

S A P I R

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THE ISSUE ON

SOCIAL JUSTICE

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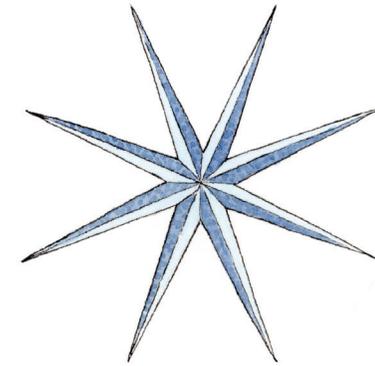
Volume One



Spring 2021

*And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.*

—Exodus 24:10



S A P I R

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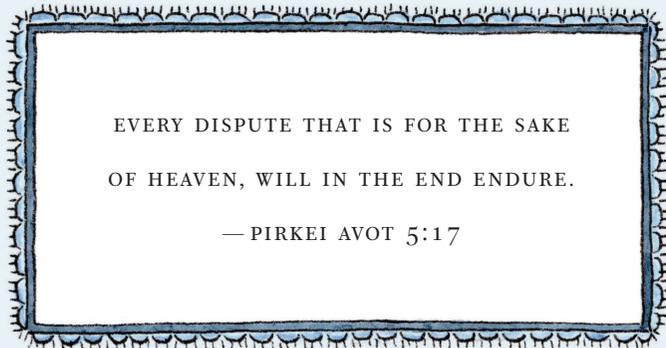
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WELCOME



JUDAISM has long embraced and celebrated argument. The Talmud records not only conclusions but also dissenting opinions and often the full course of the discussion. Dispute, ideally, is not resolved; it endures. It continues to educate us, challenge us, and impose gray in a world that too often seeks the simplicity of black and white.

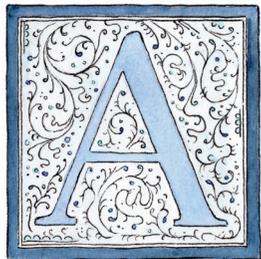
Coming out of a generational pandemic, the Jewish community must consider its future. This pause was deeply painful, but it has given us an opportunity to reflect, to reassess, to challenge presumptions and default behaviors. While that imperative is true for everyone in the Jewish community, it is perhaps most important for leadership, one of the primary audiences for whom *SAPIR* is intended. A community that does not struggle with larger questions of policy, but instead promulgates “truths” that are accepted unchallenged, is a dull community indeed. Among American Jews, as in America as a whole, we seem to be calcifying into ideological tribes that cannot tolerate dissent. Provocative perspectives are not only not welcomed; they are vilified. Loud voices claim to speak for the whole, and those with thoughtful questions stay silent. This is not the Jewish way.

Over these four issues of *SAPIR*, we hope to engage readers in some uncomfortable discussions. We hope to challenge your thinking. We hope to inspire you to engage with your colleagues and your communities, to ask questions, examine assumptions, and embrace dissent.

In Jewish thought, the blue of the *sapir*—the sapphire—was meant to remind us of the sky, to draw our eyes toward heaven (Exodus 24:10). We hope that *SAPIR* will be another chapter in a long Jewish history of arguments for the sake of heaven. We hope you will join us on this journey, and if you do, these arguments are certain to endure.

— Mark Charendoff, *Publisher*

Jews and the Dilemmas of Social Justice



AS WITH SO MANY of the world's big ideas, social justice—the term denotes the fair distribution of wealth, power, opportunity, and status within society—is a concept with deep roots in Jewish tradition and, at times, disquieting consequences in Jewish life.

Take many of the most prominent contemporary social justice movements, and they are shot through with militant anti-Zionism, if not unconcealed antisemitism.

In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives published a platform (since deleted) calling Israel “an apartheid state” that was committing “genocide” against Palestinians. In 2017, marchers carrying Jewish Pride flags were expelled from the Chicago Dyke March. In 2018, leaders of the Women’s March were revealed as proud sympathizers of Louis Farrakhan’s. In 2019, the U.K.’s Labour Party ran under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, a man who, as James Kirchick notes in our inaugural issue of *SAPIR*, petulantly denies

being an antisemite even as he delights in making common cause with them. In 2020, basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar courageously denounced the shocking indifference of so many social justice warriors to antisemitic outbursts from prominent black athletes and artists.

Examples such as these have persuaded Jews of the political Right and center that “social justice,” whatever it may be in theory, is profoundly hostile to Jewish interests in practice. And progressive Jews are themselves frequently dismayed by the degree to which movements that tout their tolerance and inclusivity are anything but tolerant and inclusive when it comes to Jews. In the progressive world’s new intersectional hierarchies of race and oppression, American Jews who enjoy economic privilege and “conditional whiteness” while participating, through their support for Israel, in the oppression of Palestinians are now considered leading malefactors in the American system of “white supremacy.”

Did it really have to be this way?



Rabbi Shlomo Brody reminds us here that “social justice is a foundational biblical value”—at least insofar as social justice is conceived as concern for the poor and vulnerable, fair treatment of workers, national solidarity in the face of common needs and challenges, and a belief in the dignity of every human being, regardless of wealth or status.

These tenets of Jewish moral identity, coming down to us from the prophets, would be developed over 19 centuries of diasporic life. As early as the 13th century, as Moshe Halbertal notes, Jewish communities in medieval Spain were pioneering early versions of a welfare state, complete with public education, provisions for orphans, and alms for the poor distributed from social funds. Over time, this sense of concern for the communal good would be matched by an ever-expanding sense of Jewish obligation to the world at large, in what

Our struggle for individual justice as Jewish persons has been predicated on a collective struggle for justice as a Jewish people.

Rabbi David Wolpe calls “an ascending spiral of insularity and openness” in terms of the locus of Jewish social concern.

This is not accidental. Other nations, with sovereign powers and normal politics, could aggressively pursue their interests with only glancing regard for moral issues. The Jewish nation, with neither sovereign powers nor normal politics until the creation of the State of Israel, had much less latitude as far as its interests were concerned, but more scope to explore its values. For better and worse, political powerlessness went a long way to spark Jewish moral imagination as well as indignation—a self-reinforcing process.

Consider the Jewish names associated with major social justice movements in the United States. Samuel Gompers (né Gumpertz) was the founder and longest-serving leader of the American Federation of Labor. Julius Rosenwald was the single greatest sponsor of public schools for African Americans. Lillian Wald was a pioneer in community nursing. Joel Spingarn was, next to W.E.B. DuBois, arguably the most influential early leader of the NAACP. Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan all but defined the modern feminist movement. Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were, with James Chaney, martyrs of Mississippi’s Freedom Summer of 1964. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected official in California.

Look elsewhere in the world—Léon Blum in France, Rosa Luxemburg in Germany, Nadine Gordimer in South Africa—and similar patterns emerge. To be Jewish is to belong to a justice-minded community of perennial social outcasts. Jewish concepts of justice and social justice have been entwined not only because of our

religious traditions but also because of our historical experience—because our struggle for individual justice as Jewish persons has been predicated on a collective struggle for justice as a Jewish people. Social justice, for Jews, has historically been at least as much about self-preservation as it is about altruism.

Similarly, it should come as no surprise that Jews have been at the forefront of championing social justice for other marginalized or oppressed communities. *Justice for me but not for thee* is not a Jewish value. When Jews fight for the rights of others, as we did so conspicuously and courageously during the civil rights era, we are also fighting to strengthen a moral and political order that is good for us. As Jeremy Burton argues in these pages, “it is profoundly within the Jewish self-interest to defend the American liberal project.”



Yet if intellectual honesty requires that we recognize the deep connection between Jewishness and social justice, honesty also requires noting the ways in which that connection has been profoundly problematic. The paradoxical essence of the problem is this: Social justice, as it is often conceived and practiced, is both too worldly and not worldly enough.

Too worldly: Social justice may be a foundational biblical value, but it is neither the only nor the central value. *Tikkun olam* is an evolving aspect of Jewish tradition, not the sum total of it, just as social justice can be only one component of true justice, not a substitute for it. One becomes a good Jew not by seeking to repair the world but by putting the commandments of personal decency ahead of the dictates of political ideology. The direction of Jewish loyalties flows from the inside out, in concentric circles that diminish as they expand: God, family, neighbor, community, and only then to a wider world. To the extent that many versions of social justice attempt to reverse those priorities—putting the interests

of the faraway stranger ahead of the beloved kinsman—they betray Judaism and Jews alike.

Not worldly enough: If the Jewish experience of social justice has been characterized by its sense of engagement and high purpose, it has also been marked by an often fatal innocence. The Jews who signed up (in characteristically disproportionate numbers) for the proletarian revolutions of the early 20th century did not see the Doctor's Plot coming. But that's what they got, along with decades of systemic Soviet antisemitism, brought about by an ideology that left-wing Jews believed would make antisemitism impossible. Many Jews who participated proudly in the civil rights movement of the 1960s believed it would be the birth of a beautiful partnership between Jews and African Americans. But, as Joshua Muravchik pointedly writes here, the friendship hasn't always been reciprocated and has often been betrayed. More recently, Jews are beginning to see how social justice concepts associated with critical race theory and ethnic studies have become backdoor routes to ever-more-virulent strains of antisemitism. As Pamela Paresky observes, "Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are now seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil."

This combination of earnestness and naïveté leads to another paradox: As social justice work became something of a substitute religion for many Jews—often making them, at least in matters of observance, "less Jewish"—it has not reduced their exposure to antisemitism and, in certain ways, has increased it.

A version of this story has played out when it comes to Jewish debates over Israel and its relations with the Palestinians. There are normal arguments, pro and con, to be made about the wisdom of Israel's efforts since the 1993 Oslo Accords to accommodate a Palestinian state. But it's also hard to deny that many of the arguments in favor of such an accommodation were only superficially about Israel's strategic needs, rationally considered. They were also an attempt to implement a vision of social justice, with all the pitfalls that vision entailed.

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The too-worldly desire to invest a moralistic fervor into achieving a peace agreement calamitously divided the Israeli public, weakened Israel's bargaining position, and gave rise to a new anti-semitic caricature—the evil "Likudnik"—whose misgivings about the wisdom of the process were treated as mindless lust for Palestinian land and blood. And, as Ethan Felson, Matti Friedman, and Einat Wilf each point out, it turned Israel into a blank canvas upon which outsiders could sketch their own social justice fantasies, with only superficial regard for the actual country they were talking about.

At the same time, the not-worldly-enough approach failed to appreciate how untrustworthy Yasser Arafat would prove to be, how Palestinian ambitions simply did not conform to Israeli needs, how brutally world opinion would turn on Israel after it had taken "risks for peace," how easily Israel's territorial withdrawals would be read by groups such as Hamas as evidence of weakness rather than reasonableness, and how little popular support the Israeli peace camp would be left with after its approach had failed strategically, politically, and diplomatically.

Again, the point here is not that Israel was foolish to explore the possibilities of peace with the Palestinians. It's that the process came to be driven by a set of aspirations that were treated as ends in themselves, irrespective of the way things turned out on the ground. This was social justice as foreign policy: Israel would earn

the acclaim of a doubting world, and put all future enmity to rest, by making its enemy's interests its own. In doing so, it would also justify itself to itself, putting to rest the gnawing sense of guilt that came with the exercise of sovereign political power.

It failed. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg observes, moral concepts drawn from religion and social justice theories may be a useful way of *critiquing* politics. They tend to be a foolhardy way of practicing it. Thundering prophets rarely make for good statesmen.



Where does this leave us?

The first point is that those Jews who want to erase social justice from the Jewish script are ignoring rich veins of Jewish scriptural and philosophical tradition, along with centuries of Jewish struggle for acceptance and equal rights. The second point is that those Jews who want to reduce Jewishness to a social justice calling are committing both an injustice to Judaism as well as injury to actual Jews, both in Israel and abroad.

In theory, it shouldn't be hard to reconcile these positions. The least socially progressive Jew should have no trouble acknowledging that, from the time of Abraham or Moses, Jews have been a nation of social reformers, for whom politics is inconceivable without a broad and insistent moral dimension. When Menachem Begin ordered the air strike on Iraq's reactor at Osirak in 1981, he did so in part out of recognition that allowing Saddam Hussein to get a bomb would not only put Israel in mortal danger of being attacked with nuclear weapons, it would also put Israel in moral danger of having to use nuclear weapons.

By the same token, progressive Jews — at least those who haven't become hard-bitten anti-Zionists — are coming to the realization that many of their fellow travelers on the left are traveling the road toward antisemitism, if they haven't arrived there already. For these Jews, the answer to this is not to endlessly try to prove their pro-

gressive bona fides, which will always be found wanting. It is to find recourse in a quiet but justified pride — pride in Judaism; pride in what Israel is and strives to become; pride in an intellectual tradition that offers the ability to criticize even what we love; pride in a moral inheritance that provides a richer articulation of what it means to be a just and righteous person than anything current ideology can offer.

Pride alone is not a program. But pride in fundamental Jewish principles is an essential bulwark against the twin threats of anti-Jewish calumnies that denigrate Jewish identity, and pseudo-Jewish concepts that aim to dissolve Jewish identity.

The essays in this issue of *SAPIR* are intended to inspire leaders of the Jewish community — particularly those engaged in its religious, philanthropic, educational, activist, and communal arms — to think more deeply as well as more pragmatically about how they can address these issues in ways that can unite us more than divide us. But we also aim to publish essays that allow readers to reach their own conclusions. As Kylie Unell, a doctoral student at New York University and the freshest voice in this issue, rightly says, “it is for each person to discover what God intends for us, as long as we are alive to help shape the world for the better.” *

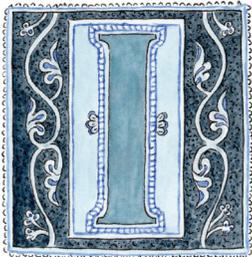
March 17, 2021

PART ONE

THE FRAUGHT POLITICS
OF SOCIAL JUSTICE



Critical Race Theory and the 'Hyper-White' Jew



IMAGINE you've just been accepted to college. You open your welcome packet. It contains the bestseller all first-year students are expected to read: Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. You flip to a random page and read, "Only whites can be racist." You flip to another page where you read that to deny being racist is itself evidence of "white fragility." You wonder what you're supposed to do in order to not have "white fragility."

You dutifully read the book.

Your first day arrives. You decorate your room with pictures. Your favorite is the one of you and your extended family in Israel when you were little. Your cousins live in Tel Aviv and you love visiting them. You hang a *hamsa* above your desk. Your roommate seems nice.

The theme of orientation is "Campus Inclusion." The first thing you learn about is "microaggressions." The associate dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion explains that perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware of the harm they're causing.

