather than speaking about caste, the Buddha spoke instead of economic class, the new social order, which was divided into six categories: very wealthy, wealthy, faring well, faring poorly, poor, and destitute. Such disparities are inevitable in a society organized by the market economy. The establishment of the monkhood, which presented a new, radical kind of freedom, enabled its constituents to stand outside caste and, in theory, outside the market economy altogether.

Can Buddhist Teachings Move Us Toward Jubilee?

The accumulation of wealth among urban merchants and moneylenders, scorned by the then dominant Brahmins, was a boon to the *sangha*, the Buddhist monastic community, which relied on the generosity of the laity for material support as well as the spread of Buddhist ideas along trade routes. This upwardly mobile class found in Buddhism a justification for its economic activities and new lifestyle. By giving to the monks, the laity performed acts of *dana*, or generosity, a fundamental tenet of Buddhism. Serving as “fields of merit,” the monks provided an opportunity for laypeople to practice generosity, the first “perfection,” and the basis of all other perfections, leading to enlightenment. Importantly, the amount of merit generated by such transactions was determined by the recipient’s level of virtue and not the benefactor’s, forming a holy alliance between the monkhood and the laity that, at least within the performance of *dana*, condoned the benefactor’s methods of accumulation. This alliance was furthered by the Buddha’s injunction forbidding those with debt from joining the monastic order, by which the indebted would effectively default.

So instead of challenging the accumulation of wealth, Buddhism critiques the social structures that perpetuate poverty and the unwholesome states of mind that contribute to the suffering of self and others. This is admirable enough, but still leaves quite a bit for Buddhist socialists and Buddhists committed to Jubilee to wrestle with.



This Tibetan illustration depicts samsara—the indefinitely repeated cycles of birth, misery, and death caused by karma. The Buddha uses freedom from debt as a metaphor for liberation from samsara.

Buddhism has historically taken a permissive approach to economic relations. It might be the only world religion that does not formally condemn usury. And being wealthy in and of itself has been taken as a sign of good karma. Yet there remains much in the Buddhist canon that can enrich our thoughts on debt and wealth distribution.

The *Ina Sutta*, the Buddha’s “Discourse on Debt,” praises *ananasukha*, the pleasure of being debtless. Conversely, it also links indebtedness directly to bondage and, ultimately, suffering, the first noble truth of Buddhism:

Poverty is suffering in the world. . . Getting into debt is suffering in the world. . . Interest payment is suffering in the world. . . Being served notice is suffering in the world. . . Being hounded is suffering in the world. . . Bondage is suffering in the world. . . . When a poor, destitute, penniless person, being hounded, does not pay, he is put into bondage. For one who partakes of sensuality [a layperson], bondage is suffering in the world.

Buddhist texts make ample use of metaphors of debt and exchange to confer spiritual advice, both a sign of the times and a winning bet made by the Buddha on the future hegemony of the monetary economy. At the end of the *Ina Sutta*, the Buddha goes as far as to use freedom (*continued on page 65*)



Interfaith activists from the Missouri Faith Voices coalition gather signatures for a ballot initiative to cap the rate for payday loans.

A Religious Movement to End Predatory Payday Lending

BY RACHEL HOPE ANDERSON

IN 1999, A CATHOLIC PRIEST in Chicago found himself counseling a parishioner who was struggling to stay afloat financially. The parishioner, a mother who worked two jobs, had been paying \$120 every two weeks for over a year to service two payday loans. The priest was shocked to learn that the original principal of the loans was only \$600. In repayment of that \$600, this woman had paid out over \$2,000—over 500 percent in annual interest—and was still paying.

The priest, Monsignor John Egan, helped his parishioner pay off the loans and the interest—and then helped catalyze a community-wide effort to fight unscrupulous and predatory lending. After his death in 2001, the coalition he assembled named itself the Monsignor John Egan Campaign for Payday Loan Reform and became one of the country’s first faith-based coalitions to combat predatory payday lending. Since then, faith leaders have gathered in nearly every state affected by payday lending to call for an end to these

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Communities Creating Opportunity (cco.org)



Predatory payday lending has expanded exponentially within the last twenty years as industry lobbyists have identified loopholes in states' usury laws.

predatory loans and the damage they inflict on families and communities. Over the past fifteen years, clergy have forged uncommon partnerships grounded in shared biblical principles. In an effort to protect financially vulnerable households, clergy have taken to the streets, collected signatures for ballots, lobbied state legislatures, raised funds to help families get out from under predatory loans, and prayed in front of payday shops.

Now, in this biblical year of release from debts, a drumbeat is building across the country. In church basements and large urban synagogues, people of faith and goodwill are joining their voices in a unified call for national regulation to stop the payday debt trap.

Understanding the Rapidly Expanding Payday Loan Industry

Lending as a tool of exploitation is nothing new. In America, predatory lending practices have flourished at various points in our history, from sharecropping contracts of the post-Reconstruction era to the “loan sharks” and the “salary lenders” of the early 1900s who enticed workers into expensive debt.

Over the last twenty years, the payday lending industry has expanded exponentially. During the 1990s, the number of payday lending storefronts exploded, growing from less than 200 to over 22,000, located in urban strip malls and on rural roads across the country.

Advertised as a trustworthy and simple solution for borrowers facing a cash crunch, payday loans are actually structured to create a debt trap: many borrowers find it nearly impossible to repay the loan. Not only are the interest rates astronomical—300 percent interest and higher—but the interest and loan principal are also structured to make repayment difficult for borrowers; they are due at the same time, often very soon after the loan is received. As a result, many payday borrowers find themselves taking out another payday loan soon after repaying the previous one, thus digging themselves deeper in debt.

Payday lenders make no attempt to determine whether borrowers can actually repay their loans without re-borrowing. Rather than underwriting their loans and profiting when borrowers repay on time, payday lenders benefit when borrowers fail and are forced to take out multiple loans. Each year, payday storefronts issue an *(continued on page 66)*

Want to take action now against predatory payday lending? Visit tikkun.org/paydayloans to learn about upcoming actions.

Transcending Market Logic

Envisioning a Global Gift Economy

BY GENEVIEVE VAUGHAN

DREAMING OF JUBILEE—the abolition of all debts and a yearlong halt to market transactions—is a helpful activity because it reminds us that our corporations are the ones who should be asking for forgiveness for their acts of plunder. Taking the idea of Jubilee seriously can help us break free of a market mentality and begin to adopt a gift economy mentality.

Within our current market-based society, it is quite common for people to frame social interactions as *exchanges*: glances, conversations, ideas, and gifts can all be considered in that mode. Market exchange, *quid pro quo*, is validated at every turn in our society, so the idea of an exchange of equivalents permeates our idea of interaction. In reality, however, there are many initiatives and responses that are not exchanges. Rather they are instances of unilateral giving that are imitated and repeated.

Maternal Giving

For many years I have been developing a philosophy of the gift economy based on mothering and being mothered. I've learned in the last decades that studies of interactions between mothers and infants show early turn-taking episodes, “protoconversations” in which the two parts of the dyad imitate and respond to each other. Protoconversations take place long before children have any inkling of economic exchange. They occur in a context in which the adult is unilaterally supplying the materials the child needs to survive. The child's survival is contingent upon this free giving because she cannot satisfy her own needs and cannot give back an equivalent.

New studies on infant psychology by researchers such as Stein Braten, Colwyn Trevarthen, and Andrew Meltzoff show



“We need to embrace the gift economy and realize the maternal potential of all of humanity,” Vaughan writes. *Mother and Child* by Janice Fried.

that babies are highly social beings right from the beginning, and not passive egotists as Freud and Piaget imagined. These studies can also be taken as the basis for a new psychology of mothering because rather than being seen as slavishly serving a solipsistic being, mothers can be seen as caring for a being endowed with what Trevarthen has called great “innate intersubjective sympathy.” This caregiving takes place before and beyond the market economy. It takes place in what we might call a “maternal economy,” where gifts and services are distributed directly in response to needs, according to a transitive, other-oriented logic that has as its goal the enhancement of the life of the child. It makes sense to call this arrangement an economy because giving and receiving form a mode of distribution of goods to needs that is actually more functional than the mode of exchange.

Although this maternal economy is often implemented with love, it can also be practiced without love—by disengaged mothers, by institutions, or by paid caregivers. In some way, though, it must function in order for the child to survive and thrive. In the process, it lays down a pattern of giving and receiving that serves the child in all her further communicative interactions. Thus for years children live and learn in an economy that is not based on the market.

GENEVIEVE VAUGHAN (b. 1939) founded the multicultural feminist Foundation for a Compassionate Society that was in operation for twenty years, ending in 2004. Her books *For-Giving* (1997) and *Homo Donans* (2006), articles, and videos are available free on her website (gift-economy.com).

Widespread Denial of the Maternal Gift Economy

As they grow up, children in our society have to adapt to an exchange economy that is actually the opposite of the childhood economy. They are forced to make their way in a world in which gifts are denied and there is no free lunch, where few will thrive and many will fail. They cease to believe in the original economy in which their socialization occurred because they embrace the ideology of the market: the idea of every man for himself, of competition and accumulation. They embrace a patriarchal ideology that denigrates gifting and justifies taking.

Popular Western philosophers like Derrida, Bourdieu, and Lyotard believe that unilateral giving is impossible or that it constitutes a hidden exchange. Other thinkers like “de-growth activist” Charles Eisenstein and Nipun Mehta (the founder of ServiceSpace, an incubator of gift economy projects) believe that unilateral giving is possible but do not see the connection with mothering/being mothered. Many agree with anthropologist and Occupy activist David Graeber that debt and obligation, not simply giving and receiving, constitute the way we establish human relations.

I believe that it is because we have been in denial of the importance of the maternal gift economy that we have continued to embrace patriarchal capitalism and capitalist patriarchy in a race toward the extinction of the human species, other species, and Mother Earth. In the current era, the economy of the market and the maternal gift economy coexist. However exchange and gifting are locked in detrimental symbiosis even if we don’t recognize that this is happening.

Back in the Cold War days when it was better to be dead than red, a crucial concept was excluded from our economic thinking: Marx’s concept of profit as coming from surplus labor, that is, free labor performed by a worker in excess of the amount paid for by his or her salary. I believe this free portion of the labor constitutes a gift to the capitalist, even if it is forced out of the worker. Recognizing this allows us to see connections between many kinds of gifts. The consideration of value as subjective, depending upon the preferences of the buyers and consumers, creates a smoke screen that hides an important flow of gifts from the many to the few that is actually happening.

The Extraction of Gifts Under Capitalism

Domestic labor and child care, performed for free mainly by women, constitute a gift that is being given to the market economy, which doesn’t have to pay for those services to “reproduce” the workers. This gift also passes through the labor of salaried workers, reducing the amount of the salary that is necessary for their survival and therefore increasing



“The gifts of workers from both hemispheres flow toward capitalists and corporations based in the Global North,” Vaughan writes. Here, workers at the Seagate factory in Wuxi, China, perform final testing on laptop drives.

the amount of free (“surplus”) labor that the worker is able or forced to give to the capitalist. Because we use money to recognize the value of something and work in the home is unmonetized, the value of work in the home is also unrecognized. Therefore it is notoriously difficult to calculate the value of unwaged work in the home.

Following the 1988 breakthrough study of women’s free work by feminist economist Marilyn Waring, Benjamin Bridgman estimated in the May 2012 issue of *Survey of Current Business* that it would increase the U.S. gross domestic product by some 26 percent if housework were calculated in monetary terms. Similarly the gifts that are “given” by the natural world are also unmonetized. In 1997, in a study on the value of the world’s natural capital published by Robert Costanza in *Nature*, the value of “ecosystem services” was calculated at \$33 trillion as compared to a global GDP of \$18 trillion. Now the commodification, patenting, and sometimes artificial replacement of the free gifts of nature (water, seeds, and fertilizers), not to mention the appropriation and patenting of indigenous knowledge, allow for the seizure of ever more gifts by corporations.

To these we can add the gifts that are extracted through the differences in level of life between countries, in that the livelihood of a worker costs less in developing countries than it does in dominant capitalist (*continued on page 68*)

Debt Forgiveness

Who Owes Whom for What?

BY NANCY HOLMSTROM

THE LION'S SHARE of indebtedness in this world is invalid and immoral. Forgiveness is not what is called for; it's liberation.

Talk of a "debt jubilee" leaves open whether the debts are valid or not, but talking about debt *forgiveness* raises the question of whether a debt is valid from a moral point of view.

By definition, calls for forgiveness imply wrongdoing by the one being forgiven. For this reason, forgiveness is seen not as a moral obligation but rather as an act of generosity. The God who forgives sinners is a God of love and compassion, not a vengeful God. But what if nothing wrong has been done? A prisoner who has been wrongfully convicted is exonerated, not forgiven. And if a person has indeed violated a law but the law is unjust, then forgiveness is not the relevant concept. Thus, to ask whether an act should be *forgiven* inevitably raises the question of whether the act was morally wrong.

Most debtors in the world today—including those in debt bondage, in medical debt, in education debt, and more—have committed no wrongs, so what is called for is cancellation and liberation, not forgiveness.

Building consciousness against the validity of debt in the world today is essential to building a movement that can force the powers-that-be to rescind the debt or at least restructure it in more favorable terms. It is also important psychologically for the indebted. We are raised to believe we ought to obey the law, including paying our debts, and hence we feel guilty, ashamed, or embarrassed if we do not. Whole countries are in thrall and made to beg for relief. Rejection of the validity of our debts can at least relieve the psychological burden of those burdened by debt and can help to build a movement against them.

Immoral Debts

There are many situations in which debts clearly lack moral validity. One particular egregious case involves debt bondage.



Millions will remain chained to their college debt for decades to come. What is called for is liberation, not "forgiveness." Illustration by Olivia Wise.

Only desperately poor people agree to loans forcing them to work for a lender for extended periods of time. Though recognized as a modern form of slavery, often passed through generations, and illegal in most countries, it is nevertheless pervasive throughout the world, even in the United States. Obviously, debtors in this situation need liberation, not debt forgiveness.

Whole countries are in similar straits due to exorbitant loans by powerful countries that reap the bounty of these countries' resources. Through structural adjustment programs (loans from the International Monetary Fund that come with coercive strings attached), debtor nations are required to enact harsh austerity measures to pay their debts to international lending agencies, which have been likened to loan sharks. Again, only desperately poor countries would agree to such conditions. Moreover, the causes of their poverty are in most cases inextricably tied to racism and imperial domination, both historically and in the current period.

These examples are extreme and may seem irrelevant to most people in the United States who are in debt. But their very extremity helps to bring out the core idea expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson who said, "A man in debt is so far a slave." (*continued on page 68*)

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Building an International Bank for Right Livelihood

BY JOEL MAGNUSON

GOVERNMENTS ACROSS THE GLOBE have piled up mountains of debt to keep their economies from crumbling on themselves. Each holds steadfast to an assumption that debt problems can always be solved with more economic growth. This idea that all national economies can and should continue to grow indefinitely is a delusion perpetuated by powerful global economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

In this age of economic recessions and impending ecological catastrophe, we urgently need to create new economic models and institutions that stand outside this growth delusion. One of the more radical visions that was proposed to the United Nations' Bhutan Commission is the idea of an International Bank for Right Livelihood. The idea emerged at a series of brainstorming sessions at the UN Headquarters in which I was privileged to participate.

A New Vision for Debt

The International Bank for Right Livelihood would not be a single monolithic institution. Rather, it would take shape as an evolving network of financial institutions that stand outside the domain and ideology of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

This network would be structured to function at both an international level and within local communities. As an international institution it would serve as a correspondence bank, or an intermediary, that would aggregate source funds from a broad spectrum of institutions and individuals who share a commitment to common foundational principles. The funds could be drawn from deposits, donations, or from issuing bonds.

At the local level, the International Bank for Right Livelihood would assist in the process of chartering small-scale financial cooperatives or credit unions that also serve their communities. These smaller banks would channel source funds as finance capital for projects such as renewable energy development, public transportation and infrastructure, appropriate technologies, cooperative investment in stewardship and payment for ecosystem services, and supporting



What would it be like if global financial institutions followed Bhutan's lead in prioritizing Gross National Happiness? Here, Bhutan's prime minister meets with Norway's minister of international development to discuss efforts to increase happiness throughout Bhutan.

place-based cooperatives that pursue economic activity in the spirit of the resolution.

Each financial institution would be required to have certain rules and guidelines for governance built directly into their charters such that the boards of directors would be bound to uphold these rules. Chief among them would be the directive that financial services are produced in accordance with clearly stated principles of ecological and human well-being to ensure that as personnel come and go the principles of governance remain intact. Each charter would contain guidelines for financial discretion and the assurances of equitable access to credit. The charters would also have a clearly defined democratic orientation in which voting rights and decision-making powers are broadly and democratically extended.

As an evolving network, the International Bank for Right Livelihood could very well establish itself as a viable

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Trond Viken/Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

alternative to established economic institutions that are not equipped to cope with the problems of limits to growth and are rendering themselves obsolete.

Our Growth-Based Economies Are Breaking Down

The soaring amounts of debt that nations and individuals are racking up worldwide underscore the unsustainability of growth-based economies. American consumer debt, which is mostly credit card debt and does not include mortgages, has soared to nearly \$10,000 per person, which is three times what it was twenty years ago. And without high levels of consumer spending, the U.S. economy would grind into an abyss of recession. Accordingly, the Federal Reserve continues to pump tens of billions in fresh cash into the banking system each month. Taking a broader, holistic view, the problem of mounting debt is not necessarily just a matter of financial imprudence but is more likely rooted in a systemic problem of unsustainability.

The media coverage of debt problems tends to focus on surface level symptoms: defaults, litigation, and debt restructuring. But underlying all of that is a more long-term and seemingly intractable problem: growth-driven economies everywhere are hitting the wall of limitations and as a result are falling into stagnation and debt. Government officials, monetary authorities, and most economists are largely ignoring limits to growth as they hold steadfast to the notion that a nation can always grow itself out of whatever economic trouble it finds itself in. The idea that endless economic growth is a panacea is mainstream economists' sacred delusion. The real answer lies in rejecting the compulsion toward growth and instead creating sustainable institutions such as the International Bank for Right Livelihood.

Drawing Inspiration from Bhutan

The United Nations has made space for conversations about the International Bank for Right Livelihood largely thanks to leadership from the tiny Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan, which has been nudging the global community to take a modest but profound step toward rethinking its economic framework. Bhutan has led the way concretely by replacing Gross Domestic Product with Gross National Happiness as its key economic indicator.

In the summer of 2011, Bhutan was the principle sponsor of a nonbinding UN resolution titled, *Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development*, which passed unanimously. The goal of the resolution was to construct a new global economic framework that no longer recognizes ongoing growth, profit maximization, and consumer spending as positive indicators.

The happiness-based framework that takes the place of the profit-based framework is based on a rubric of genuinely

sustainable well-being that is embedded in four foundational principles:

1. *Happiness and well-being* rooted in human health, secure livelihoods, diverse spiritual practices, and vibrant cultural traditions.
2. *Ecological sustainability* in the true sense of keeping economic activity contained within the capacity of the planet to sustain it.
3. *Fair distribution* of wealth and resources both within and among nations, and a particular commitment to improving conditions of those living in abject poverty.
4. *Efficient use of resources* as a model of global resource stewardship.

Once the resolution on happiness was passed, the UN convened a task force led by Bhutan and issued a two-year timeline for its implementation. The first step in that process was a series of meetings held at the UN Headquarters in New York in April 2012 to work out the details of this new economic framework. As part of that effort, I was invited by Bhutan's prime minister, Jigme Thinley, to participate in these meetings. I headed a small subgroup that was assigned the task of envisioning how institutions that govern money and finance could foster economic activity in ways that are consistent with the four foundational (*continued on page 70*)



Bhutan residents such as this woman from the town of Jakar benefit from their government's prioritization of collective well-being. Led by Bhutan, the UN has begun discussing what an International Bank for Right Livelihood could look like.

Embracing the Radical Economics of the Bible

BY MARCUS BORG

WHAT MAY BE the most radical economic laws in all of human history are found in the first five books of the Bible, variously known as the Torah, the Pentateuch, “the law,” and the books of Moses.

Central to God’s covenant with ancient Israel (the spiritual ancestors of Jews, Christians, and Muslims), these laws describe and prescribe what the new life beyond “Egypt”—at that time seen as a symbol of bondage, economic exploitation, impoverishment, and slavery—is to be like. They embody God’s dream, God’s passion for a different kind of life on earth, here and now, in this world. They include laws about debt and land.

In the world of biblical Israel, debt and land were both related to food and the material basis of existence. Most people were farmers, so access to land meant access to the source of food. In that era, a person would go into debt only for the most desperate reasons. Borrowing in order to purchase consumer goods over time was unknown. Only if one didn’t have enough food, perhaps because one’s family had to eat next year’s seed grain in order to survive, would one borrow.

In that cultural context, the laws about debt and land come alive. We can see their purpose and meaning in their ancient historical context. These radical economic laws call for:

- No interest on loans to members of the covenant (fellow-Israelites). People who have enough, or more than enough, are not allowed to profit from the desperation and misfortune of others (see Exod. 22:25, Lev. 23:35-36, and Deut. 23:9).
- The observance of a Sabbath Year. Every seventh year, all debts are to be forgiven and people who have become indentured slaves because of debt are to be released (see Deut. 15:1-18, Deut. 31:10, and Exod. 21:2).
- The observance of a Jubilee Year. Every fiftieth year, all agricultural land is to be returned to the original family of ownership without payment. Behind this law is the tradition that every Israelite family received a piece of agricultural land when the Israelites arrived in the promised land. The law recognizes that over time a family might lose its land.



In the world of biblical Israel, one would go into debt only “if one didn’t have enough food, perhaps because one’s family had to eat next year’s seed grain in order to survive,” Borg writes. Today the situation is much different. How might the Jubilee laws be adapted?

In ancient Israel, agricultural land could not be bought or sold; but it could be lost through foreclosure because of indebtedness. Thus the law mandates its restoration every half century (see Lev. 25:10-28).

It’s interesting that the Jews and Christians who think biblical laws are God’s revealed will and are thus eternally valid have not taken up the fight to put these laws into practice. Many believers are eager to use the Bible against same-sex relationships (and rely on highly questionable interpretations to do so) but devote no energy to fighting for the implementation of these crystal clear edicts on debt. We seldom hear fundamentalist and orthodox voices arguing against interest on loans or for periodic debt forgiveness and restoration of land to families who have lost their land.

Though these laws make sense in the context of ancient Israel, it is impossible to imagine them as “the law of the land” in modern societies. If interest on all loans were prohibited, who would be motivated to loan money? So also if debts were to be forgiven every seventh year—our mortgages and credit card debt erased, cancelled—what institutions would be willing to lend? Of course, it is possible to imagine that there might be some institutions (*continued on page 70*)

MARCUS BORG is the author of twenty-one books, mostly on the Bible and Jesus, including several bestsellers.

Culture

BOOKS

What Makes a Poem Jewish?

The Bloomsbury Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poetry

Edited by Deborah Ager and M.E. Silverman
Bloomsbury Academic, 2013

REVIEW BY DAVID DANOFF

WHAT MAKES A given poet a Jewish poet? It may be stories about Hebrew school and holidays, memories of the shtetl or the Lower East Side. It may be a focus on ethics rooted in the prophetic tradition, or mysticism rooted in the Kabbalah. It may be an engagement with political issues pertaining to Israel and the peace process. Whatever it is, read a selection of a poet's work and the Jewish aspects usually cohere into some kind of pattern.

But what constitutes Jewish poetry? Round up a large enough sample of different writers, and any of the above elements may start to cancel or contradict one another. Any observation you can make, the opposite is also likely to be true. Factor in a scattered set of allegiances to different schools of poetry or different styles of writing, and it becomes almost impossible to separate Jewish poetry from the main currents of poetry in general.

Deborah Ager and M.E. Silverman, the editors of *The Bloomsbury*

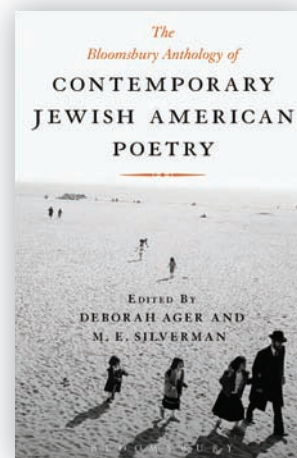
Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poetry, have chosen to present a broad selection and let the contradictions speak for themselves. "We wanted to share distinctly Jewish American voices," they explain in the introduction, "which include second-generation Jews, converts, those who've made aliyah, and others. We included poems that both do and do not focus on Jewish themes, and we did that to convey the breadth and depth of Jewish personhood."

The book covers writers born after 1945, which excludes many of the twentieth century's best-known Jewish poets (Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Alicia Ostriker, Robert Pinsky, et al.). The focus is on more contemporary voices, offering a vision of where Jewish American poetry may be headed in the early twenty-first century. But that vision is not entirely in focus, due to the wide internal variations of the book.

With birthdates extending from the late 1940s to the 1970s and even the 1980s, several distinct generations are represented. Widely published poets such as David Lehman, Edward Hirsch, Alan Shapiro, and Jacqueline Osherow rub shoulders with those just beginning their careers, and the level of accomplishment varies. Experimental poems that push at the edges of syntax and semantics sit alongside more traditional first-person lyrics,

including some poems written in traditional forms such as sonnets and pantoums. (Whichever style you favor, there are sure to be at least a few poems in the book you find meretricious.) Poems depicting scenes from Jewish history—the destruction of the First Temple, Sandy Koufax sitting out game one of the 1965 World Series—in a forthright manner are mingled with others that take a far more jaundiced, anguished, or capricious attitude toward their Jewish themes. (Are you a believer, or not so much? Either way, there'll be something to annoy you.)

This variation is probably unavoidable, unless an editor preferred to establish much narrower parameters. (And who would want to publish—or read—say, the *Anthology of Associate Professor Gen-X Neo-Formalist Jewish Skeptics*?) The best way to approach



the book is either as a buffet of possible options from which to choose and assemble one's own preferred course (decide where you think Jewish poetry is likely—or should be—going, and enjoy the poems that agree with you), or as a menagerie of specimens gathered from many populations, many diverse territories, revealing common traits and behaviors among a range of writers who might at first seem completely unrelated. Either way, some assembly is required. But there are plenty of interesting pieces to work with.

One of the techniques employed by many of the writers is to adapt traditional observances—prayers, holiday rituals—into incongruously modern terms. In “De Profundis,” Lisa Gluskin Stonestreet balances the forcefulness and clarity of the psalms against the messy flux of daily life, the wavering “middle” where most of us spend most of our time:

out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord
—more like out of the middle, the soft chewy center of *here*: the mailbox, the toaster, the dentist office: I cry to you, or to nothing, I whisper and roll my eyes: *Oh, lord*.

This mixing of registers often entails a certain amount of wrestling with the tradition, even wrestling with God. In “Aglow,” in a chatty, blustery, and slightly aggrieved tone, Matthew Zapruder directs a wide-ranging monologue (touching on Paul Celan, Neko Case, and his father building a boat from a catalog) toward an unresponsive “you,” indicting the reader, the Almighty, and possibly others who don't understand or won't respond:

My name is Ukrainian and Ukrainians
killed everyone
but six people with my name. Do you
understand
me now? It hurts to be part of the chain
and feel rusty
and also a tiny squeak now part of what
makes
everything go.

Such juxtapositions can also be used for chiefly comic purposes, as Philip Terman does in his narrative poem “The Shank Bone”:

Our dog swipes the shank bone from
the seder plate,
shakes her muzzle from side to side,
takes off
through Elijah's door.

A number of the poems strike sparks by bringing Judaism into contact with specifically non-Jewish elements. In Cheryl Fish's “Generation X, Crown Heights (1995)” the cultural references, names, and slang tumble deliriously together, celebrating (with a certain amount of irony) the strength that comes from heterodoxy:

Generation X Lubavich boys
listening to Sun Ra
and getting high
eating kosher coldcuts by the pound
mingling *halakah* and vodka
can you reverse *baal t'shuvah*?

Elizabeth Coleman's “Prayer in Anticipation of a Guitar Recital,” before ending with a glimpse of a ghetto and violence, paints a more rarefied picture of transcultural harmony:

God of all secular Jews who lean
towards Buddhism, give me the skill
and poise to play
that elegiac Bach line with fluidity,
with the ease of the Loire running
through
a town in the French countryside,
a town that brews its own vintage wine.

Parents and grandparents make regular appearances, as one would expect in any collection of poetry. But here they come bearing the familiar tropes of Jewish parenthood: stories of immigration and privation, worry, overbearing concern for their children's well-being (and material success), as well as sustaining love and a certain strand of mystical wisdom. In “Dancing in Odessa,” with a mixture of the fanciful and the ominous, Ilya Kaminsky remembers:

My grandmother threw tomatoes
from her balcony, she pulled
imagination like a blanket
over my head. I painted
my mother's face. She understood
loneliness, hid the dead in the earth
like partisans.

In her pantoum “Hyacinths for the Soul,” with the form's prescribed repetitions of lines marching systematically forward before ending back where they began, Joan Siegel ponders a mysterious saying that connects with larger mysteries about her family's life in the old country: “*Bake two loaves of bread, my mother used to say. / Give one away and plant a hyacinth for the soul.*”

And Joy Gaines-Friedler's “How We Love Our Parents” begins simply: “We leave a list of disasters by the telephone / in case they call.”

There are only a few poems that touch on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and these, like Jeff Friedman's “Somebody,” generally do so obliquely:

Somebody tosses a bomb
in the burning bush
and nobody's talking.

Others, like Norman Finkelstein's “Allegory of the Song,” feature images of immigration and displacement that encompass the common experience of many groups:

At the disputed border the song is
turned back.
Denied a visa, without proper ID,
the stateless one, begging and bluffing,
is last seen with what little it owns,
slumped on a bench outside a station
in an unidentified jurisdiction.

Many of the poems in the book have no apparent Jewish content at all, and for certain stretches the book seems hardly different from any anthology of early twenty-first-century poetry. Poems about nature, love, travel, or aging proceed in the usual way, and the Jewishness of the writers can start to seem incidental. It's a little bit

puzzling. Anyone reading this anthology is most likely looking for poems about Judaism and the Jewish experience (however broadly construed). Why not make more of an effort to deliver that experience?

One possible benefit is that a poem with no obvious Jewish connection, like Jane Hirshfield's "In A Kitchen Where Mushrooms Were Washed," can take on unexpected resonances when read in a specifically Jewish context:

In a kitchen where mushrooms were washed,
the mushroom scent lingers.
As the sea must keep for a long time
the scent of the whale.
As a person who's once loved
completely,

a country once conquered,
does not release that stunned
knowledge.

On encountering this poem previously, I've thought about the war in Iraq, the lingering effects of a relationship after it's ended, the link between sensory details and memory. Here, unexpectedly, it made me think of the Jewish element in American poetry:

Unburnable mushrooms are other.
They darken the air they come into.
Theirs the scent of having been
traveled, been taken.

Jewish poets have been largely absorbed into the mainstream of American poetry. Watered down, blended with other national and ethnic traditions, overshadowed by the

much wider differences of style and subject matter between individual writers, a distinctively Jewish element may seem impossible to quantify. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. This scattered but engaging collection helps clarify both the distinctiveness of Jewish American poetry and its prolific dispersal, inviting the reader to discover patterns and attempt to make his or her own sense of this multifaceted, often contradictory body of work as it moves into a new century. ■

DAVID DANOFF is a writer and editor living near Washington, D.C. His poems and reviews have appeared in *Tikkun* and a number of other publications.

DOI 10.1215/08879982-2833719

Loving at the Wrong Time

The Road to Emmaus

by Spencer Reece
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014

REVIEW BY KATIE HERMAN

SHE HAD THE CULTIVATED dignity of those / who withhold their lives," Spencer Reece writes of an aging, androgynous baroness encountered in the first of several long poems in his second poetry collection, *The Road to Emmaus*. It's a characteristically perceptive description that could be applied to many of the book's poems as well, but as with the lonely baroness, the poems' restrained, carefully crafted surfaces only highlight the depth of emotion beneath. Stitching together narratives from religion, history, and myth, *The Road to Emmaus* is a sort of hero's journey, following Reece from his emotional wanderings as a gay man seeking love and acceptance

to his eventual spiritual homecoming in the form of a mid-life call to the Episcopalian priesthood. Yet at its core, this book is about the continuous struggle between two contradictory impulses: the impulse to withhold and protect oneself and the impulse to be open to love.

Loving in the Face of Loss

This dynamic plays out poignantly in the collection's opening poem, "ICU," in which Reece recalls his time as a hospital chaplain. Reece describes the premature infants as "blue, spider-delicate in nests of tubes . . . their faces resigned in plastic attics." It seems reckless to let oneself love something so fragile, so unlikely to survive, but Reece affirms, almost as if to convince himself, "It is correct to love even at the wrong time." This statement is a spiritual imperative and the central challenge of the book: How do we love in the face of inevitable loss? How can

we convince ourselves that it's worth the pain to love what we cannot keep? As a chaplain, Reece is helpless to save the newborns, but at the end of the poem they become "each one / like Orpheus in his dark hallway, saying: / *I knew I would find you, I knew I would lose you.*" In this role reversal, the newborns are the ones who cannot hold onto the beloved, and Reece is the



one who is disappearing. The poem subtly revises the Orpheus myth: in Reece's version, the finding is worth the loss.