They can even have good intentions. But as the handout says, "almost all interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions."

You were looking forward to meeting people from different backgrounds. You didn't realize it would be so fraught—you don't want to perpetrate anything. It never would have occurred to you that asking someone where he's from could be a microaggression. Or that saying "I believe the most qualified person should get the job" is. Even saying "America is a melting pot" is on the list.

You cringe when you read that it's a microaggression to say "there is only one race, the human race." That's something your grandmother always says. Her father, who survived several concentration camps, used to say that, too. They aren't racist. But according to the list, it's also a microaggression to *deny* being racist.

You wonder whether it's a microaggression to deny being anti-semitic. You look on the list for examples of microaggressions against Jews. There aren't any.

In your second year, you attend a campus protest against systemic racism. You hear from the Asian American and Pacific Islander Student Union, the Latinx Student Union, the LGBTQIA+ Alliance, the Black Student Union, and the leaders of student government. All of them reiterate in various ways that any system with unequal outcomes is a "white supremacist" system. "We're either racist or antiracist," says Sandra, the president of the student government. She adds, quoting this year's summer reading for all students, Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*: "The claim of 'not racist' neutrality is a mask for racism."

You're against racism. Now saying you're "not racist" is not only a microaggression and evidence of white fragility, but is itself racist? It makes your head spin. In any case, you know how evil white supremacy is. Your great-grandparents were unambiguous victims of it. Your grandmother was born in a displaced-persons camp, and most of her extended family were murdered by the Nazis.

"Denial is the heartbeat of racism," Sandra says before closing, again quoting Kendi. She adds something about being a true

“ally” and antiracist, accepting her own racism, “doing the work,” and standing in solidarity with all movements for liberation and self-determination.

In your third year, you take a class called “Privilege, Domination, and Oppression” to fulfill the college’s new diversity requirement. You learn that being white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle class, and able-bodied are all associated with privilege, oppression, and domination. Belonging to an opposing category means you have a “marginalized identity” and that you are, definitionally, oppressed. You’re all supposed to define your own “intersectionality” and, if you have “multiple marginalized identities,” understand that you experience “multiple forms of oppression.”

This seems pretty different from what you learned in law class about intersectionality: Black women who faced hiring discrimination sued General Motors, but GM proved that they hired plenty of black people and plenty of women. Because the company didn’t discriminate against any one protected category, the women lost their case. But all the black people GM hired were men, and all the women they hired were white. The law didn’t recognize discrimination on the basis of the “intersection” between two protected categories.

Understanding this legal loophole in discrimination law doesn’t seem like the same thing as accepting your “internalized dominance and oppression,” or acceding that marginalization and privileging “are things that are done to us,” or working to determine which of our identities are privileged and which are marginalized.

The week before your Privilege, Domination, and Oppression final, you’re assigned two articles: one about how Jews “became white” and another about an Orthodox woman who wanted a divorce, but her abusive husband refused to provide the *get* (a Jewish divorce). Her rabbi didn’t help at all; instead, he told her that the wife’s responsibility was *shalom bayit*, making peace in the home.

During the discussion, a student named Feigah objects. She is the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. Domestic abuse, she points out, happens across all cultures. Why has the topic been covered only with

In the critical social justice paradigm, Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are now seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil.

respect to Jews? Furthermore, while certainly there are exceptions, victims of domestic abuse can find help in Jewish communities. And men who try to withhold a *get* are not generally aided by rabbis. Plus, *shalom bayit* is not the sole responsibility of women. This lesson conveys all kinds of false concepts about Jews and Judaism.

For the entire semester, she adds, the class has discussed intersectionality, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, ableism, fat-shaming, and the marginalization and oppression of black people, indigenous people, and other people of color. Yet, in a class about oppression, antisemitism wasn’t even covered. Members of her community have been violently attacked on the streets for being Jews, and not by white supremacists. But none of this was included in the material.

Another student in the class tells Feigah that she’s invalidating the abused woman’s “lived experience.” The professor suggests that Feigah can share her concerns with the dean of curriculum.

In your final year, your first-year roommate invites you to an event co-hosted by Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). As you arrive, the speakers are promoting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions proposal that the student government is considering, and volunteers are handing out a petition to prevent the campus police from being trained in Israel.

Someone asks, “The *campus police* are being trained in *Israel*?”

The head of JVP flips over a copy of the petition and holds it up. On the back is a cartoon of an Israeli soldier and an American police officer, each with an arm around the other's shoulder. They are deploying the same knee-on-the-neck technique that was used on George Floyd—the Israeli soldier on a Palestinian, the American cop on a black man. “This petition is a precaution,” the JVP leader says. “We don't want to wait until they're already doing it.”

Someone asks, “What about Palestinian terrorism?”

The room goes quiet. The head of SJP addresses the crowd. Palestinians, he insists, unlike racist, “transnational” Zionists, do not have an army. Whatever Palestinians do in their struggle for their liberation and rights is *necessary*. Labeling their actions “terrorism,” he says, is the white, colonialist, imperialist propaganda of an illegitimate, apartheid country.

As people disperse, you express your angst to a Jewish friend about how Israel and Jews are sometimes depicted on campus. She stops and puts her hand on your arm. “You know how Robin DiAngelo says she wants to be ‘less white’—meaning she wants to be ‘less oppressive’? We should be less white, too.”



I tell this story—a composite account based on real trainings, classes, resources, and the experiences of actual students—because some readers may not fully understand the extent to which our universities are promoting and exporting a certain kind of indoctrination, one that has especially profound consequences for Jews.

Why Jews in particular? Because current social justice ideology (“critical social justice”) is heavily influenced by critical theory of various kinds, including critical race theory (CRT). Despite its laudable goal of opposing racism and white supremacy, CRT relies on narratives of greed, appropriation, unmerited privilege, and hidden power—themes strikingly reminiscent of familiar anti-Jewish conspiracy theories.

To make matters worse, the expectation of solidarity between social justice allies allows anti-Zionists to use the latent antisemitic themes of CRT to propagate a false narrative about Israel without opposition from within the movement. This magnifies the existing anti-Jewish nature of the social justice project.

The subtlety is that, instead of targeting Jews directly, the target of critical social justice is “whiteness.” But this does nothing to protect Jews. In 2018, when Hasidic Jews were victims of a wave of violent attacks—a precursor to another cluster of bloody attacks to come a year later—Mark Winston Griffith, the executive director of the Black Movement Center in Crown Heights, told *The Forward* that some black Americans see Judaism as “a form of almost hyper-whiteness.”

Race is the locus of power in the critical social justice worldview, which holds that the dominant group—white people—will, when it serves their interests, conditionally invite minority groups into “whiteness.” When people (such as “light-skinned Jews”) can “gain the benefits of whiteness by dropping ethnic markers of difference,” as California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum teaches, those people gain “conditional whiteness.”

The above is from the lesson, “Jewish Americans: Identity, Intersectionality, and Complicating Ideas of Race,” which instructs students that, “to the present day,” Jews continue to change their names (in other words, drop ethnic markers) and benefit from whiteness. At a time when the moral imperative is to “be *less* white,” there is no identity more pernicious than that of a once powerless minority group that, rather than joining the struggle to dismantle whiteness, opted into it.

In the critical social justice paradigm, that is how Jews are viewed. Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are now seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil. This reflects the nature of antisemitism: No matter the grievance or the identity of the aggrieved, Jews are held responsible. Critical race theory does not merely make it easy to demonize Jews using the language of social justice; it makes it difficult not to.

Simply put, the ‘critical social justice’ movement, informed by critical theory, represents an assault not just on core concepts of liberal democracy, but also on the epistemology that undergirds it.

This is not merely theoretical. The CRT lens, and the theories with which it is suffused, are brought into corporations and non-profits through diversity trainings and imposed on students across the country through campus activism, student-life programming, and even course curricula.

One “critically informed” social-work curriculum teaches that the notion of Jews “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” is a “myth.” Instead, having “become white,” Jews benefited from federal programs that allowed “Jews and other European immigrants to be recognized or rewarded.” In other words, these social-work students are not taught that antisemitism is a conspiracy theory about Jews gaining unmerited success and power. They are taught that Jews, having been initiated into whiteness, have gained unmerited success and power.

Why does current social justice theory target Jews?

According to Kendi, the leading scholar of antiracism, “racial inequity is evidence of racist policy,” and “racial inequity over a certain threshold” should be “unconstitutional.” This obviously presents a particular problem for Jews, who represent roughly 2 percent of the U.S. population. A much higher proportion of Jews than non-Jews attend college. Jews represent an outsize share of winners of major awards, like Nobel prizes. As of 2020, seven of the 20 wealthiest

Americans were Jewish. In virtually every major American industry and institution, Jews hold leadership roles disproportionate to their overall demographic numbers.

American Jews have generally looked upon Jewish success in the United States as evidence of the country’s fundamental (if far from fully realized) commitment to the principles of tolerance, fair play, and recognition of individual merit. But, according to critical social justice ideology, that explanation is not just false. It’s racist. Jewish success can be explained *only* by Jewish collusion with white supremacy.

Again, this is no accident. Critical social justice is not an extension of liberal or progressive politics, or even a critique of such politics. It is, as its more sophisticated proponents readily admit, a form of anti-liberalism. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain that “unlike traditional civil rights, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.” Concepts like the rule of law, merit, reason, knowledge, and even truth are seen as fictions constructed by the “white cisheteropatriarchy” that are used to perpetuate injustices against BIPOC groups (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

Arguments against this view are rejected out of hand. Logical analysis—or any independent thinking that questions the theory’s pivotal presuppositions—is evidence that the questioner is ideologically suspect and requires either education or ostracism. In fact, logic is itself seen as a tool of white supremacy, thereby invalidating it as a legitimate way of making a case. Perhaps this is how people who subscribe to critical social justice ideology can be blind to the inherent antisemitism within it. They must adopt the doctrine as a belief system rather than doing the critical thinking necessary to work through its internal logic.

Simply put, the “critical social justice” movement, informed by critical theory, represents an assault not just on core concepts of

liberal democracy, but also on the epistemology that undergirds it. That's something that ought to concern anyone, Jewish or not, who cares deeply for freedom and reason. And it should also concern everyone who wants to see true social justice succeed.



What can we do?

First, *not only must Jews reject the victim narrative, we must also decline to participate in any “us” versus “them” paradigm.* Despite a long history of persecution, Jews have continually found ways to thrive. Even with a clear-eyed view of a past in which Jews have been objectively victimized and oppressed, Jews have not historically clung to victimhood. Were it not for the “victim” versus “oppressor” narrative in which Jews must either admit to being oppressors or adopt a victim identity, Jews would not feel the need to cling to it now. A Jewish lens allows for complexity and nuance, rather than requiring everyone to play one of those two roles.

Second, while there are wounds to heal within the global Jewish family, a distinction between “white” Jews and “Jews of color” is not a concept that emanates from Judaism or Jewish culture. It is incumbent upon Jews to reject this framing altogether. More pointedly, of all people, *Jews have the historical standing and moral imperative to denounce the ascription of moral virtue or blame as a function of race.*

Third, *only in defending the right to speak freely do we defend the disempowered.* Jews know what it means to be silenced and must become the bulwark against a culture of censoriousness and censorship. Jews must defend the right to say the most distasteful, abhorrent, and even antisemitic things—while at the same time making the most persuasive arguments against those views.

Fourth, *treasuring the habits of a free mind and appreciating the importance of truth-seeking are essential Jewish values.* Critical social justice ideology relies on denigrating critical thinking and reason while promoting logical tautologies and groupthink. By contrast,

Jewish culture is one of curiosity, education, disagreement, and dissent. It is a culture of “argument for the sake of Heaven.”

Fifth, the critical social justice story is an apocalyptic narrative of condemnation, powerlessness, and destruction. Its champions acknowledge that it rarely provides “concrete solutions.” By contrast, Jewish stories of social justice are narratives of overcoming adversity, being responsible for one's actions, grappling with complexity and finding no perfect answers, and being fundamentally *free.* Esther saves the Jews from slaughter. Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery. Abraham argues with God. *It is time for Jews to invoke our own social justice story, one that allows agency even for victims, forgives rather than shames, and embraces rather than condemns.*

Finally, Jewish culture is ideally suited to coexist with a liberal, pluralist society premised on the equal dignity of each individual. It also suggests a path toward true social justice by calling on all of us to make the world a better place, while acknowledging that our efforts will be imperfect. *A Jewish social justice paradigm will always seek to advance the causes of freedom and equality for all, which in turn will safeguard Jewish life and culture as well.*

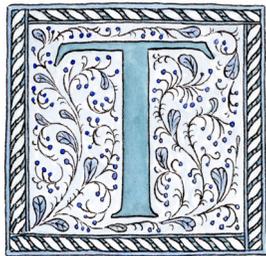


Let us return for a final moment to our campus story. Must this ideological indoctrination be what Jewish college students have to either endure or adopt over the course of four years?

Not necessarily.

But if this is to change, it will take a concerted effort by Jewish leaders, individuals, and organizations to remind us all that we are not characters in others' scripts. *We are not required to play the parts that others have written.* We can and we must reject any identity and any worldview that is inconsistent with our own past and our own social justice story. Jewish values and habits of mind are among the gifts of our heritage. Only when we are true to who we are and strive to be as Jews can we do our part to repair the world. *

Our Duty to Be Unimpressed



TO SAY THAT *Freedom for Humanity* left little to the imagination risks giving the impression that its creator nonetheless possessed some talent for subtlety.

Painted on a wall in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets in 2012, the mural depicted six finely attired men seated around a Monopoly board resting atop a passel of naked, cowering figures, like a litter in ancient Rome. Serving as background to this stark phantasm of capitalist exploitation was a Dickensian hellscape of churning gears, smokestacks, and the floating “Eye of Providence,” familiar to most Americans for its prominent place on the reverse side of our one-dollar bill and to the more conspiratorially minded as a symbol of Freemasonry. As for the well-dressed men exploiting the workers of the world as table legs in their enjoyment of the classic childhood game of rapacious capital accumulation, what most distinguished them—save the portly bearded fellow counting his ill-gotten earnings—were their conspicuously large noses.

Though he would later deny any antisemitic messaging in his depiction of “the elite banker cartel” by pointing to the inclusion

of Masonic iconography in its grim cornucopia of postindustrial nightmares (as if conspiracy theories tend to be mutually exclusive rather than mutually reinforcing), the Los Angeles-based graffiti artist “Mear One” (né Kalen Ockerman) was brutally candid when *Freedom for Humanity* first sparked controversy. “Some of the older white Jewish folk in the local community had an issue with me portraying their beloved #Rothschild or #Warburg etc. as the demons they are,” he boasted in defiance. To Vladimir Lenin’s famous rhetorical question tidily distilling Marxism’s comprehensive division of all human relations into a struggle between oppressor and oppressed—“Who will overtake whom?” (better known in its truncated form, “Who, whom?”)—Ockerman offered an answer: Once they muster the strength to stand up and overturn the metaphorical Monopoly board affixed to their backs, the toiling masses of the world will overtake the Jews.