This moment of brief encounter with love is also embodied in the collection's title, which refers to a story from the Gospel of Luke in which a stranger joins and comforts two early Christian disciples on their way to the town of Emmaus outside of Jerusalem, just after Jesus's crucifixion. When they reach the town, they suddenly recognize the man as Jesus, but in that moment he vanishes. As in this story, in Reece's poems love is often painfully fleeting, but the specter of loss lends a delicate tenderness to these narratives of romantic and family love. In "Gilgamesh," a long sequence in seventeen fragments, Reece recounts his relationship with a man he calls Joseph, a love that, after years of searching and shame, offered the promise of a true life together. "All your life you have waited for this, / this is what you wanted," the moon tells them, a statement that's both the truth and a taunt. The poet, looking back, already knows the relationship will not last:

Five years they had,
meeting on their celery-green love seat.
Not forever.
But something.

Something still.

Reece's verse can be deceptively plainspoken. These lines don't seem dramatic; their emotional power lies in their restraint. We can feel the emotional work that goes into the insistence that this brief, domestic love, even after its loss and the accompanying pain, is "something still." As Joseph begins to withdraw his love with brutal honesty ("I do not desire him," "I want a younger man, / between the ages of twenty and twenty-five"), Reece continues to showcase his talent for the powerful, simple statement. Perhaps the most crushing line

in the whole book is the sentence, set in a stanza by itself, "Enkidu died," a reference to Gilgamesh's beloved lost companion that eloquently conveys in two words how the loss of love is like a death. Yet as the poem progresses from love to heartbreak, Reece returns to the refrain that concluded the first section: "*But all is to be dared, because . . .*" It is a sentence for which he never supplies an ending, for there is no clear answer to *why* we should dare the things that bring us pain. Instead it seems that for Reece the belief that we must dare to love is a matter of faith.

Turning to Faith

Perhaps this is why Reece ultimately makes the unusual choice, as a gay man in his forties, to become an Episcopal priest. This new stage in his life may seem like a retreat from the world and its difficult loves, but for Reece it is a turn *toward* love. In "Prodigal Son," as he bids goodbye to the secular life of Miami, he confesses:

For a decade I did not speak to my
parents.
Are you listening to me?
I will not bore you with details.
Instead, I will tell you something new.
Listen to me. I was angry.
But the reasons no longer interest me.

Turning to faith means letting go of the anger and pain that have made it seem "as if the world would always be / an endless pair of separated things." Rather than a withdrawal from the world, Reece's embrace of his religious calling is a metaphorical and literal homecoming, an end to his spiritual wanderings. "Devotion becomes the most reasonable emotion as we age; / we recognize it in contrast to the losses," he tells his brother in "12:20 in New York."

Yet while devotion represents a turn to love, Reece is too smart, too tempered by experience to believe it offers easy answers. Encountering a prayer that asks God to "make

us . . . deeply sensible / of the shortness and uncertainty of life," Reece wonders, "Sensible? / How to be sensible about uncertainty?" Devotion cannot eliminate uncertainty and loss, but it does offer a way to love in spite of uncertainty. In "Hartford," a long prose sequence dealing with Reece's return to his hometown as a hospital chaplain and his efforts to rebuild his relationship with his mother, he admits, "The mother and son understand each other well and not so well." This statement is both self-contradictory and easily recognizable as true: we never fully understand even those we know best.

While in the past this type of difficult understanding led to estrangement, religion has taught the older Reece to love even when he cannot understand. In fact, in the uncertain world of these poems, devotion *despite* uncertainty comes to be the defining characteristic of love. One of the ways Reece works to reconcile with his mother in "Hartford" is by digging into a family mystery that has always haunted her—her father's possible Jewish background and escape from World War II-era Lithuania. Reece is able to offer some clues but no definitive answers. "Her confusion has defined me the way confusion defines Jerusalem and my love has required confusion as religion requires poetry," he writes. Is confusion a necessary part of love? For Reece, it seems, both religion and poetry offer a way to embrace and hold those we love but can never fully grasp. ■

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DOI 10.1215/08879982-2833731

Transcending Economic Dualities

Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons

by David Bollier
New Society Publishers, 2014

REVIEW BY MIKI KASHTAN

THIS BOOK excites me in a rare and precious way. It has the potential to introduce many more people to a startlingly new way of making sense of where we are as a species and what we can do—starting within the communities we inhabit—to move toward the world of our dreams. Although an actual commons “movement” doesn’t quite exist yet, there is a depth of transformation in the ideas and activism Bollier describes in this book that may offer us one of the key entryways into a livable future.

Think Like a Commoner provides a coherent framework that freshly illustrates the enormous losses that have accompanied the transition to capitalism and its continued entrenchment. It does so by making visible the existence of the commons and the devastating effects of markets and states encroaching on the commons, which they have both been doing for

the last several hundred years. At the same time, the book is more about hope than about destruction, because it brings us into the rich and complex world of people managing resources together in a collaborative way. The commons, which are a truly collaborative form, were the principal means of managing resources for millennia, and is gaining momentum in this critical time in human history. This fact is what gives me so much hope and excitement the more I learn about it.

A Clash of Two Paradigms for Managing Resources

This book also provides a simple and deep introduction to how the commons work, why commons are so important, and examples of commons that persist, such as the *acequias* in the Southwest of the United States and fisheries in Maine. It also describes new commons that are being created today, especially with the advent of the internet—for example, peer production such as Wikipedia, open source software, and many more.

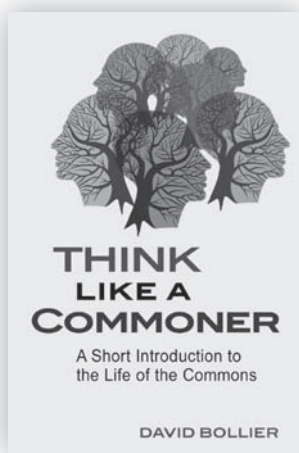
Despite centuries of ongoing losses to capitalist encroachment, it is still the case that at least two billion people on our planet depend on resources held as commons for their daily necessities, and a growing number of people are actively engaged in creating commons as a way of reclaiming our very humanity. My hope is that this book can help catalyze a movement to turn around the continued appropriation by large corporate and state players of resources previously held as commons. Some of the key zones of struggle are the internet, where corporations continue attempts to limit usage; water, where corporations are battling, from Maine to Bolivia, to wrest access and control from local

communities; and land, particularly in Africa, where massive sales of land previously held as commons are being made to large foreign entities without benefit to the local people. Like their predecessors in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, the local people, dispossessed, become unable to subsist on the land they had known for millennia.

This book also frames the commons as an entirely new lens through which we can analyze the world, as well as a path toward creating change. Instead of focusing purely on major structural changes, which often appear to be beyond our capacity to attain, or limiting ourselves to individual transformation that doesn’t add up to institutional change, we can focus on the commons. Doing so allows us to work with our fellow humans on local or global projects that illustrate and prefigure the world so many of us want to create: one where everyone’s basic needs are attended to, where we steward resources on behalf of the whole, and where we collaborate effectively to respond to local and global challenges.

Collaboration Challenges Corporate Capitalism

Part of what makes the commons so exciting is that their very existence challenges both the core assumptions of economics and the continued existence of corporate capitalism. The reality of the commons—an economic and social form that is based on sharing and collaboration—questions the core premise that we are all, fundamentally, narrowly self-interested. This premise is most vividly exemplified in ecologist Garrett Hardin’s theory on “the tragedy of the commons.” According to Hardin, any resource held as a commons will



degrade because there is no individual incentive for anyone to care for the resource, and therefore each person will consume as much of it as possible.

Drawing on the remarkable work of Nobel prizewinner Elinor Ostrom, Bollier exposes a major flaw in Hardin's theory: Hardin ignores the fact that *actual* commons are never opened. Instead, they tend to be managed by a specific group of people that are connected to each other by bonds of purpose, vision, or sometimes their collective ability to survive. As a result, they create agreements and follow them for everyone's benefit. This is what humans have been doing since time immemorial. It's our current focus on individual benefit through consumption without limits that is the tragedy, rather than the previous forms of social organizing we have known for so long.

In addition to the theoretical challenge, the commons constitute a

practical threat to the existing systems because they function in stewardship rather than ownership, and because sharing of resources means that people are less likely to turn to markets for their needs. Ultimately, the existence of the commons challenges the most sacrosanct institution of the market—private property. Bollier tells us, for example, how even philosopher John Locke stated in his *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (Chapter 5, sec. 27) that private appropriation must be limited to “at least where there is *enough, or as good, left in common for others.*” And, yet, despite this acknowledgment—known as the Lockean Proviso—of the inherent tension between private property and the commons, in actual practice, the appropriation of resources continued apace beyond that limit. Thus did the “engineering of scarcity” that modern markets consist of replace the “engineering

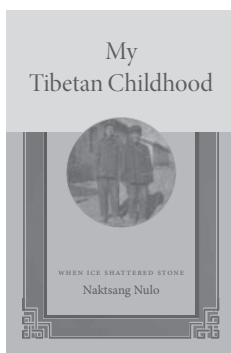
of abundance” that the commons are based on.

It is little wonder that our collaboration muscles have atrophied so dramatically that many of us are reluctant to engage with others in sharing, in collaborating on projects, and in co-creating our future. We run into endless conflicts, inefficiencies, or lack of purpose when we engage in groups. Two study-circle communities I was part of disintegrated within weeks of someone bringing up the topic of sharing resources within the community. It was evident to me that everyone saw sharing as loss of autonomy and did not believe they would gain meaningful access to more resources.

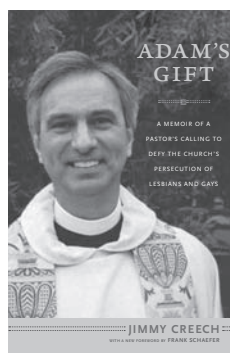
In order to succeed in creating new commons by people who have not been part of the commons for a while, we need to relearn how to collaborate. The one thing that Bollier doesn't address in this book is how this learning can happen. The skills of collaboration are not as obvious as they appear. Acquiring them is not simple when the legacy of separation is so deeply ingrained in us after centuries of coercion and competition. Learning to collaborate entails deeply integrating our conceptual and spiritual understanding that we are interdependent by developing practices and tools that support us when we reach the inevitable and necessary conflicts. It entails healing from the trauma of separation and (engineered) scarcity that lead us to look for consumer solutions rather than collective ones. There are specific things we can do to strengthen our collaboration muscles. These include inner practices, such as learning to experience ourselves as part of the whole, so we know that our needs matter and are important, as well as actively learning about the effects of our choices on other people's ability to attend to their needs.

Collaboration, especially around the management of finite resources on which our entire species depends, is about always looking for a solution

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that works for as many stakeholders as possible in any given dilemma. We are not used to using everyone's needs as a lens through which we approach decision-making. After reading Bollier's book, I am ever more committed to transcending coercion, incentives, and sacrifice to move toward a world where true willingness in service of the whole is the primary motivation for attending to all that needs doing. ■

MIKI KASHTAN, PH.D., co-founder of Bay Area Nonviolent Communication (baynvc.org), is author of *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness*. She blogs at thefearlessheart.org and her articles have been published in *Tikkun*, the *New York Times*, *Waging Nonviolence*, *Shareable*, and elsewhere.

DOI 10.1215/08879982-2833743

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Reading Death

To Mourn a Child: Jewish Responses to Neonatal and Childhood Death

Edited by Jeffrey Saks and Joel Wolowelsky
KTAV Publishing House, 2013

Kaddish: Women's Voices

Edited by Michal Smart and Barbara Ashkenas
Urim Publications, 2013

REVIEW BY ERICA BROWN

IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN school of superstition, if speaking about death is inviting it, then reading about it is like building your own coffin. No one wants to talk about what is inevitable, especially if it involves nonexistence. I say this because even though I spent years researching and writing about death myself, when the book *To Mourn a Child: Jewish Responses to Neonatal and Childhood Death* arrived unsolicited, I put it, unread, on my desk stack. The cover has a photo of an empty swing; the book's title hangs between the chains, suspended like a life freighted with expectation that has suddenly stopped.

The book sat for months on that stack, until I finally turned the spine around to face the wall. I could not

bear to look at the title in the morning as I studied or typed. Life is heavy enough. Read to escape, I told myself. When it comes to reading death, I'm done. *Genuck. Dayenu*. It's enough.

This was my exact thought when *Kaddish: Women's Voices* appeared at my door. What is with all of us? Let's spend more time living. That didn't even make it to the stack. I looked over the table of contents and then it went straight on the shelf.

I assume many reviewers did the same thing when they first received my own book on death, *Happier Endings: A Meditation on Life and Death*. A few days after *Happier Endings* was published, the vice president of Simon & Schuster called: "By the way, there's something I forgot to tell you. Death does better in paperback." He was preparing me for the lack of royalties that would be coming my way and for the likelihood that Oprah and Ellen were not going to be calling soon.

But there are moments when we overcome our aversion to facing death and can find solace and wisdom in writings on it. We look for writing that can help us articulate our pain or our primal fears of mortality. As the *yartzeit* (death anniversary) of a close friend approached, I pulled out *Kaddish* to see if I could locate myself on its pages. True, I never said *kaddish*

(the mourner's prayer) for my friend, but I think it might have been easier to say it than to answer "amen" to her teenage son's prayer. Hearing the adolescent jumble of kaddish's numbing words rattled me each time. Kaddish is a positive affirmation of life and can have the ironic effect of feeling more painful at times than ignoring death altogether.

Women in Mourning

When I picked up *Kaddish*, I could not put it down. I read essay after essay in Barbara Ashkenas and Michal Smart's anthology, taking comfort from these women who had loved and lost and had the temerity to share the pain and try to halve it as a result. "Each Kaddish for me was a chance to keep my father 'alive' for a little longer. It was our special time together," writes one woman. This sentiment is echoed in different ways throughout; the repetition and familiarity of kaddish provided an anchor: "Death and illness are a disorganizing experience and people look for familiar words uttered by a familiar voice when they find themselves in the chaos of tragedy."

There were young women and old women, women who had lost parents and those who had lost siblings. The authors stretched the globe, yet a preponderance of them came from

Stamford, Connecticut, the home of the editors. There were Reform rabbis and those new to Judaism who deepened their Jewish lives through the experience of Jewish mourning. There was one essay from a woman who did not recite the kaddish and wanted to justify her decision.

A number of women spoke of feeling invisible, particularly when on their travels they visited synagogues that did not welcome their voices. Some synagogue doors remained locked to them, literally. Some were upset when the *tzedakah* box passed around to gather charitable donations during daily prayers did not make it to their side or when male mourners hurried through the Aramaic and did not pause for them.

There were women who, in saying kaddish, which was traditionally recited by men, felt accepted into what they previously thought of as an old boys' network because they came to synagogue day in and day out to keep the discipline of kaddish. Sensitive men on the other side of a ritual barrier waited for them or kept time with them so that they would not feel alone standing in a women's gallery. Saying kaddish makes anyone feel alone enough.

I found myself asking a familiar question in my reading. Why is this book about women only?

The experience of death and mourning is universal; the Jewish flavor of death makes no gender concessions. The angel of death is an equal opportunity employer. But the male-based rituals can feel alienating.

The why-women-only question struck me when I got to the end of the anthology and read two legally based essays by men, both rabbis. These essays seemed out of place, both because they felt scholarly when the general tone of the writing was emotional and personal and because they were included in a volume subtitled "Women's Voices." A change in orientation or style might have been more natural had the volume been broken

into thematic sections. Although the essays were sometimes separated by anonymous poems, there was no sense of broader organization, which would have helped the reader. This lack of organizational structure contributed to a different, perhaps more important and nonlinear feeling: that of open voices relieved to share a moment of anguish. This nonlinear feeling invites readers into a friendship of sorts, the companionship of misery. This requires no organization, just the willingness to make oneself open to the depth of human experience. There were a dozen women I thought of instantly who would benefit from such a gift at a *shiva* (weeklong mourning period), whose hearts, already cracked open, would have appreciated someone to "talk" to in the act of reading, to open those hearts yet wider still.