What was evident to nearly everyone about *Freedom for Humanity*—from the Conservative councilor who equated it with “propaganda in pre-war Germany” to the formerly Labour, now independent mayor of Tower Hamlets, who decried how its “images of the bankers perpetuate antisemitic propaganda about conspiratorial Jewish domination of financial and political institutions”—was utterly lost upon Jeremy Corbyn, the Right Honourable Gentleman for Islington North. His interest in the mural’s fate ought to have struck more people than it did at the time as worrisome, and not because it was located 40 minutes by bus from his own parliamentary constituency. Presented with an artistic regurgitation on public space of reactionary propaganda originally fabricated by the Russian imperial secret police and popularized by Henry Ford, one would most expect a proud socialist to recommend effacement if not desecration. But that was not how Corbyn responded when Ockerman alerted fans on Facebook to the news that Tower Hamlets authorities would be quickly and permanently erasing his rendering of *The Protocols of Elders of Zion*. “Why?” Corbyn asked, before attempting to lift

Ockerman's spirits. "You are in good company. Rockefeller [*sic*] destroyed Diego Viera's [*sic*] mural because it includes a picture of Lenin."

These three sentences—which would not be publicized until 2018—tell us three important things about the man whose ascension to the leadership of the Labour Party in 2015 unnerved Jewish communities far beyond the British Isles. The first, as evidenced by Corbyn's basic misspellings of proper nouns, is that Martin Amis was more right than he knew when he dismissed Corbyn as "under-educated," "slow-minded," and a "fluky beneficiary of a drastic elevation" six weeks after the radical backbencher easily dispatched three moderate rivals in his bid to become Labour leader. The second, irrefutably established by his comparing one of the greatest muralists of the 20th century to Alex Jones with a paintbrush, is that Corbyn has absolutely terrible taste in art. The third conclusion to be drawn from Corbyn's insouciance regarding *Freedom for Humanity* is the most significant, as it bespeaks an attitude prevalent on that part of the Left: Genuine befuddlement at the notion that the milieu they inhabit evinces even the slightest whiff of antisemitism.

In the more than four years that Corbyn served as leader of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition, not a week seemed to go by without an antisemitism scandal. And nearly every time, the response from Corbyn and his devotees was almost exactly the same. Because Corbyn had "always implacably opposed all forms of racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia"—a phrasing which, by its categorizing Jew-hatred as just one form of bigotry among many, became something like a left-wing, British rendition of the cynical "All Lives Matter"—the mere suggestion that either he or the hard-left movement from which he emerged had an antisemitism problem was a logical impossibility.

Making this noxious ritual even more frustrating was the realization that Corbyn and his acolytes sincerely believed their professions of anti-antisemitism. The suggestion that Corbyn had a problem with Jews was treated by these people as a grave insult to the honor of



Detail of the mural *Freedom for Humanity* as it was being painted. CREDIT: duncan c, flickr

a thoroughly decent man and the political movement he led, despite his florid expressions of praise for Hamas and Hezbollah, solemn attendance at a graveside ceremony honoring the terrorists responsible for the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre, and his assertion that "Zionists" lack appreciation for "English irony." (This is my personal favorite in the Corbyn litany: the Jews' alleged inaptitude for humor.)

The sincere denial of its existence is one of the key ways in which left-wing antisemitism differs from its right-wing variant. The alt-right Twitter troll, neo-Nazi militant, or xenophobic lunatic who shoots up a synagogue—all of these haters will enthusiastically admit their hatred of Jews. The right-wing antisemite is most often a racial or religious reactionary who extols the superiority of his tribe over all others.

The antisemite of the Left, on the other hand, will never confess to such dark impulses, at least not at first. His problem is never with

It is the very nature of the Jews as a people apart that so rankles our modern-day utopians.

Jews *qua* Jews but rather “Zionists” (or the shrewder “Likudniks”), whose attachment to a “settler-colonialist” state raises legitimate concerns about their national loyalty and basic humanity. He noisily advertises his belief in the equality of man, which is why the chauvinism of the Jews rankles him so much (though why only the Jews and not, say, the Chinese or the Pakistanis—nations not particularly known for their embrace of Enlightenment universalism—is left unsaid). David Duke attended an Iranian-sponsored Holocaust-denial conference in the belief that obfuscating the greatest crime of the 20th century lays the groundwork for a repeat performance in the 21st. Jeremy Corbyn, meanwhile, speaking on an Iranian regime-sponsored television network, alleged that he saw “the hand of Israel” behind various dark maneuverings out of his steadfast commitment to progress and justice.

The intellectual underpinnings of left-wing antisemitism long predate the 19th-century philosopher credited with creating the modern Left. “What is the worldly religion of the Jew?” Karl Marx notoriously asked in his 1843 pamphlet, *On the Jewish Question*. The German theorist, a grandson of rabbis on both sides of his family and a prototype of the self-loathing Jew, offered an answer:

Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money....The Jew has emancipated himself in a Jewish manner, not only because he has acquired financial power, but also because, through him and also apart from him, money has become a world power and the practical Jewish spirit has become the practical spirit of the Christian nations. The Jews have emancipated themselves inso-

far as the Christians have become Jews....In the final analysis, the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism.

Marx’s crude depiction of the greedy Jew—which can be traced back to the 12th-century Catholic edict prohibiting usury among the faithful—would be flatly repudiated by his leading contemporary admirers and political heirs. Today’s socialists are adamant not only in their attestations to *not* being antisemites, but also take great umbrage at the suggestion that, even if they *were* antisemites, it would be on the basis of something so parochial and unsophisticated as a belief that “the Jews” dominate global finance. That Jews are crafty money-grubbers is the sort of down-market superstition a reactionary, middle-class, provincial housewife who reads the *Daily Mail* would believe. Not a subscriber to the *Guardian*.



The roots of the tortured relationship between Jews and the anti-capitalist Left go back thousands of years, long before a dualistic political spectrum of “right” and “left” was even conceivable. It is the very nature of the Jews as a people apart that so rankles our modern-day utopians, just as it has rankled all of those malefactors who, whatever their political stripes, have wanted to impose their grand theories upon society.

As the Nazis and their collaborators were exterminating his European brethren, the playwright and Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht had a revelation. A street-smart son of Belarusian immigrants who gained his writing chops as a newspaper reporter covering the seamy underbelly of Chicago, and a proud, secular Jew, Hecht had never given much thought to antisemitism because he claimed never to have experienced it. Nor did he have any interest in Judaism as a religion. But so disturbed was he by events overseas that Hecht attempted an answer to a question that had bedeviled wiser men:

how something so irrational as antisemitism could also be so durable across time and place.

The reason, Hecht contended in his incensed, frequently over-the-top yet utterly captivating broadside *A Guide for the Bedeviled* (1944), had to do with what he described as “the mission” of the Jews. The notion of a “people” embracing something so nebulous as a “mission” can easily become a recipe for disaster, most horrifically in the case of the German *volk*. The mission Hecht had in mind, however, was not an exclusionary one, even if it concerned the biblical concept of chosenness.

By transferring their allegiance away from the emperors, monarchs, and warlords who had always ruled over man to an Almighty figure in the heavens, Hecht wrote, the Jews had accepted “the mission to think—to think as an individual in the teeth of all Kings and Causes.” In so doing, the Jews not only liberated themselves from the whims of arbitrary authority but gave humanity itself a priceless gift: the insight that, because life is a godly creation, no man can rule over another. In this understanding lay a powerful argument against tyranny, particularly of the sort that would attempt anything like a societal reengineering. “It is the drive to separate the human from nature, to rear his ego above the perfection of the ants,” Hecht wrote, in his description of the Jewish mission’s loftier aims. “Any nation intent on the perfection of the ants must automatically hate the Jews.”

The Jewish covenant with God stood and continues to stand as a permanent rebuke to every king, pharaoh, pope, and commissar who would try to make the Jews bend to their will. Forced conversions, pogroms, genocide—no people have endured more, or suffered it longer, than this stubborn group of erstwhile desert wanderers who refused to bow down, because they gazed up. The Jewish refusal to abandon their traditions, beliefs, and peoplehood under the harshest punishments devised by man is the most remarkable story of collective survival in human history. “During the eighteen centuries in which hate, humiliation, and massacre boil constantly around

them, my kinsmen, the Jews, reveal a single, unwavering characteristic,” Hecht marveled. “They are not impressed.”

Could this perpetual state of dissatisfaction with the world explain the Jewish penchant for complaint? Kidding aside, skepticism toward the promises of their fellow men is one of the most foundational Jewish instincts. Indeed, one such expression of skepticism launched 2,000 years of unrelenting oppression: For their failure to be impressed by a man who claimed to be the son of God, the Jews would pay a terrible price, culminating in the Holocaust.

If it were just kings, queens, and gentle bearded men claiming to be deities who failed to impress them, the Jews would have had a much easier go of it beginning around the end of the 18th century, when opponents of Europe’s throne-and-altar regimes first rose up in revolution. But because their resistance to enthrallment makes no exceptions for secular theories of human perfectibility, the Jews also elicited venom from those who, due to their intelligence and open-mindedness, we’re conditioned to believe are the *least* susceptible to something so primitive as antisemitism.

Voltaire, in his attempt to undermine the authority of religion, which he considered the chief obstacle to the triumph of reason and light over superstition and darkness, was scathing in his attacks on Jews, whom he blamed for monotheism. By the time Marx strutted upon the intellectual scene a century later, a well-developed anti-semitic template was available for the children of the Enlightenment, a politically wide-reaching constituency encompassing anyone who believed that legitimate authority rested with individual citizens and not the establishment institutions (such as the monarchy and clergy) that treated them as subjects.

In this ostensibly more sophisticated view, no longer was Judaism—as an organized religion—just part of the larger structural impediment to mankind’s salvation through progress. That the Jews, unlike their Christian descendants—reassured in the knowledge that whatever their failings in this world they would ultimately receive God’s deliverance in the next—did not believe in an afterlife

unwittingly elevated them as adversaries in the eyes of secular utopians, attempting to create heaven on earth and now in direct competition with God's chosen people for the soul of mankind.

Though Marx famously decried religion for its narcotic effect, his *Weltanschauung* more closely resembled a religious faith than a scientific theory. In *The German Ideology*, Marx spoke of a “day of judgment”; the proletariat plays the role of the Messiah throughout his writings. He disguised the spiritual nature of his ideas by cloaking them in “scientific” garb, which by definition made the values and morality of traditional religion—another Jewish contribution—unscientific. In an age of reason and enlightenment, Marx had good cause to believe that this marketing strategy would appeal to a broad swathe of mankind, and the persuasiveness of his ideas, if not the ideas themselves, was posthumously vindicated in the 20th century, when Communism ruled over a large portion of the globe.

The collapse of Communism less than 80 years after its instantiation in Russia—due in no small part to a courageous band of Jewish opponents, the refuseniks—would seem to vindicate the Jewish faith in an Almighty over the Marxist faith in man. Yet decades later, Marx's destructive legacy persists. One way we see this is through the resurgence of antisemitism on the left, which classical Marxism (thanks to a major assist from Lenin) has helped undergird through its licensing of hatred against individuals—kulaks, capitalists, the bourgeoisie, Zionists—based on their membership in a targeted group. It's unfortunately easy for a political movement to gain support through hatred, especially during times of economic and political uncertainty, and anti-capitalism is the politicization of class hatred.

As an exclusionary phenomenon, nationalism is traditionally associated with the political Right. But the process of globalization

The bar to prove oneself loyal to the leftist creed is so much higher for Jews than for everyone else.

that followed the Cold War, whereby corporations have become as powerful as governments, if not more so, inspired a nationalist strain on the left.

One manifestation of this strain is the anti-globalization movement, which announced itself violently to the world at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. The infusion of nationalism, something usually not hospitable to Jews, into left-wing discourse exacerbated the problem of antisemitism. Since their wanderings in the desert, Jews have been the ur-globalizers. And as has been the case with other well-educated and dynamic diaspora communities (Indians in Uganda, Chinese in Indonesia), Jewish success has bred resentment among certain sectors of the populations among whom Jews live, a resentment that grows as the benefits of the globalization with which Jews are associated appear to be waning.

This phenomenon reveals another crucial, relevant difference between right-wing and left-wing antisemitism. Unlike right-wing antisemites, whose worldview is fundamentally racial and therefore permits no reprieve for would-be Jewish collaborators willing to denounce their people in order to save their own skin, left-wing antisemites not only allow for such converts to their burgeoning faith of “social justice,” but indeed welcome them with open arms. And as the liberal values that Jews considered their secular dogma come under strain alongside the institutions that upheld them—from the *New York Times* to the American Civil Liberties Union; from the Democratic Party to the Ivy League—the temptation to succumb to this new dispensation may grow.

In this near-future scenario, marked by subtle pressures and implicit threats, Jews who seek full and equal participation in these institutions will be allowed to do so on sufferance, permitted to maintain their belief in things such as *tikkun olam* and perhaps some gauzy form of monotheism. But traditional notions of Jewish peoplehood—a form of “white supremacy” since Jews are considered “white” in contemporary hierarchies—will be verboten. And you can forget the State of Israel unless you’re supporting a binational one with the right of Palestinian (but not Jewish) return.

In an America where antisemitism is becoming normalized within respectable, liberal precincts, one can expect that many secular Jews will judge the costs of maintaining a Jewish identity too heavy a burden to bear. In addition to being less genteel, the chief difference between the new antisemitism and that of yesteryear is that, whereas once it was WASP bluebloods who limited Jewish entry into the Ivy League (to preserve room for their own offspring), soon it may be woke Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) administrators reinstating unofficial Jewish quotas.

Jews abandoning Judaism and Jewishness for the sake of acceptance by a progressive movement is hardly a new phenomenon, of course. By becoming a Communist, the Jew “graduates from worrying about the enemies of Jews,” observed Ben Hecht in 1944. “He can enjoy the nobler anger against the enemies of man.” As the Left’s emphasis on identity politics at the expense of its old mainstay of class consciousness intensifies, and the discursive phenomenon identified by British sociologist David Hirsh as the “politics of position” edges out “a politics of reason or persuasion,” the prospect of “graduating” from Jewishness to progressivism and adopting its “nobler” precepts will become increasingly attractive.

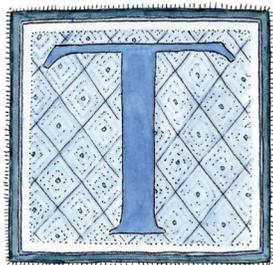
One can quite easily become a traitor to his class; just look at the president most beloved by American Jews, FDR. Many, if not most, of our millennial socialists come from upper-middle-class backgrounds; some even have trust funds. Much harder is it to be a convincing traitor to the uniquely ethno-religious identity that

is Jewishness. Writing big checks to the correct #BlackLivesMatter groups and voting straight-ticket Democrat will no longer suffice.

In part because the bar to prove oneself loyal to the leftist creed is so much higher for Jews than for everyone else (no black or Hispanic student activist is ever asked to disassociate from his community as the price of entry into the progressive fold), the proportion of self-loathing Jews has always been far larger than that of any corresponding minority group. The derogatory term “Uncle Tom” is used to describe African Americans who’ve done nothing more extreme than oppose racial preferences or vote Republican. There is no Mexican, Vietnamese, or Pakistani equivalent to Jewish Voice for Peace, one of several Jewish-led organizations devoted to the dissolution of the world’s one and only Jewish state. No other people can boast the dubious honor of producing so many prodigal sons—men such as Norman Finkelstein, the disgraced academic who mocks Holocaust remembrance as “The Holocaust Industry,” or Noam Chomsky, one of the world’s leading intellectuals, who singles out Israel for vicious opprobrium while dismissing antisemitism as a “marginal issue.”

Fundamental to resisting these worrisome trends is first to acknowledge their existence. For far too long, the Jewish establishment has pretended that there was little to nothing wrong with the liberal institutions in which Jews thrived, institutions that Jews did much to strengthen. The next step for Jewish leaders—on the individual as well as the institutional level—is to move on, to “graduate” from the psychologically abusive relationships these institutions have developed with their Jewish constituents, which might be approximated to battered-woman syndrome in the way so many Jews respond to ever further insults and harms with subscriptions, votes, and donations. Long term, like an exiled government, or a diasporic people yearning to reconstitute their ancient kingdom in the land of their ancestors, their goal must be to build new institutions that maintain the purported but abandoned values of the old. And all the while, the one thing the Jews must never lose is their capacity to be unimpressed. *

The Past and Future of Black–Jewish Relations



TO COMMEMORATE the first day of Black History Month this year, 170 Hollywood industry leaders announced the formation of the Black-Jewish Entertainment Alliance, aiming to “bring our two communities together in solidarity” against racism and antisemitism. This initiative harked back to the era when black and Jewish groups coalesced with labor, churches, and liberals to win passage of countervailing legislation against Jim Crow and to effectuate less-tangible changes in our culture, anathematizing overt bigotry.

Today, sadly, bigotry appears to be rising again in certain quarters, even while the dominant culture seems ever more alert against it. Former President Trump vehemently denied accusations of racism, but the “populist” wave he rode carried along extremists who reveled in flouting intergroup taboos. For example, on QResearch, the website where the QAnon movement’s multitudinous online conversations are compiled, the search utility yields 47,000 hits for the “n word” and 37,000 for the equivalent “k word” aimed at Jews. The harm is not limited to insult. Words that wound may be fol-

lowed by terrible acts, as the massacres at a church in Charleston and a synagogue in Pittsburgh reminded us so chillingly.

Clearly, Jewish and black Americans share a bedrock interest in combating the extremists and their acceptance in respectable politics. But whether this alliance can have any larger agenda is uncertain, given the disparate experiences of the two groups. In America, Jews endured prejudice, discrimination, and even lynching, but the abuses heaped upon blacks through centuries of slavery and then Jim Crow laws were immeasurably more grievous. And while Jews have largely prospered despite adversity in America, black Americans still occupy disproportionate space on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

Even with a limited agenda, renewing the black-Jewish alliance entails recalling something of the history of relations between the two groups, including both high and low moments, and also considering what each can do today to make relations as mutually beneficial as possible.



In its heyday, the black-Jewish alliance jelled in the fight for civil rights, which had been denied so long and so flagrantly. While anti-discrimination laws also applied to Jews and other minorities, some of the most critical measures, like the Voting Rights Act of 1965, scarcely affected Jews directly. Yet Jews rallied around them, less out of self-interest than a sense of justice and identification with the downtrodden. Of course, there were Jews who shared in anti-black prejudice, but the prevailing spirit of the Jewish community then was to view the black cause as its own.

The NAACP, the preeminent American civil rights organization, was founded in 1909 by several black leaders, most notably W.E.B. Du Bois, and a larger number of liberal whites, a disproportionate share of whom were Jews. One of those Jews, Joel Spingarn, “formulated much of the strategy that fostered much of the

To endure for the long term, an alliance must be a two-way street.

organization's growth" in its first years, according to the account on the NAACP's website. Spingarn became the group's president in 1929 and a decade later was succeeded in that role by his younger brother, Arthur, who served until 1966, when he was in turn succeeded by yet another Jew, Kivie Kaplan, who held the post until his death in 1975. Jews were also important officers, staff, and funders of the National Urban League and the Congress of Racial Equality, the other two oldest of the "big five" black organizations that led the civil rights movement in its heyday.

That era was touched off by the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling striking down the concept of "separate but equal." Its ruling rested largely on research by black sociologist Kenneth Clark that had been commissioned by the American Jewish Committee. As the movement gained momentum, its lobbying was coordinated by an umbrella group, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, whose offices could be found in the headquarters of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and whose operations were led by a director, Arnold Aronson, who was seconded from his role as program director of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

When organized labor cracked down on discrimination in its ranks and threw its considerable weight behind the push for anti-discrimination legislation, the AFL-CIO created a standing Civil Rights Committee and a civil rights department in its headquarters. Charles S. Zimmerman, a Jewish vice president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, chaired the former; Donald S. Slaiman of the Jewish Labor Committee led the latter.

The heartbeat of the civil rights movement was the courage of Southern black activists, leaders, and protesters, who faced brutality, prison, and death to challenge Jim Crow. But many whites came south to support them; again, Jews disproportionately among them. This rallying culminated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, a voter-registration project for students dreamed up and organized by the activist and Jew, Allard Lowenstein. Many of the volunteers were Jewish; former congressman Barney Frank, who was one of them, claims that most were. And, tragically, it produced three martyrs, murdered by the KKK: civil rights workers James Chaney, who was black, and Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who were Jewish.

Jews served as influential advisers to civil rights leaders. When the FBI notoriously put Martin Luther King Jr. under surveillance, it was in part worried about the influence of Stanley Levison, King's close adviser and sometimes ghostwriter, who had been a Communist. When the civil rights movement gave way to more radical black protest, Jews continued to be found in key supporting roles, even in groups that were not friendly to Jews. Tom Wolfe's famous account of "radical chic" depicted a fundraiser for the Black Panthers in the luxurious Manhattan apartment of Leonard Bernstein. David Horowitz, then the co-editor of *Ramparts*, organized the Panthers' school in its home base of Oakland, and his liaison to Panther boss and co-founder, Huey Newton, was Hollywood producer Bert Schneider, who functioned as a kind of elevated factotum to Newton.

One could go on; the list of Jews who devoted themselves to black causes is all but inexhaustible.

To endure for the long term, however, an alliance must be a two-way street. Through the other end of the telescope, one spies less in the way of black Americans who have embraced Jewish concerns. King was an eloquent defender of Israel, characterizing it as "one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land almost can be

transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy.” Bayard Rustin and his mentor, A. Philip Randolph, organized Black Americans in Support of Israel Committee, to which NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins lent his name, along with some political officials. Rustin and Randolph were also outspoken in denouncing antisemitism, as have been a handful of other public figures, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., head of Harvard’s Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, and, more recently, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the basketball legend turned author. No doubt, there have been more in this vein, but alas, too few prominent examples come to mind.

Easier to recall is a long record of public effusions hostile to Jews from black leaders—politicians, activists, musicians, sports stars. Anti-black racism is far from unknown among Jews, but it has almost never emanated from prominent voices. In contrast, some of the most celebrated black figures have unapologetically vented anti-Jewish sentiments.

Malcolm X, for example, often expressed jaundiced thoughts about Jews, including after he broke with the Nation of Islam and moderated his stance on other matters, as his biographer Manning Marable records. “The exploiters of blacks are the Jews,” Malcolm once said, adding coyly, “This does not say that we are anti-Semitic. We are simply against exploitation.” When he met with representatives of the Ku Klux Klan seeking to collaborate toward the goal of racial separation, he sought common ground in shared bigotry, telling the Klansmen that “the Jew is behind the integration movement.”

Malcolm looms much larger posthumously than he did during his lifetime, when he was little more than a sideshow. A more central figure for a time was Stokely Carmichael, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who first coined the phrase “black power” as an alternate slogan to the civil rights movement’s mantra “freedom now.” Carmichael changed his name to Kwame Ture and emigrated to Guinea, from where

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he made repeated speaking trips back to the United States to expound Jew-hatred. “The only good Zionist is a dead Zionist,” he said, as Murray Friedman recounts in *What Went Wrong: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance*. Ture added: “We must take a lesson from Hitler.”

For a spell in the 1980s, Rev. Jesse Jackson emerged as the preeminent black spokesman. His campaign for president was damaged when a black reporter for the *Washington Post* revealed that, in a recorded interview, Jackson had referred to Jews as “Hymies” and called New York City “Hymietown.” Eventually, Jackson was superseded by Rev. Al Sharpton, who had a history of Jew-baiting. When, in 1991, City College professor Leonard Jeffries’s antisemitic teachings evoked protests, Sharpton intervened: “If the Jews want to get it on, tell them to pin their yarmulkes back and come over to my house.” Days later, after a seven-year-old black boy was accidentally run over by a Hasidic driver, triggering anti-Jewish riots in Crown Heights during which one young Hasid was stabbed to death, Sharpton egged on the rioters: “If you offend one of these little ones, you got to pay for it. No compromise, no meetings, no coffee klatch, no skinnin’ and grinnin’.” Nearly three decades later, now a respectable public figure, Sharpton confessed with self-serving understatement that he could have “done more to heal rather than harm.”

All of these examples pale in comparison to the record of Louis Farrakhan, whom the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has called “the leading anti-Semite in America.” His assaults on Jews as “termites,” his description of Judaism as a “gutter religion,” his declaration that Hitler was a “great man” (later modified to “wickedly great”) have been widely reported. His Nation of Islam has distributed the notorious fabrication *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as well as a tract of its own, *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, which Henry Louis Gates Jr. condemned as “the bible of the new anti-Semitism.”

Farrakhan might be dismissed as a marginal figure, which in some sense he is. But over and over again, he demonstrates remarkable influence in black America. In 1984, when Jesse Jackson finished third in the Democratic presidential nomination, 65 percent of his delegates told pollsters that they held a favorable view of Farrakhan. A decade later, when Farrakhan called for a “Million Man March” in Washington, it drew 400,000 participants (as estimated by D.C. authorities—others put the numbers higher), despite having no clear program, goals, or mainstream organizational partners. The crowd included many celebrities—among them, a young Barack Obama.

In 1993, Kweisi Mfume, then the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, announced a “sacred covenant” between the CBC and Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam. At a public event consecrating this marriage, Farrakhan apologized for having attacked various black leaders, but as black columnist Clarence Page observed, “notably missing from Mr. Farrakhan’s apologies was one for the Jews.” A few months later, Farrakhan’s spokesman and aide, Khalid Abdul Muhammad, gave a speech in which he said, “Everybody always talk about Hitler exterminating six million Jews....But don’t nobody ever ask what they do to Hitler....They went in there, in Germany, the way they do everywhere they go, and...undermined the very fabric of the society.” Farrakhan publicly rebuked Muhammad for being “mean-spirited,” despite characterizing what he’d said as

“truths.” This was not enough to assuage the CBC, which repudiated its alliance with Farrakhan, although amid the publicity all this caused, members acknowledged that the group had held three previously unreported meetings with him.

The unpublicized meetings seem not to have ended with the Khalid Muhammad fiasco. At one, in 2005, a young Senator Barack Obama posed for a photograph with Farrakhan, but a CBC staff member called the Nation of Islam photographer immediately afterward, appealing to him to withhold the shot, which he did. When the photograph was finally published in 2018, the photographer admitted to fearing that its release would have compromised Obama’s already-known presidential ambitions.

Despite—or perhaps because of—his offensiveness, Farrakhan retains his sway today.

In 2018, Tamika Mallory, co-president of the Women’s March, participated in the Nation of Islam’s annual gathering, where Farrakhan delivered himself of the thought, “Satanic Jew...your time is up.” Mallory described Farrakhan as the “greatest of all time” (“the GOAT”) and later said that “white Jews, as white people, uphold white supremacy.” When this led to calls for her removal from leadership of the organization, several dozen black figures signed a petition declaring “unwavering support” for her, including Kristen Clarke, who has been nominated by President Biden to head the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division.

Most recently, over the course of a couple of days in the summer of 2020, NFL star DeSean Jackson expressed admiration for Farrakhan on social media, also sharing a quote (wrongly) attributed to Hitler, claiming that “white Jews” know that black people are the real “Children of Israel” and will “blackmail” and “extort” America to keep this hidden so they can continue to pursue “their plan for world domination.”

Jackson soon took down the posts and apologized for “any hurt” he had caused, but the next day Stephen Jackson (no relation), a former NBA player turned social activist, jumped in, arguing that

Whites are so numerous and powerful that rage against them draws little blood, but a small subgroup can be treated as a stand-in for the whole — one that is gratifyingly easier to wound, which Jews certainly are.

DeSean Jackson's original posts had been "speaking the truth." He added that the Jews "control all the banks" and called himself "a fan of Minister Farrakhan," adding, "I love the Minister."

What accounts for the frequency—and unashamed boldness—of these expressions, or the comparatively greater currency of antisemitism among black Americans? (When the ADL surveyed such attitudes in 2016, it found that 23 percent of black respondents harbored antisemitic attitudes—low, but more than twice the percentage among whites [10 percent].) The question is not a new one. James Baldwin wrote a piece in 1967 titled "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," which appears to explain nothing. But on second thought, perhaps there is something to this. Whites are so numerous and powerful that rage against them draws little blood, but a small subgroup can be treated as a stand-in for the whole — one that is gratifyingly easier to wound, which Jews certainly are.

And the obvious success of Jews invites envy from various quarters. Even as they climbed the socioeconomic ladder in the post-war period, Jews were disproportionately visible and in roles easy to resent: storekeepers in black neighborhoods, school teachers, welfare workers, and landlords.

Whatever the cause, concerted efforts by black Americans to

combat antisemitism in their own community must be a cornerstone of the black-Jewish alliance.