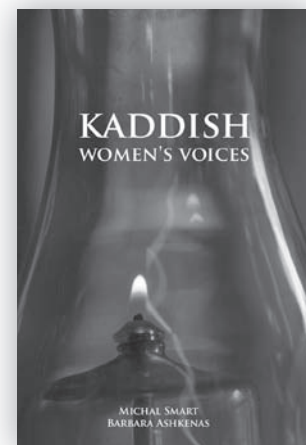
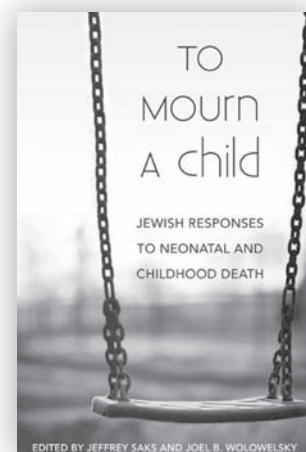
Mourning for Children

By the time I finished *Kaddish*, I was open to reading *To Mourn a Child*, edited by Jeffrey Sacks and Joel B. Wolowelsky. This, too, I could not put down. There were scholars who wrote about the experience of losing a child or a sibling. Some of them were people I knew, and hearing about their loss enabled me to know them in a different and deeper way. Here the tone was less an invitation to a shared experience than the tender attempt to retrieve a time of tragedy and offer it to readers. Unlike *Kaddish*, *To Mourn a Child* offers a variety of different lenses through which to view the death of a child: the ache of a parent or an older brother, the wisdom of a passage of Talmud, the voice of a physician who has to travel through this tragedy with parents, a rabbi who has sheltered and shepherded people through the experience and offers his wisdom, a *rebbetzin* (the wife of a rabbi) who has lost a child and then decades later suffers as a grandmother losing a grandchild, a clinical psychologist who offers sage advice about coping with marital difficulties when two parents

mourn a child differently. The book's essays were exquisitely touching, a profound *nechama*, a solace.

My daughter entered the room when tears were streaming down my face. I was mid-essay, absorbed in the honesty of the writing and grateful for writers who were in effect saying, "I have gone through this. You are not alone," to someone who has never gone through this unspeakable loss. Many authors spoke of the personal responsibility they felt to go to the shiva of strangers who lost a child, if only to show that human beings can go to hell and back and remain standing. And I was overcome with a need to thank everyone in both these books for their courage.

We all wonder sometimes how much suffering one person can hold and remain whole. And that's when we realize the truth of what the Kotzker Rebbe once said: "There is nothing so



whole as a broken heart.” People are whole, not in spite of suffering but because of it. If we read death for that reason alone, we will understand why Ecclesiastes says it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of mirth. We read death, and if death is “done well,” we learn how to live with greater intensity and grace. ■

DR. ERICA BROWN is an educator and writer. Her latest books are *Happier Endings: A Meditation on Life and Death* and *Leadership in the Wilderness: Authority and Anarchy in the Book of Numbers*.

DOI 10.1215/08879982-2833755



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Embracing Change: Forgotten Traditions Within Sephardic Judaism

Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East

by Zvi Zohar

Bloomsbury Academic, 2013

REVIEW BY TZVI MARX

RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS are often, if not always, associated with dogmatic, unchanging claims of absolute truths. If God revealed it, it must be a permanent verity, fixed in the eternal universe. Change is associated with human uncertainty, while divinity, the very stuff of conviction, is characterized by the unchanging. This explains why people do not want to get involved in debates about religion. Believers will never change their minds in the face of even

the most persuasive evidence. So what is the point of critically discussing with them anything that touches on their religious convictions?

The intractability of Jewish law is succinctly expressed in the phrase, “The new is forbidden by Torah” (*chadash assur min haTorah*), according to which view, “authentic Jewish continuity would be maintained only to the extent that Jewish society continued to cloister itself from external influences.” The most famous spokesman for this view was Rabbi Moshe Schreiber (popularly known as the Chatam Sofer), who was the spiritual head of Hungary’s Ashkenazic community in the early nineteenth century. Rabbi Schreiber said: “It is fully clear to God, that it is impossible for the Israelite People to be different from the rest of the nations, except if they separate themselves completely from them and from their ways.” He emphasized that especially education must continue as it had in premodern times “in the ways we have followed forever, from the days of Moses our teacher until today.”

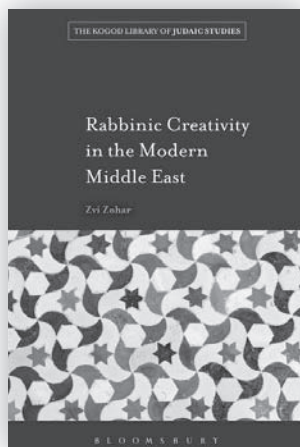
So it is like a blast of fresh air to discover through Zvi Zohar’s new book that in the modern Middle East of the nineteenth century, a different wind was blowing within the Sephardic Jewish world, one in which changeability and adaption to changing

conditions were of the very essence of true religiosity. Zohar’s 369-page book *Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East* reflects on the “halacha as a *dynamic* religious tradition according to the Sephardi-Oriental halakhic scholars” in which “the greatness and eternity of Torah is revealed specifically in its capacity to promote the realization of the highest values in a variety of ways, each fully in tune with the conditions of a (different) specific time and place.”

No Precedent Is Binding

As an example, Zohar focuses on the flexible outlook and halachic decisions expressed in Rabbi Israel Moshe Hazan’s book *Sheerit ha-Nahala*, which was published in 1862. Hazan was born in Izmir in 1808, and his last post was as Chief Rabbi of Alexandria. He died in Israel in 1862 after having done rabbinic service in North Africa, London, Amsterdam, Rome, and Corfu. Rabbi Hazan is not shy even to disagree with the saintly Moses Maimonides, whose word was Torah for many Jews. In particular, he disagrees with Maimonides on the sacred character of the Hebrew language.

For Maimonides, the holiness of the Hebrew language lies in its delicacy, in not having explicit words for sexual activity and for the sexual organs, but



referring to these only indirectly. It is this, and nothing else, that distinguishes it from other languages and earns for it the status of “holy tongue.”

But Hazan argues that in the primordial Hebrew there was certainly explicit terminology for these things, insofar as the original language was complete. “Even the most minute idea in the world of thought could be expressed beautifully and properly,” he says. It is in the later version of Hebrew that we inherited—not its primary version—that such terms are lacking.

Zohar lays the groundwork to demonstrate that, in fact, according to the classic halachic system, “no precedent is formally binding”: a rabbinic decisor, the *posek*, may disregard the decisions of earlier authorities on the matter at hand and rule solely according to his own best construction and application of the original canonic sources (primarily the Bible and Talmud). And yet we here in the West are under the mistaken impression that the “true” Halachah is a never-changing fixity. That is a fiction, according to the historian Jacob Katz, whom Zohar cites. The inflexibility of the Orthodox claim of halachic infallibility is actually a radical departure from the classic flexibility of the halachic tradition.

Zohar cites many Sephardic rabbis to make his case and gives a variety of examples to show how Sephardic Judaism permitted more leeway in the encounter of Judaism with modernity.

Dishwashing Dilemmas

One realm in which Sephardic Judaism is more flexible is on the question of whether one may place milk and meat dishes together in a dishwasher and run the machine. Western-oriented Orthodox Jews are careful to wash milk and meat dishes separately in order not to violate the biblical injunction not to “cook the kid with the mother’s milk,” which forms the basis of the very complicated separations ruling a kosher kitchen. Some kosher

practices require a neutral washing of water between actual washings of dishes. Others require separate milk and meat dish racks to avoid the slightest possibility of contact.

Sephardic tradition is less rigid. Shaul-Matlob Abadi, a Sephardic Syrian rabbi born in 1889 to a long line of rabbinic scholars, authored a halachic work, *Magen Ba’adi*, which permits washing meat and milk dishes together. To make this claim, Abadi adduces the Talmud’s concept of *ta’am nifgam* (unpalatable taste), which renders food a nonfood. The soap of the dishwasher makes the transfer of milk to meat moot. It renders all food residues nonfood material and hence not a *kashrut* (kosher laws) problem. Interestingly, according to Zohar, the distinguished former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel Ovadiah Yosef published a similar ruling. In this age of conservation, when one considers the amount of water saved through this elegant solution to a pressing household problem, one cannot fail to be impressed by this creative rabbinic thinking.

I am aware that for some readers the whole issue seems trivial, since for them it may seem that the Jewish dietary laws are outmoded, but for those loyal to the *kashrut* regime, this offers much relief in a sober observance of Judaism, taking some of the drudgery out of the kosher kitchen.

The Loss of Sephardic Creativity

Anyone familiar with the Talmud cannot but be impressed by its nondogmatic appropriation of the prophetic revelatory literature of the sacred canon. One might almost call it subversive of the Bible. Nothing is as it seems and nothing is beyond the critical comments of the sages, rabbinical teachers, and scribes. To emphasize this point, consider the rabbinic controversy in the Talmud (Yebamot 89b) in which the point at issue is whether a

Beit Din (a rabbinically constituted authority) can lay down a condition that will cause a law of the Torah to be disregarded. The one rabbi who believes a *Beit Din* should be able to do so asks his opponent: “And do you not yourself agree with such a ruling?” It is in this spirit of inquiry and responsibility, even to the point of upending the biblical injunction, that the guidelines inherited from the prophetic revelatory tradition are refined in the crucible of new developments so that the letter of the law might not overpower its spirit and reasonable applicability.

Zohar delights us with his tidbits of Sephardic creativity but ends as well with a sad admission that this original Sephardic consciousness has been lost in Israel as Sephardic students have come under the influence of Ashkenazic mentors. For the most part these Sephardic students have studied in yeshivot under the aegis of European rabbis and have therefore internalized the Ashkenazic religious reluctance to embrace the insights of modernity.

Zohar’s epilogue saddens us with the statement that “the original Sephardic-Oriental classic model” that he so poignantly described “has become almost totally forgotten; it is not taught today at any yeshiva in the Jewish world,” leaving our Judaism “an impoverished, semi-atrophied manifestation of the halachic tradition in its entirety.” But he hopes that the awareness of such a tradition will contribute to its resuscitation. I do too. Enough of dishwashers that have to be run through four times instead of just once to make us feel kosher. ■

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DOI 10.1215/08879982-2833767

Sadly, for several years after Berry made this statement, the commission drifted ever further from alignment with this mission, instead adopting a lopsided approach that focused overwhelmingly on anti-Semitism. Two right-wing Republican appointees in the middle of this situation are Abigail Thernstrom, a USCCR commissioner, and Kenneth L. Marcus, who shaped policies at the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and at the USCCR. Thernstrom is still a commissioner. Marcus has left government service but continues to write and organize against anti-Semitism on campuses.

Imbalanced Hearings on Campus Anti-Semitism

Three years after the 9/11 attacks, Marcus—the deputy assistant secretary for enforcement in the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights—announced that Title VI civil rights enforcement would be expanded to cover students at federally funded colleges “targeted for harassment based on their membership in groups that exhibit both ethnic and religious characteristics, such as Arab Muslims, Jewish Americans, and Sikhs.”

In December 2004 Marcus was appointed by President Bush to be staff director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Before, during, and after his tenure at the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and the USCCR, Marcus wrote and spoke out against anti-Muslim, anti-Sikh, and anti-Arab discrimination. Yet most media reports about efforts at both agencies—as well as public awareness of their activities—pointed to an apparent focus almost exclusively on Jewish students.

At the USCCR Marcus launched a major investigation into anti-Semitism on campus, leading to a highly imbalanced briefing in November of 2005. Testimony was presented by

representatives from the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, the Zionist Organization of America's Center for Law and Justice, and the American Jewish Congress. Specific targets were Columbia University, San Francisco State University, and the University of California, Irvine.

Several universities under investigation refused to participate in the hearings. The commission implied that the universities' refusal letters were nonresponsive. In fact a review of the letters on file at the USCCR offices in Washington indicates that a main concern was that the colleges felt the hearings themselves were improper.

Some of the one-sided testimony at the hearings was later shown to be based on false, poorly documented, or ideologically biased claims. The testimony of Gary Tobin, president of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, was drawn from a book he co-authored, *The UnCivil University: Intolerance on College Campuses*. According to its publisher, the book “documents the alarming rise in bigotry and bullying in the academy, using a range of evidence from first-hand accounts of intimidation of students by anti-Israel professors to anti-Semitic articles in student newspapers and marginalization of pro-Israel scholars.”

One reviewer, however, described part of the book as “an indictment of 1960s liberalism, academic freedom, and tenure.” And the respected newsletter *Inside Higher Ed* noted that various Jewish leaders said Tobin's book “inappropriately equates all criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.”

Both the USCCR and the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights began to base their actions on the biased hearings and the biased views that undergirded their conclusions. Ominously, the USCCR became concerned with incidents of anti-Semitism “fueled by ideologically biased campus programs that receive operating funds from the federal government under Title VI of the Higher

Education Act.” The implied threat was that federal funding was at risk.

How Bush Pushed the Civil Rights Commission to the Right

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was designed by Congress to have an equal number of Republican and Democratic commissioners, but President Bush managed to circumvent this intent by packing the commission with a mixture of right-wing Republicans and right-wing libertarians and independents.

This process began at the commission when Republican appointees, commissioners Abigail Thernstrom and Russell Redenbaugh, re-registered as independent voters. Rechristening right-wing Republicans as “independents” allowed for the appointment of four Republicans and two “independent” right-wing ideologues on the eight-person commission. This meant the Right controlled the panel, because to approve any major official action by the USCCR requires five votes—and the “Bush Bloc” controlled six votes. A 2007 investigative report by Charlie Savage in the *Boston Globe* noted:

Unusual circumstances surrounding the appointments attracted little attention at the time. But they have had a sweeping effect, shifting the commission's emphasis from investigating claims of civil rights violations to questioning programs designed to offset the historic effects of discrimination.

Savage explains that “until Bush's 2004 appointments, no president used re-registrations by sitting commissioners to satisfy the law that forbids presidents from appointing a fifth commissioner of the same party.” Peter Shane, an Ohio State University law professor, saw Bush's move as a historic first. Shane told Savage it was an “escalation” in the use of hardball politics.

To his credit, Redenbaugh, Savage noted, “called Bush's use of his switch

to appoint a Republican ‘inappropriate’ and ‘wrong.’” Redenbaugh resigned in 2005 and the Senate promptly appointed Gail Heriot, a member of the conservative Federalist Society and a Republican activist who had re-registered as an independent. Though she claimed she had disagreements with the Republican Party, she declined to name one when asked.

The Right-Wing Leadership of Abigail Thernstrom

The shifting balance of power within the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights enabled the approaches championed by commissioner Abigail Thernstrom—a woman hailed as a leading intellectual by conservative and right-wing libertarian commentators—to prevail from 2004 until recently.

In her book *Mobilizing Resentment*, progressive scholar Jean Hardisty described Thernstrom and her husband as “rightist libertarians who have focused on affirmative action as the greatest of liberalism’s mistakes.” Hardisty notes that the Thernstroms considered affirmative action “dangerous” and that their “personal mission is to promote ‘color blind’ policies as the only true reflection of the original intent of liberal racial programs.” Hardisty notes that Thernstrom has served as:

a senior fellow at the rightist Manhattan Institute and has served on the boards of three [right-wing] movement organizations—the Institute for Justice, the Center for Equal Opportunity, and the Cato Institute. The Thernstroms’ research for their book was supported by grants from at least three rightist foundations.

Thernstrom, who now lists her political affiliation as Republican, is currently the vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

As a commissioner, Thernstrom repeatedly played the role of a polite ideological hammer, striking down

attempts by Democratic appointees to broaden the discussion and find some sort of bipartisan compromise. In addition, according to Savage, after the Bush appointments, the commission “stopped issuing subpoenas and going on the road to hold lengthy fact-finding hearings, as it previously did about once a year.” There were “three planned hearings in the works when the conservative bloc took over” that were cancelled, Savage found.

Consequences of the Conservative Takeover

All of this partisan maneuvering has produced troubling results:

- The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights for many years moved away from national and regional hearings on growing Islamophobia in the United States and preferentially highlighted anti-Semitism and the plight of Jewish students.
- Thernstrom and her right-wing allies began issuing unilateral letters that were sent from within the commission but that bore only their signatures, pushing their anti-affirmative action views in an attempt to sway state and other agencies and policies.
- Attempts to broaden the focus of the commission from 2004 to 2012 by Democratic appointees were repeatedly squashed by Thernstrom and her allies (this is clearly evidenced by a review of commission minutes).
- Both the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights appeared to act on the dubious popular claim by right-wing ideologues that U.S. college campuses are hotbeds of liberal bias, Marxist treason, and Muslim treachery promoting organized anti-Semitism in the form of anti-Israel activity.
- The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights under Marcus and Thernstrom established a special page link

highlighted at the top of the home page devoted to collecting complaints solely about anti-Semitism on college campuses. Meanwhile the main complaint form for discrimination was left inside the website for those of other faith traditions to find on their own.

- Federal agencies such as the Department of State and U.S. Commission on Civil Rights have based anti-bias policies on a document developed by the European Union Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia—the “EUMC Working Definition of Anti-Semitism”—even though the monitoring center’s successor group later abandoned the draft without implementation. (It seems relevant to note here that Marcus is now the president of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law which also, for “most purposes,” defines “anti-Semitism according to the EUMC Working Definition of Anti-Semitism.”)