Sad to say, there is one other sense in which Jews feel that black Americans have not been the close friends Jews wish they were; that is in respect to Israel. The most prominent black advocacy group in the last decade has been the Movement for Black Lives. When it emerged, it issued a platform that called for ending U.S. aid to the "apartheid state" of Israel, which it said engaged in "genocide" against the Palestinian people. This and other foreign-policy planks of the movement are no longer evident on the Internet, but neither was there any public repudiation of this stand.

In the more important (and moderate) venue of the U.S. Congress, most black members have shared in that body's consistent support for Israel, but not uniformly. The House's most florid anti-Israel voice is that of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, originally of Somalia, who declared that Israel "hypnotized the world," and she compared boycotting Israel to boycotting Nazi Germany. Across the Capitol, Georgia's newly elected black U.S. senator, Raphael Warnock, took some pains in his recent campaign to explain away a 2018 speech, captured on video, showing him delivering an impassioned sermon accusing Israel in effect of genocide and presenting a purely fictitious scene:

Young Palestinian sisters and brothers, who are struggling for their very lives, struggling for water and struggling for their human dignity, stood up in a nonviolent protest, saying, "If we're going to die, we're going to die struggling." ...We saw the government of Israel shoot down unarmed Palestinian sisters and brothers like birds of prey.

In bills of special importance to Israel, the members of the Congressional Black Caucus on the whole adopt pro-Israel stances, but in somewhat smaller proportion than their white colleagues. For example, when the House voted overwhelmingly in July 2019 to

put itself on record against the anti-Israel BDS (boycott, divest, sanction) campaign, only 17 members dissented, of whom six were from the CBC. Of the 44 co-sponsors of a bill to sanction those providing material support to Palestinian terror groups, none was from the CBC. Of the bill in the last Congress authorizing military aid to Israel and other forms of cooperation, two-thirds of House members signed on as co-sponsors, including 61 percent of Democrats, but only 44 percent of CBC members.

There is little doubt that in the face of energized extremists, black and Jewish Americans will be working together or in tandem to combat overt bigotry. But if this alliance is to be as strong as possible, what can each side do for the benefit of the other?

With anti-discrimination laws long since enacted, black interests have centered on programs to facilitate economic empowerment. Jews have been supportive of these, out of liberal conviction more than self-interest. Some 50 years ago, the essayist Milton Himmelfarb quipped that Jews “earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans.” What’s changed since then is that Jewish earning has surpassed that of Episcopalians, while Puerto Ricans seem to be voting more conservatively than Jews. Although Latinos as a whole are often twinned with blacks in political commentary, in 2020 as in other years, it appears that Jews joined blacks in supporting the Democrats in greater proportion than Latinos, despite American Jews’ attachment to Israel, where Trump was overwhelmingly preferred.

There are two key areas in which Jews must look to black leaders for support. One is in denouncing antisemitism, especially when voiced by prominent black figures such as Farrakhan. Sometimes, black leaders have complained about Jewish pressure to condemn black antisemites. But if a Jewish leader made an openly disparaging comment about black people, Jewish organizations and

Jews have mostly put aside their self-interests as affluent taxpayers in supporting liberal policies, but to abandon the bedrock value of equal treatment of individuals would threaten everything that Jews have achieved in America.

opinion leaders would rush to castigate the offender before anyone could ask them to do so. To Jewish ears, unprompted rebukes of antisemitism like those of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar have been welcomed like water in the desert.

The second area is Israel. Today’s black leaders could be vocal in support of Israel, as were King, Rustin, and Randolph. Black members of Congress could easily be in the fore of legislative support for the Jewish state.

These two issues of Jewish concern intersect on the college campus. At many schools, student activists have formed “intersectional” coalitions, which have welcomed anti-Israel groups that have steered entire student governing bodies toward anti-Israel positions, sometimes tinged by outright antisemitism and a vehemence that has intimidated Jewish students. Were black students to resist the inclusion of Israel-bashing in the progressive agenda of their activism, it would send a powerful message.

Beyond these commonsense realms in which black and Jewish Americans can lend support to each other, there are two ideas of recent provenance that could strain relations further and that must invite dialogue. One is “antiracism”; the other is The 1619 Project.

The most noted black thinker in the current moment would seem to be Ibram X. Kendi, a leader of his “antiracism” movement.

The essence of “antiracism,” says Kendi, is “equity between racial groups,” a goal to be pursued by means of “antiracist discrimination.” In other words, group rights should be prioritized over individual rights, and the cumulative attainments of groups over individual opportunity and achievement.

This would be materially deleterious to Jews. In 2016, Pew published data on income distribution within each religious group in America: 44 percent of Jews had family incomes above \$100,000, a higher percentage than any other faith; for all Americans combined, only 19 percent reached this level. Jews also ranked near the top in education, with 59 percent having achieved a college degree, compared with a national average of 27 percent. Jews have mostly put aside their self-interests as affluent taxpayers in supporting liberal policies, but to abandon the bedrock value of equal treatment of individuals would threaten everything that Jews have achieved in America.

It is not only in a material sense that most Jews would find Kendi’s prescription repugnant. It also flies in the face of the liberal ideals that made Jews champions of civil rights. A central idea of the Hebrew Bible is that each person is created in the image of God. This core belief in the inherent dignity of each individual has infused Jewish thought and culture, embraced by both those who hold the Bible close and those who do not. It is a principle that lies at the root of the very idea of “rights.” It is hard to think of a tenet held dearer by Jews.

The 1619 Project of the *New York Times*, awarded the Pulitzer prize and accompanied by a curriculum used by many of our nation’s schools, argues that American history should be reframed with the understanding that “slavery—and the anti-black racism it required” underlie “nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional.” Dismissing the contributions of others to the struggles for emancipation and civil rights, it argues that “for the most part, black Americans fought back alone.”

The latter assertion is bound to be taken by Jews as erasing

the history of Jewish contributions to the civil rights movement, of which Jews are rightfully proud. But more important is the broader assertion that America is an essentially malign country eternally rooted in slavery and racism. To Jews—despite painful memories of discriminatory quotas and lassitude during the Holocaust—America has been a country of liberation, the place where they received more acceptance than anywhere else in the 2,000 years of the Diaspora; and, to boot, it is a global power that helped to defeat Nazism, bring down Soviet Communism, and protect Israel. The creed of American Jewry includes great love of America. If, as The 1619 Project implies, the creed of black America is to see this country as rooted in evil, then the gap between the two groups will yawn wider than ever before.

This would be a sad development. Despite differences of history and circumstance, black and Jewish Americans have been productive partners in advancing programs of social welfare, dating back at least to the New Deal. And, notwithstanding 1619’s claims to the contrary, they were partners in the glorious victories of the civil rights movement, one of the proudest chapters in American history. Also, although it is not of their own doing, they are inseparably joined as targets of extreme-right hate groups. Thus, while black and Jewish Americans should face their differences frankly, they should all the while keep in mind the things, good and bad, that bring them together. *

Liberalism and the Common Calling of Blacks and Jews



AS A WAVE OF anti-Jewish violence tore through New York in December 2019, Christian clergy across Boston gathered to compose a powerful statement, asserting their shared responsibility to combat antisemitism. Ministers of all races and denominations drafted the statement collaboratively, inviting a handful of their closest Jewish partners to provide feedback to ensure that the language they chose and the message they conveyed would meaningfully address the Jewish community's fears, rather than merely serving as a palliative for their own feelings.

A fascinating dynamic emerged: As the ministers quickly chose George Washington's letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport as the most fitting text for the moment, some of the Black ministers expressed discomfort. A text that American Jews see as a foundational promise of our equality—the pledge of the first president that our government would give “to bigotry no sanction, to

persecution no assistance”—rang false to them. For these people of faith, partners in so many Boston struggles, these were, simply put, the words of a slave owner.

Still, every Black minister who was part of the project signed this letter decrying violence against Jews, quoting Washington's words and declaring that in the face of rising violent antisemitism, “silence is both sanction and assistance.” This action on the part of these Black ministers was not a dismissal of facts important to them regarding the Founding Father. Rather, in a moment of crisis for the Jewish community, they resolved to demonstrate their unconditional solidarity: to prioritize building bridges, transcending tensions, and meeting the moment with the language their Jewish neighbors needed to hear.

Building bridges between any communities—across race, nationality, religion, or any other identity—always entails challenge. There are differences in worldview, theology, values, and lived experience. Things that we say and that we believe can hurt and even harm others. Inherent in any such relationship is the ability to authentically understand those experiences through our partners' perspective, even if it is different from our own. Weaving trust requires appreciating complexity and navigating the tension between our narratives and those of others, while remaining clear about what we believe we are called to do in any given moment. Authentic and trusting relationships can be built on the foundations that bind two communities together, even as we acknowledge the complexities, including the conflicts and differences that separate us.

As a Jewish professional working in intergroup relations, striving (and not always succeeding) to act in deep and authentic solidarity with other groups, I've had the opportunity to learn critical lessons about the exceptionally complicated “Black–Jewish relationship.” Few communal relationships suffer from so much oversimplification, whether from those who overly romanticize our similarities or from those who focus too heavily on our disagreements and conflicts. To move forward, we need to build

honest, clear-eyed relationships, acknowledging the many kinds of diversity within both communities, and engaging with a wide variety of Black leaders in order to understand their experiences and interests. Neither community is a monolith.

To observe the Black community as it is, and not as we imagine it to be, is to experience a community that is at least as complex and diverse as the American Jewry. The Black community is Christian, Muslim, and Jewish, often centered around strong anchors of faith, while also including people of no faith. There are gender, class, and generational gaps in worldviews and attitudes about social change. It is a community that includes recent immigrants, alongside those whose ancestors have been part of this nation's story for centuries. Working in partnership with many different Black leaders, I've seen the same kinds of tensions, divisions, and vigorous debates about self-interest, values, and strategies that animate Jewish communal conversations.

This does not mean being naïve. Some of the Black leaders who have emerged in contemporary social justice movements have given voice to antisemitic notions, both classical and contemporary, and we need to ensure that these figures are not normalized or mainstreamed. We must also be honest about those who ignore or minimize Jewish vulnerability and concerns about antisemitism in a way that would be unthinkable regarding other bigotries.

Still, in some Jewish quarters, it has become common to stop there—to rely on one-sided tropes that seek to absolve us of responsibility to keep investing in building strong, meaningful, and diverse relationships. In viewing the relationship as transactional, tallying up which “side” has benefited or hurt the other more, we miss the true diversity of viewpoints and motivations among the many figures engaged in these relationships every day.

So, for example, while we talk about the ways that the civil rights alliance between Black Americans and Jews became strained in the 1970s, we must also remember groups such as Black Americans in Support of Israel Committee (BASIC), which was founded

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as members of the United Nations pushed for condemnations of Israel that would result in the UN's heinous “Zionism = Racism” declaration in the fall of 1975. Hundreds of the most powerful and prominent Black civil rights leaders came together to say: We know what racism looks like, and Zionism isn't it. They leveraged their moral authority on behalf of their Jewish neighbors. As BASIC's chairman, A. Philip Randolph, told the *New York Times*, “Jewish Americans supported us, marched with us and died for the cause of racial freedom. Black people cannot turn their backs on a friend.”

Similarly, today, although it is right for us to focus on antisemitic comments by media darlings like Marc Lamont Hill regarding Israel, I suggest that we also pay close attention to the far more numerous Black leaders who consistently stand up for the U.S.–Israel relationship, and whose work changes the situation on the ground. Take Deval Patrick: During his two terms as governor, Patrick made establishing strong economic ties between Massachusetts and Israel a central agenda item of his administration, leading two trade missions, consistently showing up at solidarity rallies, sharing a stage with Jewish leaders in 2012 as thousands rallied when Israel was under fire. He spoke from the mainstage of AIPAC in 2019, at a time when many other progressives were being pressured to stay away.

It is profoundly within the Jewish self-interest to defend the American liberal project: the promise to each new generation of Americans that, if we work hard and play by the rules, we can ensure a strong future for our children.

It is also necessary and right for us to be concerned about hateful figures such as Louis Farrakhan—we have a clear self-interest in not allowing the mainstreaming of antisemitism and other bigotries. But we also must not ignore the day-to-day reality of community-relations work in cities across America, the persistent solidarity Black leaders demonstrate with Jewish communities, the ongoing and mutual willingness to learn and grow together. After every Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, or Poway, among the first calls our Jewish Community Relations Council received were from Black and Brown Christian and Muslim religious leaders, who then publicly stood with us at rallies and protests. The leadership of our local Black Ministerial Alliance was the first to throw its weight behind the Jewish nonprofit security agenda with the Massachusetts state government, and the first to push back when a government official scheduled a meeting on the Jewish Sabbath.

To be invested in the relationship between and among communities is to recognize and accept *all* of these truths. We must have candid and challenging conversations about the tensions that some exploit as wedges to divide us. We must reflect honestly together about doing more to marginalize antisemitic and racist voices. And we must also hear, in loving feedback, that the Jewish community doesn't own the moral high ground, either, that Jews

don't always do all we can to marginalize those of our own leaders who say bigoted, hateful things about other communities.

When we continue to stay in difficult conversations and build complex and authentic relationships, we're able, for example, to push back when we hear rhetoric regarding Israel that we believe is unfair or inaccurate. This is also where we can engage with the idea that perhaps some of the challenges we now experience in garnering Black support for Israel are exacerbated by unhelpful and unproductive actions and statements by some of Israel's leaders.

When we reject simplistic, transactional thinking, we can also embrace a more expansive and enlightened understanding of Jewish self-interest that can go much deeper and further than the classical approach to Jewish "defense," on two levels.

First, we must set aside the notion that Jewish self-defense does not also include working for Black civil rights and against racism. While we might once have viewed ourselves as parallel minority groups in America who needed to join forces, we now understand that the increasing diversity of American Jewry means that our fates are literally intertwined. To stand up against racism is to stand up for members of our own family: Jewish self-interest includes the interests of Black Jews.

Second, we need to understand that articulating our self-interest as Jews means embracing those aspects of the American project that have made this country a place where Jews (and so many others) have thrived more than they have anywhere else in Western civilization. In these fractured times, our nation is increasingly challenged by a crisis of polarization. Some who are dissatisfied with the values and priorities of the American liberal project are seeking to tear down and delegitimize the very fabric of centuries-old institutions, rather than engage in substantive debate.

We are seeing the impact of these efforts in a decline in trust in institutions, democracy, and in facts and information. We are seeing this decline in the amplification of conspiracy theories and in the growing instability of our political systems.