This situation lasted well into President Obama’s first administration. In November 2012 the Civil Rights Commission finally held a public briefing on “Federal Civil Rights Engagement with Arab and Muslim American Communities Post 9/11.” Chairman Marty Castro noted wryly that Commissioner Michael Yaki had been advocating the briefing “for many years.”

Both Thernstrom and Marcus defended their past actions when contacted for a response to the assertions made in this article. Both noted there long has been partisan activity by both Republican and Democratic Party appointees in agencies and commissions. Both said that the intent and outcome of their actions was to ensure federal protections for Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and other students targeted based on perceived ethnic characteristics.

Marcus added: “Congress should act to prevent harassment of all religious minority children. Fifty years after we

passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it is inexcusable that Congress still has not passed a civil rights statute to bar religious harassment in our schools, colleges, and universities.”

The Threat of Censorship

In a 2010 op-ed, former commissioner Marcus urged the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights to explain that nothing in its new policy requires any encroachment on constitutionally protected expression by either advocates or critics of Israel.” He added, however, that “where anti-Israel groups are engaged in deeply offensive protests” and the university can only condemn “the hate or bigotry rather than censor or punish the speaker,” then the university deserves “to get a call from the federal agency that funds them.”

This orientation raises the threat of government censorship warned about by Kenneth Stern and Cary Nelson in their suppressed joint letter. This threat emerges from the adoption of the EUMC Working Definition of Anti-Semitism because its wording was a draft for debate, never meant to be adopted uncritically. Ironically, a main author of the EUMC text is Kenneth Stern, the very same person criticized for his concern over possible government censorship.

While the EUMC states that merely criticizing Israel does not constitute anti-Semitism, the examples of anti-Semitism that it offers are very broad. For example, Stern and Nelson note that the examples include holding Jews collectively responsible for acts of the Israeli state, comparing Israeli policy to that of the Nazis, or denying to Jews the right of self determination (such as by claiming that Zionism is racism). In recent years the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights have crafted policies based on the abandoned EUMC document.

Addressing the question of censorship based on the EUMC text, Stern and Nelson wrote:

It is entirely proper for university administrators, scholars, and students to reference the [EUMC] “working definition” in identifying definite or possible instances of anti-Semitism on campus. It is a perversion of the definition to use it, as some are doing, in an attempt to censor what a professor, student, or speaker can say. Because a statement might be “countable” by data collectors under the “working definition” does not therefore mean that Title VI is violated. To assert this not only contravenes the definition’s purpose (it was not drafted to label anyone an anti-Semite or to limit campus speech), it also harms the battle against anti-Semitism.

The unfinished debate over the exact language in the EUMC text centered on the question of defining when anti-Zionist or anti-Israel statements step over the line into anti-Semitism.

The chilling effect of the present situation is very real. In March 2014, Northeastern University in Boston suspended a chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine after the group promoted BDS in a series of actions. University officials claimed the suspension was due to an alleged failure to abide by school policies, but Students for Justice in Palestine members and civil libertarians argued it was based on the content of slogans and posters seen as offensive. In an interview with NBC News, Tori Porell, the president of Students for Justice in Palestine at Northeastern, said the campus administration had a double standard. She suggested it was part of a campaign of censorship and that “our free speech is suppressed.” Northeastern’s action came roughly a year after the Zionist Organization of America complained to the university president, suggesting that the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter might be spreading anti-Semitism. The Zionist Organization of America was a major player in crafting the Civil Rights commission’s policies on anti-Semitism under Marcus and Thernstrom.

Defending Dissent, Civil Liberties, and Civil Rights

Reacting to the situation at Northeastern, Sarah Wunsch, a staff attorney at the Massachusetts ACLU, told NBC News that “freedom of expression isn’t always nice” and “may be upsetting, but that’s the point of it. That doesn’t mean it should be unprotected.” Wunsch noted that in every case where the Department of Education has investigated Title VI complaints stemming from campus conflicts over Israel and Palestine, the determination has been that they “do not constitute civil rights violations.” Similar free speech issues have arisen at Barnard College, Rutgers University, Florida Atlantic University, the City University of New York, and other colleges. The watchdog group Palestine Solidarity Legal Support has tracked over eighty complaints of campus intimidation aimed at supporters of Palestinian rights.

In his preface to a June 2014 blog post on Tikkun Daily (tikkun.org/daily), Rabbi Michael Lerner bemoaned the fact that often “in the view of the Jewish establishment” supporters of BDS and Palestinian rights are “automatically suspect of being anti-Semitic,” adding, “We believe a public debate is a more healthy way to conduct this discussion.” Public debates should include an attempt to clarify what is meant by participants when they use the terms anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism.

None of what we have written here should be twisted to suggest a sinister conspiracy of Jews or agents of Israel. That is the sort of bigoted nonsense that pollutes the internet. In some cases the imbalanced outcomes of the federal government’s efforts may even have been unintentional.

We tell this story to show what inevitably happens when a political party—in this case the Republican Party—packs federal agencies, commissions, institutions, and the U.S. court system with uncompromising ideologues who seek to block and crush the opposition

rather than to engage in the give-and-take of democratic civil society.

Bigotry and discrimination against Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, and others of religious faith (as well as nonbelievers) should be opposed by all of us. The appropriate roles for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights in matters of discrimination based on religion and ethnicity remain unclear. Congress and the Obama administration should rectify this biased situation as soon as possible.

(Please visit buildingequality.us/silencing-dissent for a timeline of the events described here and for additional resources on this topic.) ■

LEVY-LYONS *(continued from page 10)*

And it gets even more interesting. This God/Being could have been described as the God who made the world or who judges humans or who makes the sun rise. But no. Of all the ways it could have been described, it's described as the God "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." The one thing the author

wants us to know about this God is that this is the God of liberation—the *power* of liberation itself. It's not just existence as a static fact, but existence as something that is expanding and pushing us all to expand from our places of constriction. It is that which brings us from slavery to freedom, from suffering to joy, from injustice to justice. You shall have no other gods besides *that!*

Now suddenly this commandment voices a powerful progressive ideal. We may have many things that we value, but if we *worship* anything it should be the power of liberation in our world. Liberation from poverty, liberation from war, liberation from addictions, liberation from modern-day slavery, liberation from racism and homophobia and all forms of oppression, liberation from fear and from all that holds us back from realizing our highest selves. The commandment teaches us to focus all our life energies and love and hope on the power of liberation, which is the nature of existence itself. Imagine if we all did this, what a cultural inversion this would be! Imagine if we all took the same passion we now save for "other gods"—our favorite sports team, our career success, our physical

appearance, our electronic toys, and our material wealth—and channeled it into working toward the liberation of this captive world.

It's hard to do. The other gods are enticing and powerful. And we sometimes fear that the universe is indifferent to human struggles for justice. The people of the ancient world shared this fear, as have people in every era since. It's hard to stay clear and maintain faith in the power of our guiding principles. Like Lynn Westmoreland, we sometimes have trouble even remembering what they are. And so the Ten Commandments, among the other mitzvot in the Torah, can serve to guide us. They remind us that the universe is not static; it's always evolving toward freedom and redemption. They remind us that when we struggle for liberation—our own or on behalf of others—that we are not alone. When we do the work of liberation and justice, we are bringing some serious backup. We are aligned with the essential energy of the universe. We are doing God's work. And if there are any other gods lurking around, they'd better get the hell out of our way. ■

MAGID *(continued from page 15)*

Maimonides essentially affirms this idea in one of his Thirteen Principles of Faith when he states that no other revelation can usurp the Mosaic revelation. Thus on Maimonidean terms, all religions that do not recognize the "non-translatability" of the Mosaic revelation at Sinai are, by definition, false. That is, there is only one faultless, true religion (Judaism) and all other religions are true only to the extent that they recognize the truth of Judaism as illustrated in the revelation at Sinai. In fact, Maimonides views the recognition of the exclusive truth of the Sinai revelation and its rabbinic interpretation as a condition for being included in

the "righteous of the nations." On these terms, Christianity and Islam, each of which may recognize the revelation at Sinai as an event but contest the exclusive Jewish interpretation of it, are, from the perspective of Maimonides, false religions.

For our purposes, the crucial point in Assmann's Mosaic distinction is that it functions primarily as a political

theology that deems past religions—that is, everything prior to the revelation of God's presence on Mount Sinai—as false, setting "one God" on the pedestal of "no other gods." Assmann claims that the original impulse of revolutionary monotheism seems "to consist of tearing apart the archaic unity of creation and dominion, or cosmic and political power, and to conceive of religion as a means of emancipation from the politico-cosmological power structure of the ancient world." In other words, this revolutionary monotheism enables the oppressed to feel independent of their oppressors. A covenant with a singular, transcendent God enabled Israel to liberate itself from the confines of foreign legislation.

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Ethical Monotheism vs. Jewish Exceptionalism

It is interesting to note here that in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the Israeli Bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann made a similar argument to reach the opposite conclusion. Kaufmann called the Hebrew Bible a product of the “Mosaic *revolution*,” a unique monotheistic moment that rejected all idols as human creations and created the conditions for what became known in some modern Jewish circles as “ethical monotheism.” Assmann, in contrast, suggests that the Mosaic distinction views the God of Israel as the sole God to exclude all other gods, thereby creating the makings of theological exceptionalism and, from Assmann’s perspective, intolerance.

A question we can ask is: Are today’s practitioners of traditional Judaism closer to Kaufmann’s Mosaic revolution, that is, practitioners of ethical monotheism, or to Assmann’s Mosaic distinction, that is, advocates of Jewish exceptionalism? Paradigm Shift Judaism suggests that much of today’s Judaism stresses an exceptionalism that must be subverted, not only through political activism and social change (e.g., through the efforts of groups such as *Tikkun’s* Network of Spiritual Progressives) but also theologically, through a reassessment of Judaism’s foundational principles.

Assmann’s Mosaic distinction rests primarily on what he considers the biblical move away from the translatability of gods, that is, ancient societies’ propensity to translate foreign gods into their own regional theologies, thus internationalizing their God idea by subsuming other gods rather than excluding them as false. There has been much criticism of Assmann’s “Mosaic distinction,” one of the best being Mark Smith’s *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World*. Smith claims, with others, that we can find many cases of translatability in the Hebrew Bible, and thus

Assmann’s flattening out the Bible as the rejection of theological translatability (a central tenet of his Mosaic distinction) is inaccurate. Of course, Smith’s compelling claim is precisely correct to the extent that the Hebrew Bible is not monotheistic, at least not in the normative, Maimonidean sense. Once mature monotheism emerges, perhaps not finally until the Jews meet the Greeks through the Muslims in the Middle Ages, Assmann’s “Mosaic distinction” may indeed apply.

Schachter-Shalomi’s Postmonotheistic Metaphysics

While Smith may be correct when it comes to the Hebrew Bible, Paradigm Shift Judaism’s new postmonotheistic metaphysics is not a response to the Bible but rather to its reception in historical Judaism where the Mosaic distinction may be more palpable. And it is precisely what I call Schachter-Shalomi’s postmonotheism, in my mind a new articulation of what Assmann calls premonotheistic “cosmotheism” (which may have been an earlier stage of biblical protomonotheism), that renews the possibility of translatability, which Assmann claims the Bible denies.

Smith ends his book-length critique of Assmann with the following observation: “Translatability of divinity is no mere academic task; it is a central task of human self-understanding. Otherwise, in this situation, something of our humanity—and arguably of our divinity—may be lost.” I think it is precisely the (post)monotheism that says “one God” implies “all gods are one”—that is, a universal monism—that Paradigm Shift Judaism is espousing. Given that Schachter-Shalomi thinks we exist today at the other end of this monotheistic spectrum, following what he calls the transition from theism (the Middle Ages through modernity) to pantheism (the new paradigm), postmonotheism emerges as a real theological template for Paradigm Shift Jews.

Cosmotheism, the term Assmann uses to contrast with the Mosaic distinction, is a theological construct based on the premise that the divine world (the cosmos) and the world we live in are inextricably intertwined. Cosmotheism holds that “the divine cannot be divorced from the world.” It believes in a plurality of divine life in the world and its accessibility to the human, focusing more on ritual than on Scripture or text. This comes close to what I am calling Paradigm Shift Judaism’s “postmonotheism.”

Postmonotheism’s new metaphysical template may indeed be a revival of a very ancient template that had fallen into disuse among Jews. Even though the Zohar and Hasidism in some way reflect this idea, they were both situated deeply in a monotheistic world that did not enable them to think outside the monotheistic paradigm, at least not in any overt way. However, Schachter-Shalomi suggests that both resist normative monotheism within their respective monotheistic orbits. It is in Paradigm Shift Judaism that this covert resistance to classical monotheism rises to the surface to become a new metaphysics. The central tenet of this paradigm shift is Schachter-Shalomi’s innovative interpretation of the kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*—divine contraction.

Post-Triumphalist Judaism

I believe that the political theology of biblical monotheism that Assmann considers the backbone of the Mosaic distinction is precisely what Schachter-Shalomi is criticizing in his Paradigm Shift Judaism. He often writes of a “post-triumphalist” Judaism, by which I take him to mean a post-elective one, chosenness itself arguably the product of a monotheism that says “no other gods,” as opposed to “all gods are one”: not *one humanity* but *God’s chosen people*. Resistance to Jewish exceptionalism has taken many forms, for example, in the revision of exceptionalist proclamations in the liturgy as well as in

many flourishing Jewish social justice movements that focus on human injustice rather than on only Jewish issues.

In this sense, Paradigm Shift Judaism is part of that larger community of progressive Jews. However, it does not contest Jewish exceptionalism through a liberal critique of religious pluralism but through a metaphysical one that constructs the cosmos such that some of the hazards of traditional monotheism are resolved. In ways similar to a progressive or radical critique of liberalism, Paradigm Shift's post-triumphalist/post-elective monotheism does not pose a social solution to the problem of intolerance but strikes at the metaphysical core of what it claims produces intolerance: the elective and exclusivist nature of the old paradigm, which is not founded solely on social circumstances, i.e., exile, but rooted in the metaphysical construction of reality that helped produce and maintain those exilic social constructs.

In order to root a post-triumphalist Judaism theologically, one must first offer a metaphysical template that corresponds to a new theo-political reality, since politics lies at the heart of the very conception of God in the Bible, resulting in, among other things, the political theology of election. Schachter-Shalomi does this through a creative reading of the kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum*, the doctrine of divine contraction, not primarily as a creation myth but as a construction of God that serves as a watershed, ultimately undermining the monotheistic and elective nature of Jewish theology and politics, respectively.

Divine Contraction: The Kabbalistic Concept of *Tzimtzum*

In his 2013 book *God Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown* and in earlier works as well, Schachter-Shalomi presents a notion of God in Judaism as a trajectory from deism (in the Bible) to theism

(in Medieval rationalism, as discussed by Maimonides) that is then challenged by the kabbalistic (Lurianic) concept of *tzimtzum* and its literal and metaphoric interpretations. In this model, *tzimtzum* is the final phase of the theistic period, resulting in two divergent interpretations: the nonliteral interpretation that breaks with theism to a penultimate pantheism (or acosmism, still theistic, common in neo-Hasidism) and ultimately to pantheism, a final break from theism that serves as the postmonotheistic metaphysical template of Paradigm Shift Judaism.

Paradigm Shift Judaism's four-world metaphysics (deism, theism, pantheism, and pantheism) is viewed as the template of the history of God in those civilizations for which the Bible is central. Schachter-Shalomi argues that Kabbalah retains the mythic (perhaps plural) notion of the God of the Bible that was repressed through later biblical, then rabbinic, and finally medieval Jewish rationalism. Rather than deploy the language of myth as do many Bible theologians, he suggests that the first conception of God in the Hebrew Bible is deistic: a God who can occupy corporeal space but whose place is beyond the cosmos and thus unknowable. This constitutes a kind of deistic transcendence that makes room for divine descent into the world but holds that divine presence is uncanny; there is no real intimacy between God and world—the separation is categorical. God can be simultaneously corporeal and totally other (e.g., Isa. 55:8; 40:18, 25). Even in the intimate moments between God and Abraham or Moses, there is strangeness (Exod. 33:18–23). As Midrash Rabbah claims, “The world is not God's place.” In this deistic phase, God is an interloper.

We normally think of the kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum* as a creation myth. Isaac Luria suggested a model of creation whereby God withdrew Godself to create an “empty space” and then infused that space with divinity, in

limited doses, into what becomes a “finite” realm through a cosmic catastrophe known as *shevirat ha-kelim* (the rupture of the divine vessels). Schachter-Shalomi's new metaphysics seems uninterested in *tzimtzum* as a creation myth and more interested in it as a metaphor for thinking about the history of God more generally and God's presence in, rather than absence from, the world. This notion of *tzimtzum* as more about divine presence than absence is less Lurianic and more rooted in the early Hasidic thinking of Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch. This *tzimtzum* as divine presence informs later Hasidic theology, but it is only in Schachter-Shalomi that *tzimtzum* as divine presence becomes the centerpiece of a new metaphysics.

Tzimtzum simultaneously affirms and subverts radical transcendence. God as *eyn sof* (infinite, distant, and indecipherable) exists alongside God as finite (the infusion of divinity into the empty space that becomes our cosmos and world). *Tzimtzum* serves Schachter-Shalomi as the final stage of biblical theism in that it houses both the radical transcendence of God as *eyn sof* and the initial stage of divine immanence in the light that is infused into the finite space of God's absence.

More interesting for Schachter-Shalomi is the internal kabbalistic debate that was raging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries about whether the Lurianic doctrine of *tzimtzum* should be taken literally or metaphorically. That is, did God *actually* create God's own absence in the vacuum that would become the cosmos and our world, or is divine contraction a metaphor suggesting that there was never any compromise of divine presence? This debate becomes the way in which the deistic/theistic biblical monotheism begins to unravel, resulting in what I call postmonotheistic pantheism. In *God Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown*, Schachter-Shalomi writes, “The literalists were on the front-line

of the defense of the theistic idea of God, whereas the metaphorical interpreters were the forerunners of a new, pantheistic reality-map.” This is the overcoming of the theistic universe of the Middle Ages and inaugurates what Schachter-Shalomi calls “the Pantheism of Aquarius.”

A Personalist, Pantheistic Vision of God

This Pantheism of Aquarius here becomes a notion of multiplicity and hierarchy; it is not an equation of God and nature in which “everything is ultimately the same.” It includes a metaphysical spectrum in which the personal God of biblical deism (where God can be present in the world but never at home) and rabbinic/medieval theism (involving the God of radical transcendence) is reinvented in a pantheistic mode through the two interpretations of *tzimtzum* in Hasidism and Schachter-Shalomi’s interpretation of that theological move. God can finally be at home in the world. Subverting the midrashic dictum “God is the place of the world but the world is not God’s place,” Schachter-Shalomi argues that “the world is (*also*) God’s place.” Here the divine-human relationship has overcome its vertical metaphor, a metaphor founded on a theistic foundation (God and world are categorically distinct). This is the sense of his personalist pantheistic vision: the recognition that you and I are nothing but different and developing dimensions of God, informing God about God.

American Christians have moved in this direction from the time of the transcendentalists. Perhaps the notion of incarnation (God entering the world through the human body) more easily lends itself to a place of God in the world. Alternatively, the strong theistic foundations of normative Judaism, articulated most forcefully in Maimonides, prevented Jews from easily moving to this pantheistic place of radical immanence.

The Zohar and the Kabbalah that followed in its wake resisted this notion of radical transcendence but never rejected it outright. The Baal Shem Tov and Hasidism pushed Jews further in this pantheistic direction. Jewish theologians such as Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber pushed even further but still maintained a position of classical theism that we can see in second-wave neo-Hasidism’s panentheism.

It is only in Paradigm Shift Judaism that we witness the final rupture of the theistic myth of Judaism. As in many Aquarian Ages, this is illustrated by a historical event: in our case, the Holocaust. This event works in conjunction with the disappearance of any traditional hegemony that could resist a transition from monotheism to post-monotheism. The erasure of Jewish hegemony, especially in America, creates the conditions for Schachter-Shalomi’s final radical break with theism. Richard Rubenstein’s *After Auschwitz*, published in 1966, posits that the transcendent, omniscient God of Judaism (theism) is dead. He puts his finger on this rupture but it is only Schachter-Shalomi who builds a new metaphysics out of it.

Paradigm Shift Judaism’s interpretation of rebuilding *malchut* (the lowest cosmic realm) and the *Shechinah* (divine indwelling) is not only about social justice; it is also about the reconstruction of a personalist, pantheistic God—a God of nature who hears prayer because nature is alive, a God whose name can be translated among various other deities, each occupying a given space in the cosmos. This move in some way revives the repressed elements embedded in the Bible through Kabbalah and Hasidism, to bear fruit only in the postwar turn by Jewish Renewal to New Age religion in America. It is Schachter-Shalomi who articulates this spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic tradition in metaphysical terms. In doing so, he moves through and beyond the neo-Hasidic revival

as previously understood and into unchartered territory.

From “No Other Gods” to “All Gods Are One”

By shifting from monotheism as “no other gods” to a postmonotheistic “all gods are one,” I do not suggest we erase all difference and say that all forms of religiosity are, by definition, equally valid. I mean, rather, that Paradigm Shift Judaism revives the translatability of the expression of the divine; that gods can be seen as true, even necessary, refractions of one God; and that Paradigm Shift Judaism’s postmonotheistic vision does not by definition exclude all expression of divinity except Israel’s particular expression of God.

What distinguishes Schachter-Shalomi’s new pantheism is that he argues that his approach actually salvages the personal God that he believes is undermined by the radical transcendence of theistic monotheism. As Orthodox theologian Michael Wyschogrod once noted, there is a very thin line separating Maimonides’s radical transcendence and atheism. Schachter-Shalomi advocates for a Gaia rendering of the universe, arguing that the *sephirotic* realm (the realm pertaining to God’s multiple emanations), like the planet earth, is both alive *and* divine, intricately connected to the corporeal, and multiple (encompassing all deities and all humans). In this way, by reviving what can be called a countermonotheism, Schachter-Shalomi claims to open the channels for a divine-human intimacy that theism can accomplish only by apologetic means (that is, by suggesting that there is a personal God with whom we can have no direct relationship because that God is transcendent and unknowable).

The theo-political concerns are very much at play here. Erasing the triumphalist notion implicit in divine election (chosenness) from Paradigm Shift Judaism does not produce any

naïve universalism, but it does enable Judaism to come out of its exclusivist cocoon and participate fully in the global concern for the well-being of the planet and all its inhabitants. It does this not only with a call to ethics or any form of Jewish social gospel (for example, in the many contemporary Jewish social justice movements today) but also by presenting a new metaphysics that conforms to a theory of multiplicity surrounded by divine unity. When this new metaphysics is in place, a new practice can emerge that conforms to the parameters of a new theological system.

The first systematic attempt to apply this new metaphysics can be found in Schachter-Shalomi and Daniel Siegal's *Integral Halachah*, an experiment in the radical revision of Halachah for Paradigm Shift's new metaphysics, a new *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish law) for a new paradigm. It is the first practical and systematic attempt at a post-halachic Judaism. Central to this project is the idea that Judaism's resources, insights, and teachings can and should contribute to the larger, humanistic concerns of the day and not to keeping the Jews separate. This move toward theological globalism is not meant to subvert particular communities from having their own distinct identities. It is about the way each particular community relates to the others and the responsibility that each holds toward the betterment of human society. Its credo might be "Serving the world, just like serving God, is an obligation (mitzvah)."

I have used postmonotheism here as a marker to distinguish Paradigm Shift Judaism from neo-Hasidism. Some will reject its premises. Some will accept them. Those who reject them can still find a place in the Jewish Renewal camp under the auspices of neo-Hasidism, a broader project that seeks the revival of Judaism in all its many aspects in a variety of ways. I want to stress that in my view neo-Hasidism

and Paradigm Shift Judaism are bounded as part of a larger critique of mainstream Judaism in contemporary America. For those who are compelled by my reading of Paradigm Shift Judaism's call for the end of classical theism, there are deep theological, practical, and societal ramifications that need to be worked out. But even for those neo-Hasidic adepts who reject such a radical break and prefer a more adaptive approach, Schachter-Shalomi's new theological work can serve as a way to think through the difficult issues that confront neo-Hasidism's adaptation of classical Hasidism in a new generation.

This new pantheistic, postmonotheistic space as a foundation for a devotional Jewish life is historically situated in postwar America. It is a byproduct of the maturation of New Age religion based on an Aquarian Age. Does Paradigm Shift Judaism's new metaphysics have the potential to move beyond the hazards that face all Aquarian Ages? It is too soon to tell, but perhaps in this case the Renewal movement will prove Yerushalmi wrong, demonstrating that radical breaks from the past are indeed possible if done with care and a deep awareness of the potential pitfalls. The survival of Paradigm Shift Judaism's revolutionary contributions will depend at least in part on how Jewish Renewal's practitioners acknowledge, understand, and critically engage in the radical program of their own making.

(This article is dedicated to Basya S., for her song, and for so much more. An earlier and abbreviated version of this essay was presented at the tenth anniversary celebration of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School in Newton, Massachusetts.) ■



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SCHACHTER-SHALOMI (cont. from page 16)

of worship depends not so much on *which* words are being said as in *how* they are being said, with what fervor and feeling, and how much time one invests in the closeness to God.

Lately, I have been feeling that the phrase "paradigm shift" is misleading, as it suggests an abrupt shift from one reality map to another. I would rather emphasize an "axial turning," the *process* of shifting and the long arc of transition from one paradigm to another—with people at the leading edge, people still very much connected to the past, and a vast multitude in the middle. When Karl Jaspers spoke of the "Axial Age" (in which we find Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Mahavira, the Buddha, Zarathustra, Lao Tzu, and Confucius), he was emphasizing a process of turning. This is much more accurate than if one were to speak about paradigm shift as the crossing of an imaginary line between Pisces and Aquarius.

I need to stress that in all this I did not approach my work as a philosopher of religion, but as a pastor. I found it important to provide the people with whom I worshipped experiences to which they could give themselves—experiences that they could bring with them into their own places of worship. This approach also has a bearing on how we understand Halachah in each one of those earlier periods and how we have to adapt the practice to the period in which we now find ourselves.

I wish I could spend more time fleshing out these ideas. However, I received the draft of this article just a few days after I was released from the hospital, and this is the best I can do at this time. I am grateful to Professor Magid for his close reading of my writing and to Rabbi Michael Lerner for bringing it to the attention of his readers. If it engenders further conversation and responses from readers, I will be pleased. ■

investment in productive enterprises that build the real wealth of society are entitled to a reward for their frugality and their willingness to accept the risks inherent in lending or investing. Interest and profits are not inherent evils properly eliminated. They are essential instruments of enterprise.

Interest and profit become evil when, as in the case of most Wall Street enterprises, they are the result of fraud, speculation, market manipulation, and other socially destructive activities. They become evil when the interest and profits flow in a single direction, from a productive laboring class to an unproductive rentier class, thus producing ever-growing inequality that is disruptive of social order and productive enterprise. They become evil when society organizes to maximize profit at the expense of people and nature.

The answer is not to eliminate interest and profit. It is to eliminate the class distinction between working and owning classes through cooperative enterprise and the equitable participation in ownership of enterprises that seek a fair and modest profit.

Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, and Karl Marx all recognized the foundational benefit of eliminating the distinction between working and owning classes. Adam Smith was suspicious of any concentration of economic power beyond a one-person enterprise in which the same person is the owner, manager, and worker. Thomas Jefferson advocated an economy comprised of small farms and artisan enterprises. Karl Marx advocated explicitly that workers should own their means of production—essentially the means of producing their own livelihood.

Smith and Jefferson lived in a simpler time, before the explosive growth of human numbers and technological advance. Our more complex, densely populated, and interconnected communities and nations require the services

of larger-scale enterprises—but the basic principle still applies.

We have many models of well-functioning cooperative, worker- and community-owned enterprises of significant size in which each individual is an owner, contributes labor, and participates in management. Each participant thus secures his or her means of livelihood and shares in the profits. The worker-owned Mondragón cooperatives in Spain are a leading example.

Money and Banking

The benefits of broad participation in ownership are particularly important with regard to financial institutions. In a money/banking system composed of cooperatively owned community-rooted financial institutions, the distinction between borrowers and lenders is essentially eliminated. People rotate between the roles of borrowers and lenders according to their needs. Profits and interest continuously circulate within the community.

The United States created a decentralized, community-rooted banking system in response to the financial crash of 1929. This was a well-proven model that financed the United States' victory in World War II, produced an unprecedented period of economic stability and prosperity, made America the world's leading industrial power, financed major national investments in infrastructure, created the American middle class, made America the world's leading creditor nation, and put a man on the moon.

Beginning in the 1970s, Wall Street used its political power to push through financial deregulation and consolidate the financial sector under the control of its mega-banks, hedge funds, and private equity funds.

The resulting Wall Street system acted like a vacuum cleaner, sucking money out of local communities rather than supporting productive exchange and investment. Money flows to Wall

Street financial institutions, which then use it to game the financial system to generate obscene management bonuses and unearned profits for the most wealthy. This practice is a total corruption of the financial system's intended essential function.

We bear the devastating consequences. The United States is now neither an industrial power nor a middle-class nation. We have become the world's leading debtor nation, suffered a major financial collapse in 2008 followed by continuing economic stagnation and high unemployment, and now face the near certainty of an even more devastating financial collapse in the near future.

There is much wisdom and insight embodied in biblical prescriptions relating to money and the economy. We had best focus, however, not on the literal implementation of simplistic and inherently impractical prescriptions, but rather on the underlying moral principles. The principles are sound; the prescriptions are not. ■

a 218 percent increase in black high school grads and a 35 percent increase in black college grads since the late sixties, there has only been an increase in wages from 54 cents to the dollar to 57 cents to the dollar. At this rate of wage growth it would take more than a hundred years longer than the entire history of slavery for blacks to reach parity.

Yet, in spite of statistical realities, the common understanding is that class, rather than race, is the dominant factor. It is clear that current public understanding and ineffective class-oriented policies will not rectify racial inequality. It is simply impossible for African Americans to subsist under anything other than an American economic form of apartheid without a reparative strategy that alters structural conditions fundamentally.

A Modern Call for Jubilee

A modern call for Jubilee would honor the principle behind the biblical invocation by leveling the racial playing field. Rather than focusing on class, a reparative Jubilee would focus on correcting racial inequality. Potential remedies such as eliminating taxes for African Americans, implementing special mortgage programs to counteract racist lending practices, eliminating student debt, and offering free higher education for black students could all be a part of the discussion. A reparative Jubilee such as this could coexist with the more conventional class-based

approaches to Jubilee that seek to redistribute the wealth of billionaires and address the real exploitation faced by low-income white communities.

For black Americans the spirit of Jubilee has always been about practical freedom from oppression, but it has also been about inner liberation, as practical freedom has tended to come slowly. To struggle for inner freedom while living under material oppression deepens the understanding that all of us, as human beings, are ultimately engaged in the same struggle—all of our futures are bound by the past, and we are all locked into structural positions that we cannot choose.

Oppression and privilege are two sides of the same coin—even if the experience of oppression seems more visceral. A modern call for Jubilee could make clear that reparative Jubilee not only offers freedom for those most impacted by inequality, but also offers true freedom for those entrapped by their privilege. Much of our understanding of who we are in society comes down to how we experience our material conditions. Thus, resetting the system with a reparative Jubilee could allow us to build both a racially just and economically just society for us all. ■

APPEL (continued from page 30)

that both creditors and debtors would negotiate the terms of every contract. Were a Jubilee to occur as a “benevolent gift” from creditors to debtors, without an accompanying power shift, crises of indebtedness would continue indefinitely because debtors would remain without a seat at the bargaining table. Moreover, if Jubilee were to occur without a substantive reimagining of our economic system, our debts to the environment and the debts of the Global North to the Global South would only continue to spiral.

Reimagining Debt

As we begin to imagine and enact collective debt resistance, it is important to remember that our goal is not a debt-free society. Indeed, socially productive forms of debt and credit can and should be part of a healthy economy. And yet, a healthy economy must first provide debt-free access to life’s basic necessities. For instance, only a few decades ago, American public colleges and universities were free or close to it. We are told that making higher education free is prohibitively expensive in today’s austerity-driven political arena. But, according to the research

of labor scholar Bob Samuels and others, after stripping off the amount that the government *already* spends to subsidize higher education—including predatory for-profit institutions—the total amount of new money necessary is less than \$13 billion a year. This is a fraction of 1 percent of yearly federal spending—merely a rounding error. Rebuilding robust public institutions for education and health care would go a long way toward solving our current debt crisis.

Once basic needs are met without debt, socially productive forms of debt and credit can and should be part of a healthy economy. With a strong debtors’ movement, debtors will participate in negotiating the terms on which we take on, use, and repay debt. Accompanying debtors’ movements is also the broad effort to completely reimagine finance as a public good. San Francisco, Santa Fe, Philadelphia, and Seattle, among other large cities, as well as the state of Vermont, are considering full-fledged public banks, such as the one that is currently boosting North Dakota’s economy, while smaller cities like Richmond, California, and Reading, Pennsylvania, are experimenting with a variety of public interventions in finance. Finally, if we are to survive, an

economic model based not on perpetual growth and hence perpetual exploitation of our natural resources will have to be created. Here too, many thinkers and activists are developing new visions of a society in which our debts are to our friends, our families, our communities, and our environments, and not to profit-hungry corporations. Join us! ■



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Through the work of the Network of Spiritual Progressives—the interfaith and secular-humanist-welcoming activist organization associated with this magazine—*Tikkun* is creating a movement with a positive vision of the world we want to create: a world of love, generosity, social justice, compassion, and caring for each other.