It is profoundly within the Jewish self-interest to defend the American liberal project: the promise to each new generation of Americans that, if we work hard and play by the rules, we can ensure a strong future for our children. But engaging openly and honestly with the Black experience in America means also recognizing that this promise, so central to the American Jewish story, has been far from realized for many of our fellow Americans. By engaging in the work of racial justice, we work to make the American project a reality for all.

More broadly, we need to shift the conversation from self-interest to “shared interests.” In addition to a shared interest in the liberal project, Jewish Americans and Black Americans have a shared interest in combating the frightening revival of a white-supremacist movement. This hateful ideology and its increasingly violent expression threatens all Jewish and Black communities. While there may be other issues on which we do not have a shared agenda or interests, we simply must work together on this.

America is, and has always been, imperfect. Patriotic liberalism requires an acknowledgment of imperfection and the resolve to continually work toward a more perfect union. It requires us to partner with our neighbors to denounce and reject the radicalism on both sides that threatens our union. If we gauge the state of the Black–Jewish partnership only by the words and actions of our most radical elements—on both sides—then we cede the common space where reasonable, good people are working every day, making common cause when we can and respectfully going our separate ways when we cannot.

The Jewish obligation to support Black aspirations to end American racism must not be premised on Black leaders being good allies to Jews on our particularistic self-interests at all times. It must be grounded, always, in our commitment to the fulfillment of the promise of America for all Americans. We must feel the urgent need to tackle racism in this country as Americans and as Jews—regardless of the state of Black–Jewish relations. This is

what’s best for America, what’s best for all Americans, and that should be the starting point of our efforts.

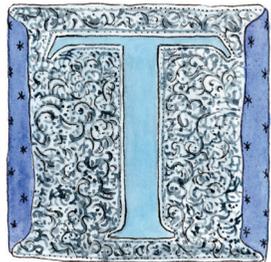
If President Washington’s promise still means something to American Jews, then we must strengthen the Jewish partnership with the Black community to fight against racism in all its forms, to create justice for all Americans—especially for those whose experience has not infused Washington’s words with the same hope and meaning. To do otherwise is to settle for a future in which the collective American project has been compromised and the aspirations of the Founders diminished. That would be a tragedy. *

PART TWO

JEWISH TEXTS,
JEWISH HISTORY



Judaism and the Politics of *Tikkun Olam*



HERE IS no one “kosher” Jewish approach to social justice, just as there is no single authorized Jewish response to any of the challenges we humans encounter and create for ourselves. Jewish texts contain a multitude of opinions, enough to support the presuppositions and political persuasions that almost any seeker could bring to them. One can write a purely socialist economic plan for society using only traditional Torah sources. One could also write a capitalist model citing another set of Torah sources.

I suggest we do neither.

Instead, I propose that we embrace Judaism’s multiplicity of perspectives, its real-world wrestling with human complexity and imperfection. As Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote: “To live up to the Torah’s ideals, maximally, one must develop every human capacity and insight — and its opposite” (*Ohr Yisrael*, Letter #30).

The Jewish worldview enables us to reject simplemindedness and silver bullets. It embraces incrementalism over radicalism, even in striving toward revolutionary goals. Judaism’s approach acknowledges

the complexities of human existence. It puts forward flawed people as role models, rather than impossible ideals. And it moves, inexorably, though not always linearly, toward the perfection of the world.



Given the wide range of socioeconomic approaches in the tradition, it will come as no surprise that American Jewish politics has reflected Jewish sociology more than theology. Liberal rabbis have long emphasized prophetic ethical monotheism, while liberal congregations have often drawn upon Jewish ethics for a broader version of *tikkun olam*—not simply repair of the Jewish community but of the whole world. By contrast, more traditional (typically Orthodox) Jews have moved in an altogether different direction, emphasizing the importance of Jewish particularism in a way that often swims against the currents of mainstream culture. As one joke common in Orthodox circles has it: “There are two kinds of Jews, those who favor *tikkun olam* and those who understand Hebrew.”

Both poles of American Jewry draw upon Jewish sources. But to reduce a complex tradition to politicized, one-sided simplicity trivializes religion and debases politics. Politics works best when everyone understands that both sides have finite claims, conflicting needs, mixed interests, and negotiable positions that will need to be compromised. To place a religious stamp on positions makes them more rigid; the “absolute” claim of divine approbation restricts maneuverability and makes it harder to come to resolution. It is a kind of idolatry to wrap human policies in the fabric of divinity and eternity. What politics needs from religion is *critique*—the challenge that universal, transcendent values and ideas can bring.

I want to offer an alternate way for American Jewry to apply the Jewish tradition in the movement to expand social justice in America. Rather than cherry-picking sources to support one “side” of an issue or the other, let us consciously utilize both liberal and conservative elements in the tradition and offer a balance of the particular

and the universal, retaining a simultaneous focus on Jewish interests as well as on broader concerns. By appreciating that the tradition has much to say on many sides of these issues, I hope to enable both wings of American Jewry to find common language for engaging more constructively and respectfully.

Jewish religion is a covenantal partnership. God is a partner, but humans must do their share in repairing the world to bring about redemption. Judaism combines a liberal, utopian, universal vision of completely transforming the planet with a conservative, realistic, particularist method of transformation. The interplay between these elements advances revolutionary ideals while preventing runaway excesses or socially destructive overreach. Typically, this leads to gradualist, incrementalist steps toward ultimate perfection.

The central principle on which ethics and social justice turn is that every human being is created *b'tzelem Elokim*—in the image of God (Genesis 1:26; 5:1). As I explore in my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Life*, this means that every human being is endowed with the intrinsic dignities of infinite value, equality, and uniqueness. In the Talmud, Ben Azzai affirms that the image of God is the *clal gadol*, the great principle of the Torah (Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:4). All of the commandments and prohibitions derive from this recognition of the other as a precious creature, fully equal and uniquely valuable, without regard to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or any other political, economic, cultural, or other man-made distinction. Humans should be treated as such. It follows that people may not steal from each other, murder each other, exploit each other. They should honor one another, show solidarity, help the needy, and so forth.

The human calling is to work in partnership with God to repair the world so these dignities will be fully upheld in real life for everybody. This central teaching of the Jewish tradition sets the agenda for a Jewish community that works for social justice, for building a society free of discrimination.

The contemporary universalist approach to *tikkun olam* is a Johnny-come-lately in Jewish religion, although its underlying ideas

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are deeply rooted in the tradition. To bring about the messianic age, people must work to repair the material world. The prophets teach that we must overcome the enemies of life—poverty, hunger, oppression, war, and sickness—to reach an age in which human life, all life, will experience the full dignity and fair treatment to which it is entitled.

This work must balance many approaches. On the “liberal” side, upholding the dignity of equality and infinite value means that human life is worth more than any amount of money. No one should lack food, clothing, shelter, or medical treatment because he is poor. This validates the entire program of welfare for the needy. And yet, society does not have infinite resources, so policy must be negotiated around distributing limited resources effectively and reconciling the unlimited needs of all without systemic discrimination against any group.

On the more “conservative” side, the tradition glorifies *tzedakah*—private giving—and the active support of family in preventing descent into dependence. Maimonides writes: “We are obligated to carefully observe the mitzvah of *tzedakah* above and beyond all other positive commandments in the Torah” (Mishneh Torah, Sefer Zeraim, Hilchot Matnot Aneeyim, 10:1). Yet, for Maimonides, the highest level of *tzedakah* was one that emphasized self-reliance. Giving someone a business partnership or a job or a loan upholds the receiver’s dignity and enables him to avoid becoming dependent on society. “When

you eat of the fruits of your own labor, you are happy and well off” (Psalms 128:2).

Thus we find a balance: building a more equal and just society through both government welfare and private initiative. This constructive interaction prevents the glorification of government action and excessive reliance on impersonal welfare by also validating personal initiatives and the web of human solidarity and civil society. This strand of tradition clears the way for the Jewish community to support the extension of the welfare state, while encouraging a central role for free enterprise and market forces in generating wealth and enabling self-determination. The two can—and should—coexist.

In recognizing the value and equality of the other, the covenantal method rejects coercion and tactics that intimidate through shame or diminishment. Exercising restraint in this process leads to advances via compromise and incremental change. It recognizes that people—especially the better-off—are more open to gradual changes in which they feel respected and included, as opposed to drastic, radical, sudden upheavals. While this approach is slower, it’s more sustainable and likelier to be accepted by the whole society.

This covenantal process of gradual adjustment has been the genius of democracy. By modulating the yin of change and the yang of establishment, the democratic process wins the trust and assent of the governed, while providing a steadier, more grounded social consensus that can withstand difficulties and setbacks. Imposed norms or dictatorial regimes are more fragile. They often move faster but then are slowed or reversed by backlash.



This brings us to the frontier of contemporary American social justice movements, especially racial justice efforts. A new understanding of structural racism, recognition of continued inequality, and high-profile incidents of the deaths of black people at the hands

of the police have led to demands for all-out efforts and drastic, extraordinary action, ranging from reparations for slavery to unprecedented levels of investment in and attention to black communities.

The time calls for serious action. The Jewish community should join in making the case for directing extra attention and resources to resolve areas of long-standing deprivation and inequality. Given the cumulative suffering of African Americans from centuries of slavery followed by systematic discrimination, their need for support to overcome deprivation deserves an out-of-the-ordinary response.

However, this work is so important that it should be guided by our own tradition, which upholds both justice and a process that shows fairness and respect to all groups. Significantly, it includes trying to prevent one-sided or extreme policies that will damage one group in service of another and that can erode the trust and mutual interests upholding democratic institutions.

A moderate approach is needed, because a more radical wing has emerged of late, usually called the “antiracism” movement. (This is not dissimilar from the phenomenon whereby a more radical black nationalist movement emerged from the liberal civil rights movement.) This group brings a new narrative that rejects the inherited story of America as a land of opportunity. This worldview holds, instead, that the true story of America is one of unalloyed exploitation and abuse, primarily of black citizens. It follows that all white Americans are beneficiaries of structural racism and are thereby implicated in this entrenched evil.

Aside from the unfairness of indiscriminately impeaching all members of a group—any group—this approach contradicts the hard-earned lessons of Jewish tradition that each person should be judged by individual behavior. Jewish tradition once demonized whole groups or tainted them by dint of their belonging to an evil community. However, as it matured, it eliminated such rulings because they violated the image of God of the “outcasts.” (Consider the neutralization of the laws to wipe out the seven Canaanite nations [Yoma 54a] or to execute the rebellious son [Sanhedrin 71a].)

Aside from the unfairness of indiscriminately impeaching all members of a group, this approach contradicts the hard-earned lessons of Jewish tradition that each person should be judged by individual behavior.

Such wholesale condemnations also undermined the checks and balances that govern action and prevent a just system from turning violent and destructive.

One of the most dangerous elements of this new ideology is many of its proponents' unwillingness to brook dissent. They label resistance, hesitation, critique, or proposed moderation of extraordinary steps as evidence of racism itself. If you are not an "antiracist" as the ideology defines it, you are necessarily a racist. The effect is to stifle discussion, damaging the integrity of political discourse and hampering our ability to create a broad consensus.

This approach violates the central covenantal principle of not imposing even good policies by force, out of respect for the dignity of the other. The delegitimization of dissent is nothing less than religious coercion disguised as upholding morality. Those who challenge or criticize are excommunicated: They are labeled "racist," which puts them beyond the pale, unworthy even of getting a hearing. Accepting this approach means that if anything goes wrong—which happens in any human system—there is no built-in review or check. A systemic warping and metastasis of abuses become inevitable and uncorrectable. All policies need independent feedback in order to function at their best.

The Jewish tradition was so opposed to creating an atmosphere

of intimidation and silence in important ethical matters that the Talmud required that death-penalty cases be brought before the 71-judge Sanhedrin (supreme court). There, the judges and advocates for the defendant were given priority to speak. If the Sanhedrin ultimately voted to convict the defendant unanimously, the case was thrown out on the grounds that unanimity could be caused only by a public hysteria that had silenced the defendant's voice. This background intimidation distorted judgment and disqualified the whole process.

While the new counter-narrative about America is justifiable according to the experiences of many black Americans, it contradicts the experiences of many Jews, Asian Americans, and other immigrant ethnic groups. (It's also not a perspective uniformly held in the black community.) For these groups, America has been a land of opportunity and promise, albeit an imperfect one. Yet the new narrative degrades these groups by turning them into partners in crime. The accusation is that they succeeded not by their own merit, as they themselves believe, but rather because of unearned benefits they have derived through their exploitation of others.

By so blatantly rejecting the sacred stories and values of other groups, this narrative creates a real danger of backlash. Indeed, the backlash is happening already: Entrenched groups and opportunistic politicians are recruiting those who are offended by these new tactics, people who might have been moved by a different kind of call for change but instead feel unjustly attacked. The demands of this wing violate the general principles of equality and justice by invoking counter-discrimination as part of the liberation process, and even suspending ethical judgment on the tactics or the leadership of the movement.

Some white Americans feel enough guilt to accept these terms. They are willing to reject the inherited American narrative, to shy away from holding antiracism movement leaders accountable for missteps, and they even refuse to acknowledge or condemn the violence exhibited by those who exploit marches

and protests to abuse and steal from others, destroying property, livelihoods, and lives.

This sort of reparative favoritism and double standard of morality threatens to undermine one of the strongest points of Jewish tradition and American ideals: equality in justice with respect for all. I predict that it will fail, starting at the ballot box, because it offends so many others. Popular resistance will block many of the desirable outcomes. The inevitable missteps or overreach will impugn the whole movement to expand social justice, and the most likely victims of the failure will be the deprived people it intends to help. The oft-quoted maxim *tzedek tzedek tirdof* (Deuteronomy 16:20)—usually translated as “justice, justice shall you pursue”—does not repeat the word *tzedek* simply for effect. The real point is that society must pursue justice justly.

Here the Jewish tradition has another lesson to teach us. On one hand, the Torah repeatedly warns about injustice to the poor: “You shall not pervert judgment of the poor in his cause” (Exodus 23:6); “you shall not elevate the person of might; judge your neighbor righteously” (Leviticus 19:15). The tradition even calls for special, additional help for the poor, for the vulnerable widow and orphan, for the outsider. As Maimonides asserts: The more a person lacks, the more we are commanded to help him (Mishneh Torah, Sefer Zeraim, Hilchot Matnot Aneeyim, ch. 7, h. 3).

On the other hand, one must not pursue justice through unjust means: “You shall not favor a poor man in his cause [unjustly]” (Exodus 23:3); and “you shall not do unrighteousness in judgment [or policy]” (Leviticus 19:15).