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from debt as a metaphor for nirvana (liberation from samsara, the indefinitely repeated cycles of birth, misery, and death caused by karma):

[Knowledge in the total ending of the fetters of becoming] is the highest knowledge
that, the happiness unexcelled.
Sorrowless,
dustless,
at rest,
that
is release from debt.

For Jubilee, perhaps the most instructive concept in Buddhist thought is that of karmic debt, for which financial debt is often used as a metaphor, as it is in these final lines. Born as humans, we all have karmic debt, the first one being to our parents, who brought us into this world, raised us, fed us, and guided us. This debt extends to all our benefactors—teachers, friends, and anyone else who has acted with our well-being in mind. But this is not a debt that can be easily repaid. For such an infinite debt, no material compensation is sufficient. In fact, the only way to repay such a debt is to become enlightened ourselves and endow others with the conditions for enlightenment. Thus, according to the *Kataññu Sutta*, we become debtless:

But, O monks, one who . . . encourages his ignorant parents, settles and establishes them in wisdom—such a one, O monks, does enough for his parents: he repays them and more than repays them for what they have done.

In other words, recognizing our true debts establishes the basis for the discernment of contrived debts, and thus any kind of resistance against them. This old Buddhist idea is freshly relevant in the context of contemporary efforts to build a debt resistance movement. In fact, it sounds surprisingly similar to the *Debt Resisters' Operations Manual*. “To the financial

establishment of the world,” the manual reads, “we have only one thing to say: We owe you nothing.” It continues:

To our friends, our families, our communities, to humanity and to the natural world that makes our lives possible, we owe you everything. Every dollar we take from a subprime mortgage speculator, every dollar we withhold from the collection agency is a tiny piece of our own lives and freedom that we can give back to our communities, to those we love and we respect.

Repaying Our Karmic Debts

In the Buddhist approach to debt, wealth can be accumulated, but only so that it can in turn be given away to those to whom we are truly, karmically indebted. Production and multiplication of merit-creating wealth is thus a noble determination. One who acquires lavish wealth, the Buddha said, should provide for the pleasure and satisfaction of himself, his loved ones, and his associates, and also for priests and contemplatives.

Buddhist monasteries for a long time accomplished a kind of redistribution of wealth, supporting mendicants who owned nothing. They also invested in local economies, providing an alternative to local moneylenders. In later years, however, some monasteries (such as in Medieval China) started making high-interest loans and meddling with debtors' contracts. A Burmese proverb characterizes Buddhist economic excess succinctly: “The pagoda is finished and the country is ruined.”

As greed—the motor of capital accumulation and, in Buddhism, one of the three “poisons” that binds beings to the wheel of samsara—became institutionalized in the new social order, the Buddha edged out a place in society where greed's opposite, generosity, could flourish.

While the production and multiplication of wealth creates conditions for merit in the form of virtuous giving, greed annihilates merit. The Buddha

said that even if one could transform one single mountain into two mountains of solid gold, it would still not provide complete and lasting satisfaction of a single person's wants. Such is the unlimited nature of desire. From the Buddhist view, then, capital accumulation does not find its end in capital accumulation, but in its transmutation into merit through generosity. “To have much wealth and ample gold and food, but to enjoy one's luxuries alone is a cause of one's downfall,” the Buddha says in the *Parabhava Sutta*. Wealth is not the enemy of spiritual development; it has an enormous potential to create merit—but not principally from lending, but giving.

For this reason, even to live modestly while retaining great wealth is sinful. In the *Aputtaka Sutta*, the Buddha speaks of a moneylender who “ate broken rice and pickle brine” and wore only “hempen cloth,” riding around in a “dilapidated little cart.” Many lives ago, the moneylender had given alms to a contemplative, leading the moneylender to be reborn seven times with great fortune. But in his subsequent lives the moneylender failed to create virtue with his fortunes, passing up many opportunities to generate merit through generosity. For this reason, after the merit generated for seven lifetimes ran out, the moneylender found himself in one of the hell realms.

The Evil of Endless Accumulation

Today's ultra-wealthy commit this same evil of endless accumulation without redistribution. Moneylending through the financial establishment, effectively indebting others in order to create profits, does not create merit but destroys it. Such a system of debt has helped concentrate 40 percent of the nation's wealth in the hands of 1 percent of its population, while the bottom 60 percent owns just 2.3 percent of the nation's wealth. Debt today encourages the upward distribution of wealth, whereas

the Buddha seems to have advocated its downward distribution.

In the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta*, the Buddha makes clear that charity, and philanthropy especially, is never enough. Giving advice to a king, he says, “Whosoever in your kingdom is poor, to him let wealth be given.” When a king comes to power and neglects this duty, he is faced with social deterioration that can be reversed neither through recourse to charity nor through justice (i.e., brutal punishments): “Thus from goods not being bestowed on the destitute, poverty, stealing, violence, murder, lying, evil-speaking, and immorality grew rife.”

Considering that Buddhist texts tend to concentrate unrelentingly on defilements of the mind as the roots of suffering, this passage is remarkable in that it

focuses instead on social and economic injustice as a foundational cause. Here, the ignorance, desire, and hatred of the people—the three poisons—are traced directly back to the failure of the state rather than to their own individual moral failings. When the king attempts to correct social strife by dispensing charity, this produces only more negative results, clearly demonstrating that charity cannot stand in for economic justice. Perhaps most importantly, the Buddha places the responsibility for the material well-being of the poor on the government. There exists no other power capable of enacting any progressive economic policy, including debt forgiveness.

This gets to the problem at the heart of the massive proliferation of personal debt in the United States: the country’s

long-term disinvestment in public goods such as higher education, health care, and housing. If wealth, of which there is no shortage, is not shared with the poor in such forms, inequality becomes exacerbated in the form of debt, which increases the burden of poverty in the form of interest.

Vital to Buddhist doctrine is the conviction that all people, regardless of social position, are capable of becoming enlightened, of becoming buddhas. Poverty and the stress it entails, however, can be real barriers to spiritual development. The Buddha recognized that becoming free of worries about our material welfare enables us to develop our potentials. If release from karmic debt is the goal of Buddhist thought and practice, then release from economic debt is its precondition. ■

ANDERSON (continued from page 38)

estimated \$27 billion in loans; 90 percent of this business is generated by borrowers who take out five or more loans per year.

The modern payday lending industry was born in the 1980s and 1990s, when industry lobbyists carved out loopholes in states’ traditional usury and small loan laws. Historically, these laws typically set interest rates for small loans at about 36 percent annual interest. As legislative loopholes proliferated, so did payday lenders who took advantage of their legal license to charge upwards of 300 and 400 percent annual interest.

The Religious Roots of Just Lending

Religious communities have emerged as some of the strongest critics of predatory payday lending, for reasons rooted in their day-to-day experience and historic teachings. Many faith traditions clearly discourage the abuses of predatory lending.

The Torah, for example, places limits on the relationship between lenders and borrowers. That limit is expressed in terms of prohibitions against interest, especially interest charged to fellow countrymen and to the poor (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35–37; Deut. 23:19; and Ps. 5:5), as well as in the creation of cycles of debt forgiveness and liberation from debt servitude. The latter, of course, bears special attention as the Hebrew year of release (*Shmitta*) that is observed by Jewish communities every seven years just commenced this September.

Rabbi Ari Hart, cofounder of the Orthodox social justice organization Uri L’Tzedek, who has begun organizing financial literacy and empowerment workshops along with advocacy efforts against predatory lending, describes the connection between his work and the year of release this way: “The Bible recognizes that debt can spiral out of control and have deeply negative consequences on those lost in its grip. That is why the Bible calls us to spend one out of every seven years actively eliminating debt.”

Throughout the Bible, abusive lending is associated with evil and corruption, while responsible lending is associated with virtue (Ps. 15:2–5; Ps. 37:25–26; and Ps. 112:5). In the Christian tradition, these teachings have variously expressed themselves as a prohibition on interest-taking or a prohibition on *excessive* interest. Meanwhile, Islamic communities—whose sacred texts condemn interest in the most severe terms—have developed a variety of economic institutions that enable aid to those who are poor, foster homeownership, and support business investment, all without relying upon interest.

The economic and sociological history of lending within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is complex and the interaction between them is even more so. Ultimately, however, all three religions see lending as a moral issue. And in each tradition, it is paramount that lending not be used to exploit and harm—particularly those who are poor. Contemporary faith leaders recognize in payday lending precisely this type of exploitation and argue that when

payday lenders benefit from borrowers' distress and inability to repay, the moral relationship between borrower and lender has gone deeply awry.

Religious Communities Take Action

Just as Scripture urges against predatory lending, it also encourages people of faith to take action against injustice. Some of the most exciting contemporary, faith-based organizing against predatory lending has arisen from religious leaders' feelings of outrage over their congregants' personal experiences.

After hearing about his parishioner's woes, Monsignor Egan, the Chicago priest who cofounded the Egan Coalition in Illinois, wrote a letter to the nationally syndicated advice columnist Ann Landers in which he described his parishioner's plight and noted that policy makers, too, can become ensnared by the payday industry. "The loan sharks are making so much money," he wrote. "They can (and do) make generous contributions to the legislators, who otherwise might vote to curtail their activities."

Years later, Rev. Dr. Freddy Haynes III, pastor of Friendship West Baptist Church, noticed something curious in the Dallas neighborhood surrounding his congregation: bank branches and businesses were closing, but five payday and car-title lending storefronts had sprung up.

After hearing from family after family caught in payday loans, Dr. Haynes began to organize. Along with other clergy, he testified before the Texas legislature, saying: "If someone is drowning, instead of throwing them a life preserver... we have thrown them shackles. That is what the payday industry has done to too many people." Meanwhile, the statewide Texas Baptist organization, Catholic Bishops, and other faith leaders began to work to secure local ordinances designed to rein in payday lenders' most egregious terms.

Over the past decade, coalitions like these in Texas and Illinois have pushed back against the tide of predatory lending, giving a voice to households victimized by unscrupulous lenders. In Ohio, Catholic leaders joined with Methodist clergy, the Hebrew Free Loan Society, and evangelical pastors to call for legislation limiting payday loan rates and to defend those limits when they were placed on a statewide ballot referendum. The Missouri Faith Voices coalition gathered the signatures of over 180,000 citizens who wanted to see a cap on payday interest rates. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, clergy made a novel request of their local payday lending establishments: in the spirit of biblical justice, they suggested that if any borrowers had repaid their loan principal plus interest payments totaling 36 percent annualized interest, the debt should be discharged.

Altogether, hundreds of national, regional, and statewide faith groups in over thirty states have been part of the movement to lift the burden of predatory debt and prevent lenders from shackling more families. As a result, national reforms are within reach but by no means guaranteed without a final push from communities of faith.

Achieving Regulatory Reform

While some states have successfully reformed or eliminated abusive payday lending practices, until recently, the financial power of the payday industry has made progress in regulating payday lending very difficult in many other states. However, the national reforms enacted in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 provide new tools for addressing predatory payday lending. The Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 instituted a new financial regulator—the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—with a mandate to protect households from abusive, unfair, and deceptive financial practices. Prior to this reform, payday and other unscrupulous lenders could dodge between the gaps in state and

federal law—or worse, use one set of laws as a shield against the other—to continue to prey upon customers. Now, payday lenders are subject to the oversight of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and its authority to weed out abusive and unfair financial practices.

National regulations to stop the debt trap could provide a much-needed fresh start by offering protections to consumers whose state laws have become riddled with loopholes. Rules requiring that loans be underwritten and extended only if the borrower has the ability to repay would restore a more traditional and fair approach to this area of credit.

The faith-based community has an opportunity to play a pivotal role in ensuring that federal regulation creates proper, adequate protections for vulnerable consumers. Since before the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, faith communities have been raising their voices and must continue to do so—sharing their experiences and moral perspectives with financial regulators and members of Congress.

If part of the role of the religious community is to provide a moral compass for the direction of the country, then seeking a world in which financial institutions have a stake in participants' flourishing rather than in their failure is part of the religious directive. Ending the misery, desperation, and exploitation imposed by predatory lending is a charge that the religious community must take up. If we answer this charge, we will make a difference—enabling millions of families to leave behind the oppression of debt—and we will answer the call to celebrate a true Jubilee proclaiming freedom from predatory debt throughout the land. ■

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countries. There is therefore a greater gift margin coming from the gifts of the developing society as a whole. This margin is monetized in the salary of the workers in the developed country—a higher salary that is then used to buy the imported product. Since most workers buy on credit, the gifts of their futures are also taken. Thus the gifts of workers from both hemispheres flow toward capitalists and corporations based in the Global North.

All these economic “externalities” (sources of value which come from outside the gift-taking market mechanism) are the gifts and services that make up present profits. If we don’t see the gifts, we don’t know where our profit is coming from. If we don’t know we are receiving, we can’t be grateful, and we don’t feel responsible. We think we have somehow made the money ourselves.

To make matters worse, the market mechanism needs scarcity in order to maintain the leverage that makes everyone work for money. If abundance accrued on a large scale, no one would work for the patriarchal hierarchy of elite capitalists. Rather they could organize themselves to supply each other’s needs directly, and the whole mechanism would fail. This is evidently recognized by the powers that be, which seem to create scarcity every time abundance arises. George W. Bush’s destruction of the budget surplus through tax cuts in 2001, followed by the mendacious trillion-dollar wars of devastation against Afghanistan and Iraq and the still unfinished financial crisis of 2008, continue to conveniently waste the abundance and create the widespread scarcity necessary for the control of the many by the few. Having wasted the gifts of the many on the devastation of our invented enemies, we stand empty-handed.

The best we could do for a Jubilee year would be to restructure the global economy to value and honor the many

gifts that are currently being forcibly extracted and taken for granted.

Creating a Global Gift Economy

There are many gift initiatives that are already being tried. Some, like Wikipedia, call themselves gift economies, while others do not use that name but call themselves movements for compassion, movements for the restoration of the commons, or movements for a sharing or caring economy. There are older volunteer organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous or volunteer fire departments, and many social change movements and spiritual organizations are primarily carried on by volunteers. There are eco-villages that function according to gift giving and there are both virtual and real “free stores.” There is a large amount of free giving that is done in everyday life that we do not recognize because we live under the illusion that the market is right. The number of these initiatives has increased enormously in the last decades due to the positive influence of the free aspects of the internet and to the negative influence of the financial crises driven by Wall Street. I believe that these gift economy initiatives will continue to multiply and will finally coalesce by finding their common source in the maternal economy, creating a variety of cultures of giving based on the core maternal model.

The difficulties in the practice of giving and receiving need to be worked out in practice locally, not imposed globally by elites. Therefore it is probably inappropriate to speculate now on what the final outcome of adopting this model might be—one might risk “colonizing” the future. However we can take our cue from the matriarchal societies that still exist in spite of the ravages of colonialism: the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy; the Mosuo in China; the Khasi in India; the Bemba, the Akan and the Ashanti in Africa; and many others, including the Minangkabau

in Sumatra. As shown by the modern matriarchal studies movement, these societies have integrated mothering into their social and economic structures, which encompass men as well as women. They are societies based on principles of social nurturing by all.

I would personally like to see decisions about distribution of goods made by councils of grandmothers with the support of others who have had a life-long personal experience of nurturing. Distribution should be given back to the nurturers. Production should be organized in accordance with their decisions, and everyone’s care of others and the environment should be seen as normal. I would phase out the market and money entirely because I believe they set up psychological patterns that make us worse people. In fact, those patterns are driving us to the brink of extinction. We need a maternal gift economy and culture now!

From the exchange perspective, the corporations have incurred a huge debt to everyone and to the earth. Even from the gift perspective, it is time for the 1 percent to begin giving forward. We need to embrace the gift economy and realize the maternal potential of all of humanity. ■

HOLMSTROM (continued from page 41)

The majority of Americans are in debt for two reasons: medical bills and loans to pay for higher education. Even public universities today cannot be financed by most people without loans, and even middle-class people are a major illness away from financial disaster. Medical bills are the cause of 60 percent of bankruptcies in the United States, but bankruptcy cannot save those burdened by student debt who can never escape their debt. Are medical and student debt and the suffering they cause simply unfortunate for the individuals? Or should the debts be forgiven? Or, rather, shouldn’t they be seen as invalid in the first place?

Every human being ought to have the medical care and education they need as basic rights. Medical care is a matter of life and death, and education at all levels is necessary for a better life both for individuals and for the society as a whole. The development of human capacities is essential for an advanced society and for any democratic one. Our global economy and the global ecological challenges we face make it all the more imperative.

Mortgage debt is another huge contributor to Americans' indebtedness. Due to predatory and fraudulent loans, and harsh loan terms, home foreclosures are often the consequence. The economic downturn, for which workers are hardly responsible, may have made them unable to make their mortgage payments. Or perhaps they could not pay their taxes because they were public employees whose financially strapped municipalities reneged on their contracts. In one case contracts are sacred; in the other, they are not. Home ownership happens to be the most significant financial asset for black women, who are also disproportionately public employees. So who owes whom for what here? Randall Robinson's *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* argues powerfully that the United States owes reparations to descendants of slaves whose labor created the wealth in the United States.

Climate Debt

One could go further in challenging the moral legitimacy of debt than I have done so far. The act of declaring most debts invalid does not fundamentally challenge capitalism, which rests on the idea that a society based on unlimited private property is the morally best system. (Some defend capitalism in explicitly moral terms, while others claim it is the only possible system, and therefore moral criticisms are otiose.) Reformers of capitalism advocate limits on private property and the provision of basic incomes to everyone so no one need go into debt, but these reforms have not

taken hold: indeed, the more capitalism has developed throughout the globe, the more unequal it has become.

Going further, if we recognize that private property rights by definition are rights of exclusion, then we could advocate common property as the moral norm for a society, but with personal property (that is, property for personal consumption—thus distinguished from private property) as a core element of a good society. All humans are morally equal and should share whatever is shareable, starting with the basic resources of the planet.

Establishing universal access to planetary resources as a moral norm leads to a very different understanding of debt. Individuals' debts pale, exposed as invalid, and instead we begin to countenance a colossal, unpaid, and morally valid debt: climate debt. By this I mean the debt owed by the richest countries (which have stoked climate change with their carbon emissions) to some of the poorest countries in the world, which are suffering the most from global warming, even though they did nothing to cause it. This debt ought to be paid but is rarely even acknowledged by those who owe it.

From desertification in Africa, to flooding in Bangladesh, to the loss of fresh water in Bolivia due to glacial melt, the damage is staggering. Ecological refugees now outnumber refugees from war and violence. And if countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia must restrict their development for the sake of the planet, they should be compensated by those who have benefited from the unsustainable economic system that has caused the crisis. Ironically, many of the countries that are owed compensation for ecological damage are "debtor nations," in thrall to global capitalist institutions. But who really owes whom?

Changing Consciousness

The facts are clear. The problem is political: how to build a worldwide movement that can force countries to

adopt more sustainable and equitable models of economic life and to reverse the dominant understanding of who owes whom for what. As with all social movements, there are both intellectual and practical tasks. We need to break the hold of the dominant ideas, which justify the status quo—no easy task, given the corporate hold over the media in this country. These dominant ideas are moral but also empirical, in the broadest sense.

In fact I think there is often more agreement on fundamental moral principles than it seems. For example, regarding poor countries' indebtedness: if we ask most Americans whether we should give more in foreign aid, probably most would say no. However, I have found throughout my years of teaching that my students were enormously more generous than United States foreign aid is. Most thought we *should* be giving around 20 percent of GDP in (non-military) aid, thought we *were* giving maybe 5 percent, and were deeply shocked to know that in fact we *give* less than 1 percent. Add the historical information as to why certain countries are poor in the first place and the argument is even more compelling that their debt should be exonerated.

Similarly I think most people in the United States are appalled by the fact that the financial institutions that caused the Great Recession were not punished, while poor people are losing their homes. Hypocrisy is deplored universally. Our religious traditions predate capitalism and have powerful resources to challenge the validity of most contemporary indebtedness. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, said that if a poor man takes from a rich man to feed his family, then strictly speaking that is not theft.

But ideas change not primarily by good counter-arguments, but by the sense that other worlds are possible. And this sense develops through political struggle. The history of the labor and poor peoples' movements in the United States, as documented by Frances Fox

Piven and Richard Cloward in *Poor People's Movements*, shows that people have to be willing to disrupt the status quo to make changes. Sit-ins to prevent evictions are one strategy; debt refusal is another. But individual refusal is fragmented, complicated, and risky. Instead, we have to figure out how to make this protest collective. Protests against austerity measures enacted to meet debts that were taken on by public bodies, whether in Detroit or Athens, are one kind of collective refusal. The use of eminent domain to acquire houses threatened by foreclosure and then sell them back to their owners at affordable prices is another. People in Richmond, California, have actively considered this creative use of eminent domain.

In struggle for the recognition of climate debt, the first step to building a movement is to nurture—on the most profound level—an appreciation of what we are losing and what needs to be done to save ourselves. As Evo Morales and others in the developing world have said, we have enough resources for all to live a good life, but not for everyone to lead the rich life of the well-to-do in the developed world. While I do not believe that kind of radical change is possible within capitalism, I believe we must demand support for any measures or experiments that point us in that direction. A revitalized democratic labor movement that fights for the long-term interests of working people is also crucial to both struggles.

Religion has a vital role to play in this struggle as well. Although indigenous and Eastern religious traditions have the most ecological understanding of humankind's relationship to the rest of the natural world, adherents of all religious traditions should be outraged by our ecological crisis. To see this beautiful planet of ours as God's creation, given to humankind, and then to see it trashed should feel sacrilegious as well as self-destructive. ■

MAGNUSON (continued from page 43)

principles. It was there that the idea of an International Bank for Right Livelihood germinated.

After the first round of brainstorming, our subgroup presented a summary of the structure and function of the bank to our larger group, whose leaders then took the proposals of all the subgroups and worked them into a more comprehensive framework that included ideas for fostering civic participation, developing new economic indicators, and other aspects of the resolution. In the final draft, our proposal for an International Bank for Right Livelihood was invoked through the mention of "possible alternative financial institutions aligned with the Millennium Development Goals." This raised some red flags for our subgroup because the framework of the Millennium Development Goals is firmly situated within the International Monetary Fund and World Bank establishment.

Nevertheless, there was a palpable sense of hope at those UN meetings that a critical mass of like-minded people and organizations could break from the pack of established economics and launch something truly new and provocative. But as the UN carries this initiative forward, it will become increasingly vulnerable to the pressure to compromise with the status quo. It remains to be seen whether a vast bureaucracy like the United Nations can redirect the global economy toward a better future, or whether it will cave under the pressure to support business as usual. If it caves, there is still good reason to believe that an International Bank for Right Livelihood could nonetheless be fostered outside the auspices of the UN and succeed. ■

BORG (continued from page 44)

that commit themselves to providing interest-free loans for some purposes, and that debt forgiveness might sometimes be the best course of action.

And yet the spirit and intention of the Bible's laws about debt and land are clear and still relevant. Their purpose is to prevent the emergence of a permanently impoverished underclass. They seek to insure that families have a chance for a new beginning. They aim to guarantee that everybody has access to the material basis of existence, which in the world of biblical Israel was land on which to produce your food.

Note that these laws are not about "charity" in the common sense of the word, namely voluntary deeds of generosity to help those less fortunate. Charity is always good and probably will always be needed. But these are "laws"—part of the structuring of society, of how it is put together.

Honoring the spirit and intention of these laws is thus about more than private charity. Doing so includes a strong concern for fair and just structures, systems that serve the well-being of the many and not just the few.

The Bible's laws about interest, land, and debt are central to God's passion for a world of justice, the fair distribution of God's earth. The Bible proclaims that the world belongs to God—it and its fullness are the Lord's (see Ps. 24 and Lev. 25:23). It does not belong to us as individuals or as groups or as a species. It is meant for all of us—humans and nonhumans alike.

What might it mean if we were to take that seriously? ■

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Demitasse

(circa 1887-)

You evaded the fire-storm, reaching the shore
Of the New World long before, so nothing
To speak of has shaken you more than the rage

In my father's voice or my brother's infant fist
Shattering a pane of the china closet, leaving you
Unharmed (the shards swept away, the glass

Replaced in a day). Through it all you never
Were lifted, never filled, until at the close
Of the century I asked for you. A door

Opened: you were offered without a pang,
Without a story. Nothing have I beheld
As perfectly made—but are you the craft

Of a human hand or a portal to splendor?
Burnt umber glazes my espresso,
I'm adrift yet home, my lip touching

Yours touching gold; and when I'm done
I peer over the brim to find a faded
Corona within. Your fluted pedestal

Gives you balance, you contain an eternity
Of sighs: at the bottom, where you taper
And the dregs settle, thick enough to muffle

Any cry, a blossom abides in the center
(Even when you are empty something is there).
Sometimes I study the scallops of your body,

Slipping my fingers along your contours,
Curious about your lineage, wondering
Who else marveled at your lightness, your near-

Transparency, turning you over then to see
The mark of your maker—a blue lamb
Standing by a gilded rose, its feet resting

On a slender line, a single brushstroke saying,
This is the earth that will hold whatever
Dwells here, this the border dividing above

From below; and under this line, in a script
Deliberate and free, run the letters telling
Where you became what you are:

You were born in a lull called peace
In a kiln in Meissen, from a mound of clay
In the river's mossy marsh. You were reborn

In Dresden, adorned by a master-painter
Of flowers that bloom in fire. You arrived
In a steamer trunk in New York Harbor.

You need no saucer, have no mate.
I will look after you and pass you on,
Hoping you stay for the last drop of the last
Day, the future for which you were made.

—Phillis Levin

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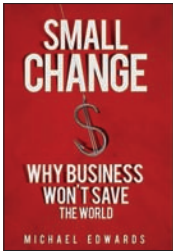
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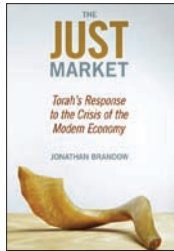
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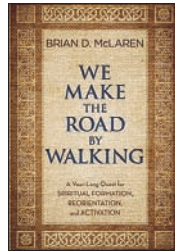
Tikkun RECOMMENDS



Small Change: Why Business Won't Save the World
Michael Edwards
Berrett-Koehler, 2010



The Just Market
Jonathan Brandow
Langdon Street Press, 2014



We Make the Road by Walking
Brian D. McLaren
Jericho Books, 2014

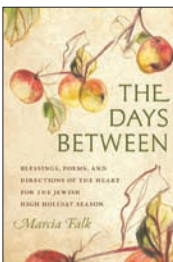
Global capitalism is destroying the life support system of the planet. Meanwhile, the capitalist ethos of materialism, individualism, and selfishness is destroying the ethical foundations of our families, friendships, and communities. Even so, the fantasies of “reform from within” persist, and anticapitalist critique is widely dismissed as pointless rhetoric. Even sensitive and well-intentioned people have come to believe that “socially responsible business” holds the key to transforming the world for the better.

All the more reason to cherish these three books. Read together, they provide a valuable foundation for spiritual progressives who are looking for new ways to express the fundamental need to restructure our global economic and political arrangements in accord with the values of love, generosity, environmental sanity, peace, social justice, and nonviolence.

We regret not having previously hailed Michael Edwards’s brilliant exposition of why businesses won’t save the world, no matter how principled their founders or their boards of directors. As Edwards points out, “The best results in raising economic growth rates while simultaneously reducing poverty and inequality come when markets are subordinated to the public interest.” Read this book together with Jerry Mander’s classic, *The Capitalism Papers*, and you’ll be able to help your friends throw away their fantasies of maintaining their liberal ideals while eating a rich pro-capitalist diet.

In *The Just Market*, Jonathan Brandow demonstrates that the Torah provides a solid foundation for a critique of the modern capitalist economy. Addressing issues as broad as employment, profits, a level playing field, and respect for labor, Brandow demonstrates an astute knowledge of how ancient wisdom works to rectify the distortions of the contemporary market society.

Brian D. McLaren, an evangelical Christian, reports on a yearlong quest for deepening spiritual wisdom bringing to life the revolutionary readings of the Christian tradition that were begun by Jesus, revived by liberation theology, and that now find expression in the nondenominational movement of Red Letter Christians. The profound thinking in this book will be inspiring to Christians and non-Christians. McLaren’s insights are at once accessible and revolutionary.

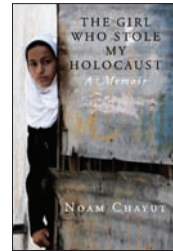


The Days Between
Marcia Falk
Brandeis University Press, 2014

Marcia Falk’s collection of blessings, poems, and “directions of the heart” for the Jewish High Holiday season is another gem by this inspired poet, whose *Book of Blessings* was an inspiration to a generation of feminists and their allies. With matching pages of Hebrew and English, Falk has captured some of the rich wisdom of Jewish spirituality that permeates the High Holiday prayer book (*machzor*), translating it into a language accessible even to resolute atheists.



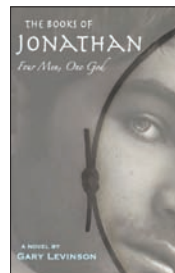
Absolution: A Palestinian Israeli Love Story
R.F. Georgy
Parthenon Books, 2014



The Girl Who Stole My Holocaust
Noam Chayut
Verso, 2013

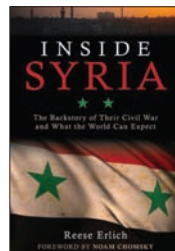
In the wake of Israel’s bloody struggle in Gaza, it may be healing to read *Absolution*—a Palestinian Israeli love story by R.F. Georgy that rehumanizes what media reports reduce to political sloganeering. Here you can reconnect with the human spirit, transcending the normal boundaries of political positions to momentarily rekindle your belief in love.

Another story that offers hope in this moment is Israeli Noam Chayut’s memoir of his life as a young soldier on the front line of Operation Defensive Shield, a devastating offensive against Gaza by Israel. Chayut’s memoir takes you into the inner life of a principled and caring soldier whose acceptance of the standard narrative of the Holocaust initially allows him to believe that Israel’s wars are necessary and just. His views start to change when his encounter with a Palestinian village shatters his certainty and he comes to question the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the necessity of the Occupation. This is a beautiful and hopeful story!

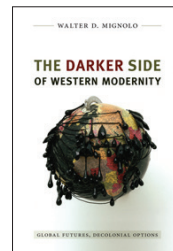


The Books of Jonathan: Four Men, One God
Gary Levinson
Self-Published, 2014

If you are itching to get away from the contemporary world, here’s a fun and steamy route: a hot gay love story based in part on an imaginative reconstruction of the relationship between Jonathan (the eldest son of King Saul) and Saul’s antagonist, David, who eventually overthrows Saul and becomes the founder of the dynasty that by legend is destined ultimately to produce the Messiah. Levinson explores questions of faith and nationhood in a historical novel that provides a fun escape even as it smashes any romanticization of the past.



Inside Syria
Reese Erlich
Prometheus Books, 2014



The Darker Side of Western Modernity
Walter D. Mignolo
Duke University Press, 2011

To many Westerners, the Middle East seems more confounding each day. How could the killings get any worse, the struggles more irrational? When the rebellion of Syria’s people against the oppressive Assad dictatorship suddenly turned into a civil war, thus giving strength to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the confusion only worsened. Reese Erlich begins to unpack some of our questions demonstrating how the histories and dynamics of international struggles are indispensable for understanding current realities.

The situation involving ISIS can’t be fully understood without a grasp of the way Western modernity looks irrational and destructive to people Westerners think of as extremist fundamentalists. Theorists of decolonialization have been spelling this out for the past two decades. Mignolo seeks to conceptualize a world in which human beings and the natural world are no longer exploited in global capitalism’s quest for endless accumulation. Without validating the violent strategies used by some decolonizing projects, we can seek to understand why people might join movements that do not integrate into their practice a commitment to human rights.



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Transformative Activist Trainings

Martin Luther King Jr. did not become an icon of social change by giving a speech saying, “I have a complaint.” He inspired action by sharing his dream. Facing the political realities of the coming years, social change movements need a positive vision and leaders who can articulate that vision while conveying empathy, caring, and generosity of spirit to those who do not yet agree with us.

Rabbi Michael Lerner and Cat Zavis offer such a training. In it, participants learn how to articulate a vision that unites people to create a world that speaks to their deepest needs; how to present a coherent strategy to change economic, political, and social dysfunction; how to engage in heated dialogues where all parties can be heard and understood; how to challenge power dynamics; and how to overcome internal struggles within organizations and movements that undermine their effectiveness.

Cat Zavis, a lawyer, mediator, and expert in empathic communication, is executive director of the Network of Spiritual Progressives.

Rabbi Michael Lerner is editor of *Tikkun*.

Some trainings are already scheduled, and Cat is willing to set one up in any community where you can get fifty people to enroll.

For information on currently planned trainings and for information on how to create one in your geographic area, contact cat@spiritualprogressives.org.