The Torah is warning against twisting our basic moral code on behalf of the oppressed. We cannot compromise our principles to assert that the oppressed are just regardless of their behavior, simply because of their identity. Their race, gender, past colonial status, membership in a marginalized group, and so forth, do not *a priori* make their cause right and all opposition to it wrong. Where a free society ought to engage in policy debates, we instead

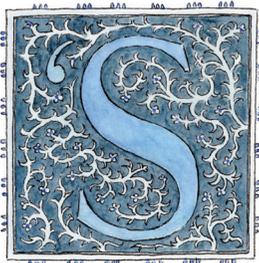
find ourselves in the midst of quasi-religious battles between good and evil.

We must do better. We must press toward more perfect application of our American ideals, which have been imperfectly applied. But giving a blank moral check to people corrupts them and destroys the moral landmarks that would keep them on—or help them get back on—the straight path. The Talmud speaks harshly of such a situation. If people, lacking guidance, act wrongly and bring disaster, then those who could have criticized and checked them but did not are blamed for the misdeeds and the resultant blows inflicted on society (Talmud Shabbat 54a).

Martin Luther King Jr. took a very different approach. His success in winning much of the country to the cause of black Americans was due, in large measure, to the fact that he called upon all Americans to live up to the highest ideals of the American democratic narrative and of human rights, many of which are drawn from the Jewish traditions outlined here. When King spoke of the American ideal that “all men are created equal,” he was tapping into the very principle of *tzelem Elokim*. He asked America to live up to its promises, an approach that American patriots of all backgrounds could embrace. To resist his arguments necessitated rejecting America’s own cherished values. Many did resist—but collectively, American society accepted his call.

This can be a moment of world repair and a breakthrough for American society to a higher level of liberty and justice for all. The opportunity can also be frittered away by resistance from entrenched interests, by widespread bystanding and indifference, or by allowing extremists to hijack the movement and turn it away from equal justice for all. American Jewry can make a special constructive contribution by illuminating the way for all Americans to wisely, realistically, empathetically, and fairly realize the Torah’s call to “love your neighbor as yourself.” *

Reclaiming Biblical Social Justice



“SOCIAL JUSTICE” is a foundational biblical value. But its ancient meaning has little to do with the modern catchphrases and ideologies that are part of contemporary social justice discourse, like socialism or “equality of outcomes.” Instead, the Bible gives us a much more complex vision of “justice and righteousness” to describe the ideal social order. This vision includes notions of self-reliance, protection of private property, and personal responsibility for oneself and one’s dependents, principles that seldom appear in contemporary conversations.

The Bible offers profound wisdom about creating a society that cares for the underprivileged. Amos, the eighth-century B.C.E. prophet, declared that nations do not even deserve to exist if they build their wealth by trampling on their most vulnerable members. While this applied to all nations, it was particularly incumbent upon the Jews, precisely because they are God’s Chosen People (Amos 3:2). Amos further stresses that immoral behavior cloaked by conspicuous piety is nothing more than cheap performative politics. “Spare me the sound of your hymns and let me not hear

Communal leaders must draw from the full scope of the tradition’s wisdom if they are to speak in its name.

the music of your lutes; but let justice (*mishpat*) well up like water, righteousness (*tzedakah*) like an unfailing stream” (Amos 5:23–24).

Amos’s warnings remain just as essential in 2021 as they were nearly 3,000 years ago, especially in countries like America and Israel, which have strong religious traditions and pride themselves on notions of exceptionalism. A society that invokes God, but does not follow His ways, ultimately takes God’s name in vain. Precisely for that reason, we must identify the key elements necessary to build a just and righteous society, and communal leaders must draw from the full scope of the tradition’s wisdom if they are to speak in its name. While the Bible’s agrarian society differs greatly from modern industrial economies, we can nevertheless identify eight essential principles, stemming from both the letter and spirit of ancient norms, to guide contemporary thinking and practices.

1 | EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW

Justice and righteousness cannot be accomplished by distorting the law, either to favor the rich or the poor. “You shall not render an unfair decision. Do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich,” God commands (Leviticus 19:15). Preferential legal treatment for the powerful or wealthy is wrong, but so are Robin Hood ethics that undermine legal equality or penalize honest financial success. Similarly, the Torah repeatedly demands that *all* people, native-born citizens and resident aliens alike, live under one legal

system. “The same ritual and the same rules shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you” (Numbers 15:16).

2 | MAINTAIN HUMAN DIGNITY FOR ALL

Equality before the law, however, does not mean mandating equal outcomes. Thriving societies will have socioeconomic gaps, and the Torah calls upon the financially successful to help prevent the less fortunate from falling into destitution, while protecting private property and prohibiting coveting another’s possessions. When encountering the needy, the Torah commands, “Open your hand and lend him sufficiently to provide what he is missing” (Deuteronomy 15:8). The Sages later expanded this commandment to include outright charity. Loans or charity to support someone’s basic needs are a far cry from the equal redistribution of wealth, but they can ensure a minimum standard of living for all.

Even in an ideal society, people will have varying means at their disposal, but everyone is entitled to the dignity of a rich spiritual life. People’s limited means should not limit their ability to stand before God—thus the Torah allows people to bring a wide range of items, from expensive sheep to simple flour, to utilize for sin offerings at the Temple (Leviticus 5:1–11).

Preserving human dignity also inspires the Torah’s laws regarding the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. Every seventh year, the Sabbatical year for the entire community, the Torah mandates the remission of all loans and the liberation of slaves. In the 50th, Jubilee, year, land titles were also restored to their original owners. The rationale behind these emancipation orders was to affirm the theological value of individual liberty: Humans, created in the image of God, are meant to be servants of God, not “servants to servants,” i.e., other human beings (Leviticus 25:55). This emancipatory system ensured that slaves and others on the verge of debt-driven

enslavement would regain control of their basic freedom, their land, and the fruit of their labors.

3 | ETHOS OF SELF-RELIANCE

These laws did not redistribute commodities, currencies, and other sources of wealth. Immediately after the Sabbath, Sabbatical year, or Jubilee, people are expected to return to work and use their restored economic tools to provide for themselves such that they will not become destitute again. The Sages saw work as a noble pursuit and a way to avoid reliance on society. “A person should always hire himself to lowly work rather than require support,” they declared (Bava Batra 110a). A just and righteous society thus promotes the values of self-reliance as well as providing economic opportunities to achieve that goal.

A just and righteous economic system, according to the Torah, is one that builds a culture of economic growth while promoting a notion of human dignity that raises the living standards of the poor and provides opportunities for them to work for themselves.

4 | SHARED NATIONAL EXPERIENCES

To build a solid future, a caring society requires its citizens to share experiences in the present and memories of its past. The Torah ensured that all citizens, rich and poor alike, would share in the rest of the weekly Sabbath: “You shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your donkey, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest *as you do*” (Deuteronomy 5:14). The goal, as the verse emphasizes, is not just that laborers have some respite, but that all members of society should share that experience, thereby creating a sense of commonality and solidarity.

Societies that support multiculturalism without concomitantly promoting shared visions or ideals are unlikely to nurture the necessary cohesion to foster mutual support.

Similarly, the Torah mandates that resident aliens, widows, orphans, and slaves—society’s most vulnerable members—should take part in the seasonal agricultural festivals that commemorated central moments in shared Jewish history (Deuteronomy 16:11).

5 | DUTIES TOWARD THE VULNERABLE

A just and righteous legal system protects its most vulnerable members, preventing the strong from manipulating the weak while providing everyone with the opportunity to thrive. The Torah includes general directives such as “You shall not ill treat any widow or orphan” (Exodus 22:21). Then it goes further, mandating empathy: “If you take your neighbor’s garment in pledge, you must return it to him before the sun sets. It is his only clothing, the sole covering of his skin. In what else shall he sleep? Therefore, if he cries out to me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate” (Exodus 22:25–26). Markets and morals can coexist if we remember that our transactions are with people created in God’s image.

Beyond these prohibitions, Jewish law also mandates proactive measures, including prompt payment of wages to laborers, interest-free loans, charitable tithing, and sharing parts of the fields that were not harvested. As scholars have noted, the Israelites were unique among all ancient peoples in crafting such a beneficent

system. Rulers of other peoples would frequently utilize amnesties and other acts of grace—but only to increase the poor’s dependence on their whims. The Torah, in contrast, demands these actions regularly, and not just from communal leaders but from all citizens. It imposes significant obligations for society members to care for one another.

6 | SOLIDARITY

The Torah frequently couches these commandments in terms that stress solidarity with those in need—they are “your brother,” “your neighbor,” “your kinsman,” and so on. The appeal is both moral and emotional: Help them because they are your own. Charity starts (but does not end) in an expansive home that includes your family but also your neighbors and countrymen. Similarly, the Bible invokes the Israelite enslavement in Egypt on over 30 occasions to remind the Jews of their own collective experience with dependency—couching law within an emotionally resonant national memory. Just societies are built on norms that both stem from and foster a shared narrative, which creates a sense of national destiny that leads citizens to focus as much on their mutual obligations and duties as they do on their individual rights and entitlements. In contrast, societies that support multiculturalism without concomitantly promoting shared visions or ideals are unlikely to nurture the necessary cohesion to foster mutual support.

7 | *TIKKUN OLAM* LEGAL REVISIONS

Turning acts of kindness into binding obligations runs some risk, since changing socioeconomic conditions can make laws obsolete and even counterproductive. As guardians of the biblical norms, the Sages acted to ensure that Jewish law would continue

to uphold the Torah's values, even under changing circumstances, and some of these enactments were made, in Talmudic jargon, "for the sake of *tikkun olam*." In contemporary parlance, this term has become synonymous with lofty, overarching goals of "mending the world," "repairing civilization," or, more generally, "social justice." Its original meaning, however, was more modest but no less important: Tinker with the law to ensure that legal norms continue to prioritize important values in new conditions and protect the vulnerable.

For example, at the end of the Second Temple period, Hillel the Elder saw that the Sabbatical-year loan remissions were discouraging loans to the needy. He famously created a *prozbul* document that essentially nullified the remissions requirement—a hallmark of the biblical socioeconomic order—to ensure that poor people would have reliable access to credit. Other enactments were significantly less drastic but helped people with great social vulnerability. For example, small emendations were made to the laws of agency and contracts to ensure that divorcées received alimony payments and did not have their marital status questioned. Redeeming captives is a great mitzvah; nonetheless, caps were placed on ransom payments to discourage more attacks, even at the cost of preventing wealthy captives from paying exorbitant amounts to free themselves.

The ancient texts acknowledged complexity and weighed tradeoffs; this led to disagreements among the Sages about how to interpret various measures. The same must be true today. So, to take one example, death-penalty supporters and abolitionists can equally claim the *tikkun olam* mantle if they believe that their policy reforms will lead to more safety and justice. Like our Talmudic predecessors, activists on both the political right and left cannot just wave a "Redeem the World" banner and dismiss their opponents as hard-hearted; instead, they must rationally show how the proposed benefits from their policies outweigh the potential side effects.

Another challenge posed by turning acts of kindness into binding norms is that people might come to feel that fulfilling the law exhausts their broader social obligations—check off the legal box and you're done. Yet legal norms can never fully cover the complexity of social interactions, or imbue a society with a spirit of mutual aid and compassion. Thus the Torah augments the law with general exhortations, such as "Follow in the ways of God" or "Do the right and the good in the eyes of God." Such appeals were understood by the Sages as calls for supererogatory behavior—going beyond the letter of the law, so to speak—to help others.

This approach is exemplified in a Talmudic story about the Babylonian sage, Rabbah bar bar Hana (Bava Metziah 83a). He hired laborers to transport wine barrels for him, but they mishandled the merchandise and wine spilled out. Nonetheless, Rabbah was ordered by Rav, his senior colleague, not only to refuse compensation for the negligence but also to pay the hungry laborers their wages. This, he asserted, was the mandate of the verse "Follow the ways of the good and keep to the paths of the just" (Proverbs 2:20). Sometimes the righteous thing to do is to go beyond the demands of strict justice. We need greater moral teachers to emphasize and exemplify this point.

These eight principles present challenges that Jewish communal leaders need to confront when debating policy dilemmas. Does the current welfare system encourage people to take care of themselves as well as others? Is the law updated in a way to protect people equally or preserve critical values? Do schools, houses of worship, and other critical civic institutions promote dignity, solidarity, duty, and altruism? If the answer is no to any of these questions, then we should quickly heed Amos's warning and seek reform. Exceptional nations must overflow with justice and righteousness, not failed, ideological policies couched in religious jargon. *

Medieval Judaism and the Roots of the Welfare State



ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT medieval scholars of halakhah (Jewish law), Rabbi Shlomo ibn Adret (1235–1310), known as Rashba, was once approached to adjudicate a severe internal communal conflict. We do not know the exact date that the question was sent to him, but it was likely at the end of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century, at the height of Rashba's authority. Nor is the community that sent the letter specified, though probably it was one of the dozens of Jewish communities in the Iberian peninsula that accepted Rashba, who resided in Barcelona, as their ultimate halakhic authority.

This conflict touched upon a fundamental question of social justice, which was described to Rashba in the following manner:

The poor of the community are many and the taxes levied by the crown are heavy, and because of that, a clash among the well-to-do in the community had occurred. The wealthy among

them say—“let the poor go from door to door and each of us will provide them with food on a daily basis, so they can have sustenance, since even the average well-to-do [the middle class] ought to give the poor food like us.” The people who belong to the middle [class] claim that such a policy is unlawful. Rather, the poor should stay in their homes and not go from door to door, since they are our brethren and our flesh. The poor's sustenance should be levied on the public [fund], and each has to give [to the public fund] according to his wealth, and the court will enforce the estimate [of such tax], as it is clear from the Talmud that Rava enforced such a tax. Let me know according to who is the law. (Rashba Responsa III, 380)

The internal conflict raging in this anonymous community is very recognizable; it seems to transcend time and place. The wealthy members are against taxation to fund welfare, especially because the heavy hand of the crown had already placed a high burden of taxes on the Jewish community. This group expects that the provision for the poor will be done voluntarily, in response to requests, since the obligation to give charity extends equally to everyone who can afford it.

The middle class firmly rejects such a policy. Its members support an enforced welfare taxation based on wealth. They object to two features in the policy espoused by the wealthier class. First, in the name of solidarity with the poor—“our brethren and our flesh”—they reject the humiliating policy that will cause the poor to beg from door to door, personally appealing to the goodwill of their fellow Jews, every day. Welfare should be provided to them from a public fund established by enforced taxation. And second, the financial burdens should be proportionate to the wealth of each member of the community. Taxation should be progressive; the wealthy should provide more.

The communal conflict brought before Rashba was a medieval Jewish version of the clash between what today we might call social

democrats and libertarians. In this medieval version, as in its modern parallel, each class presents a principled argument that happens to serve its own economic interests, even as no one turns away from his responsibility to provide for the poor.

Rashba begins his responsa with a strong endorsement of the position presented by the middle class:

The law is according to the middle [class], that charity and the supply for the poor is proportionate to wealth, following the precedent of Raba that enforced R. Ami to pay four hundred *zuz* for *tzedakah*. And in proportion to the strength of a camel the weight of the load put on him.

In other words, providing for the poor is a collective obligation — not a voluntary choice — based on taxation proportionate to wealth. At the end of his responsa, Rashba affirms his opinion by pointing to the common practice of Jewish communities:

In all places the poor are provided [for] from the public fund and [taxation] is proportionate to wealth. And if, after being supplied from the public fund, the poor go from door to door, they can do so, and each will give them according to his judgment and wish.

Rashba's rejection of the exclusively voluntary conception of giving is based on a long-standing practice of Jewish communities. It is thus no surprise that Rashba's ruling was reiterated later in the *Shulchan Arukh*, the great code of the 16th century: "If the poor in a city are numerous, and the rich say they should go and beg, and the middle classes say they should not beg but be supported by the members of the community in proportion to their wealth, the law is as the latter say" (Yoreh De'ah 250, 5). Such welfare communities provided for their most vulnerable members. The public fund offered much more than money: It also provided food, clothing,

Charity is not merely a transfer of wealth from the well-to-do to the poor; it includes empathy with the poor person's travail.

lodging, and public education; gave housing and furniture to orphans who got married; and ransomed members of the community who fell into captivity (an unfortunately frequent occurrence in the medieval period).

The foundation of such widespread practice had been laid as early as the first and second centuries in the Mishnah and Tosefta. In these canonical sources, we witness a major development in the history of Jewish practices of social justice: The rabbinic world extended the biblical obligation to provide to the poor from an individual obligation to a communal institutional practice. The Jewish community might very well have been the first "welfare state."

This form of Jewish communal organization of social justice was a constant feature of the medieval and early modern periods. Even in their utterly devastated conditions, Jewish communities strived to maintain this institutional structure. By 1391, around a hundred years after Rashba's ruling, his Jewish community of Barcelona was decimated, having been ravaged, like many other Spanish Jewish communities, by a wave of massacres and forced conversions to Christianity.

What guaranteed the survival of Jewish life in Spain was the rebuilding of Jewish communities initiated by Rabbi Abraham Benveniste in 1423, through a set of enactments known as the Valladolid *takanot*. These enactments included the restoration of communal taxation that guaranteed the provision of welfare and an extensive rebuilding and funding of education.

In 1492, when the expelled Jewish refugees from Spain arrived

on the shores of North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, among the first initiatives they undertook was the establishment of welfare communities and funded education, in line with the Valladolid model. Besides the obligation of solidarity and the traditions of giving, providing support was a key to survival and continuity in an unpredictable, hostile world. Steadfast loyalty to a set of principles and practices was not enough to keep a community intact; it needed to be complemented by a profound sense of communal solidarity and mutual responsibility.

As is clear in Rashba's ruling, medieval Jewish communities did not simply perceive private ownership and the liberty to use one's property autonomously as an ultimate inviolable right — instead, they taxed their members. The poor were not blamed for their misery, and in that spirit of solidarity, welfare was not considered as having a corrupting effect on the receiver. Yet full equity wasn't the ideal aspired state either. Rashba never challenged the existence of wealth disparities, and his aim was not to abolish them. The wealthy might have more, but with such advantage comes responsibility. The community is under an obligation to establish a safety net for its most needy members, and this obligation ought to be distributed in proportion to capability.

Among the main arguments for such a collective obligation as stated in the responsa was the preservation of the dignity of the poor, "our brethren and our flesh." Poverty is not only a material condition — it can also be a psychological state of dependency and shame. This social sensibility was expressed boldly by Maimonides in his Code of Jewish Law:

He who gives alms to a poor man with a hostile countenance and with his face averted to the ground, loses his merit and forfeits it, even if he gives as much as a thousand gold coins. He should rather give with a friendly countenance and joyfully. He should commiserate with the recipient in his distress as it is said, *If I have not wept for him that was in trouble, and if*

my soul grieved not for the needy. He should also speak to him prayerful and comforting words as it is said: *And I caused the widow's heart to sing with joy* (Job 29:14). (Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor, 10:4)

Charity is not merely a transfer of wealth from the well-to-do to the poor; it includes empathy with the travails of those in need. The giver, therefore, is duty bound to respond to a request for alms. The high degree of sensitivity to be shown by the giver follows from recognizing that the needy feel humiliated by the situation in which they find themselves:

If a poor man asks you for alms and you have nothing to give him, comfort him with words. It is forbidden to rebuke a poor man and to raise one's voice in a shout at him, seeing that his heart is broken and crushed....Woe unto him who shames the poor! Woe unto him! One should be rather unto that poor as a father, with both compassion and words, as it is said, *I was a father to the needy* (Job 29:16). (Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor, 10:5)

Having determined that poverty is a psychological state as well as a state of material need, and that responsiveness to that psychological state is an essential part of giving, Maimonides goes on to formulate the hierarchy of charity ranked according to the ways that giving responds to dependence and humiliation. The most praiseworthy level is a form of giving aimed at liberating the poor person from his state of dependence:

The highest degree, that which there is none higher, is one who upholds the hand of an Israelite reduced to poverty by handing him a gift or a loan or entering into partnership with him, or finding work for him, in order to strengthen his hand, so that he would have no need to beg from other people. (Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor, 10:7)

The medieval Jewish experience provides a rich cultural inheritance in confronting social concerns in radically different historical circumstances.

The bottom of the ladder is the opposite: giving that perpetuates the state of dependence and manifests no awareness of the poor person's possible sense of humiliation. Between these extremes, Maimonides enumerates six intermediate levels of charity, from donating secretly, such that neither the giver nor the recipient can identify the other; down to giving pleasantly, albeit less than the proper amount and only after being asked. The ladder of the gradation of giving is not determined by the amount that is given, but rather by the way in which giving preserves the dignity of the one in need.

With the rise of the centralized state in the modern period, Jewish communities lost their autonomy to enforce taxation on their members. Nevertheless, the medieval Jewish experience provides a rich cultural inheritance in confronting social concerns in radically different historical circumstances, both in relation to the larger questions of social justice within a state and the more particular concern of the Jewish community. Five lessons can be drawn from this profound tradition:

1. Jewish halakhah and practice rejected the libertarian position of the ultimate sanctity of private property and the liberty to use it autonomously. States ought to tax their citizens in order to provide welfare for less fortunate members of the community, and taxation should be proportionate to wealth.

2. The greatest halakhists were not concerned with wealth disparity as such, and they didn't strive to reduce it and to create an egalitarian social order. Inequality is accepted, but with greater resources comes greater responsibility.
3. Since the condition of poverty is perceived not only in terms of material depravity but as a psychological state of dependency, welfare to the poor has to aim at preserving dignity and thus must strive to bring the poor into a position of independence. Freeing a person from the need to be dependent on charity is the greatest form of charity.
4. Abstract arguments about property, equality, and liberty cannot in themselves be the sole ground of social justice policy. Social justice has to be grounded as well in a sense of communal solidarity and anchored in the care for our fellow vulnerable citizens, whether Jews or non-Jews, because they are our sisters and brothers, our own flesh. Without establishing such a civic bond, the abstract arguments are reduced to mere sophistry.
5. Jewish continuity and flourishing are inseparable from a strong sense of communal belonging. Community-building is centered on care for its members and on the creation of a strong educational system subsidized by the community as the key to the thriving of a robust Jewish life. *

Social Justice for Moderns



MODERNITY is a balancing act for Jews between particularism and universalism. Since the ghetto walls burst open in the 19th century, arguments on each side have been bolstered by reference to Jewish texts and history. The particularists highlight the many rabbinic and medieval sources that insist upon caring first for one's own community. The universalists point to the prophetic traditions of attending to the least privileged in society. As Rav Kook pointed out in his address at the dedication of Hebrew University in 1925: "Two tendencies characterize Jewish spirituality. One tendency is internal and entirely sacred...the second...served to disseminate Jewish ideas and values from the private domain to the public arena and the universe at large."

To hold fast to the dual mandate of the Jewish people is our difficult and demanding task. Programs and projects to shore up Jewish life are essential, but they are validated in part by attempts to join hands with and improve the lot of our non-Jewish neighbors. Judaism is an ascending spiral of insularity and openness.

God, the Talmud tells us, leads you in the path you wish to go. In a polarized age, each side is increasingly pushed to extremes, so regrettably the Jewish community has become Janus-faced: The particularists look only to other Jews; the universalists gaze almost exclusively on the non-Jewish world. Some of the emphasis arises from risk assessment. If Jews are in ever-present danger, helping others feels feckless and even disloyal. If Jews are relatively secure, then turning away from others is a species of callous privilege. Some modern rabbinic authorities have expressed a rough equivalence. Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik says, "It is obvious that, from the Judaic perspective, righteousness is to be practiced equally towards Jews and non-Jews." The most vocal and influential, however, seem to heavily weight the scales to one side or the other.

In our communicative age, we see the differences in a terminological tug-of-war. Certain phrases are colonized and conquered. The best example, and the most ubiquitous, especially on the Left, is *tikkun olam*—repairing the world.

The concept of repairing an imperfect world has a long history. In Ecclesiastes 1:15, the world is called a twisted thing that cannot be made straight or repaired (the Hebrew is *litkon*, from the same root as *tikkun*). Already we have a sense of the despair that the term will later be intended to allay, presaging Immanuel Kant's famous declaration that from the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight can be made.

Kant might aptly have commented on the crooked timber of *tikkun* itself. The growth of *tikkun olam* into a concept started with the Talmud and expanded in the Kabbalah. The Talmud discusses the concept of "for the sake of repairing the world" in the tractate concerning laws of divorce (Mishna Gittin 4:2), and it is tied as well to other social legislation. In the Kabbalah, particularly in the hands of R. Isaac Luria, *tikkun* becomes repair for the catastrophe of *shevirat hakelim*, the breaking of the vessels, that occurred at the outset of creation. Certain meditations, prayers, and observance of the mitzvot will bring repair, not only in the material world but

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also in God's own self—a daring idea that has made Kabbalah both attractive and anathematized. *Tikkun* thus developed from a social concept to a supernatural one, and there it rested until the modern age when it returned to social dynamics with a vengeance. To quote the French poet Charles Péguy, “everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.”

The evolution of *tikkun olam* from prayer and mitzvot intended to help God into acts to bind up the social fabric of the world—within a conceptual framework of brokenness and healing—suits an age of advocacy. Speakers now call upon the concept as a rationale for addressing whatever they deem broken, from environmental regulations to economic inequality to all manner of social policy. That we live in a broken world is indisputable. But the cure, reinforced by the weight of the tradition, invariably falls in line with the speaker's political predispositions. One person's *tikkun* (repair) becomes another's *shevirah* (brokenness).

We see the concept invoked most frequently on the Left, but to associate the ideology of *tikkun olam* with liberal sources and causes alone would be a mistake. As the Orthodox scholar and economist Meir Tamari has written, traditional Judaism has much to say about protecting the poor, the essential kinship of all human beings, and the “economics of enough.” In a telling, surprising comparison, Tamari points out that while there are 24 regulations in the Torah about what to eat (i.e., how to keep kosher), there are more than four times as many about how to deal with money.

In any long and complex tradition, there will be sources to favor

all sides of an argument. Louis Ginzberg, the renowned scholar of midrash, was fond of saying, “The devil can quote scripture to his purpose, and if he were more learned, he could quote the Talmud too.” Increasingly a prop for political positions, *tikkun olam* has become so ubiquitous as to be almost drained of significance. When an idea becomes the presumed property of either side of the debate, it is discounted by the other, and new grounds for the particularist/universalist struggle must be unearthed.



We see the modern struggle between particularism and universalism in charitable organizations as well, especially as the increasing prosperity and security of Jewish communities meant that Jewish organizations could afford to cast a wider net, to expand beyond helping only Jews. Immigration is a clear case in point. In the mid-19th century, American Jews established charitable and benevolent societies to help German Jews immigrating to the United States. Toward the beginning of the 20th century, these organizations multiplied and expanded and were instrumental in helping new, massive waves of Polish and Russian Jews. As immigrants' fortunes stabilized, they formed *landsmanschaften*, mutual aid societies centered on their towns and cities of origin, through which they sent money to help people from their “hometown” come to America.

In time, many similar organizations, such as the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society, expanded far beyond their Jewish origins and framing to embrace immigrants as a whole. (It even universalized its name simply to “HIAS.”) Founded in 1881 with the particularist aim to help immigrant Jews, HIAS since the 1970s has expanded its mission to assist refugees and immigrants of all religions, ethnicities, nationalities, and backgrounds. The *olam* part of *tikkun olam* has predominated.

The point where justice becomes “social” depends upon how far one zooms out. For philosophers such as Martin Buber and

Emmanuel Levinas, the origin of ethics is found in the single other. Buber believed in the dialogical imperative, the need to engage the other, however difficult that may be, and whomever the “other” was. His willingness to travel back to Germany after the war met with strong opposition; and while living in Israel, he became a rare, early advocate of a binational state. Dialogue was the only path forward, he believed, and mutuality an absolute ethical demand. Even more so after the Shoah, when the otherness of Jews doomed so many to suffering and death, the suffering of any other human being could not be dismissed as being from an “out-group.”

The shattering events of modern Jewish life, the Shoah and the birth of Israel, proved to be catalysts for both sides of this debate. (Indeed, a renowned theologian of the Holocaust, Emil Fackenheim, even titled one of his books “To Mend the World.”)

For the particularists, social justice meant protecting a Jewish community shattered by the Shoah. They supported Israel, rescued Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry, and built institutions like Jewish schools and federations. If Israel and the Jewish people were to be a light to the nations, they needed to exist, be strong, thrive. If, in early *haggadot*, the exemplar of the wicked son was often drawn as a soldier, in the new age, the Israeli soldier was the obverse: a representation of the self-assertive power that not only protected Jews but also provided a salutary model to the world of the dignity and renewal of a small people. Social justice sometimes comes with a sword.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the particularist state of Israel is also a beacon of Jewish universalism. IsraAid and other similar organizations send emergency workers to war-torn and disaster-stricken regions, all in the name of Israel and Jewish values. This is a kind of platonic ideal of particularism; as Cynthia Ozick put it so beautifully, the shofar has a broad end and a narrow end. If you begin by blowing in the broad end, you hear nothing. But begin by blowing in the narrow end, and you get a sound everyone can hear.

An example of this duality—the particular leading to the universal—is eco-kashrut. Building on the particularist laws of keep-

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ing kosher, some activists have suggested that vegetarianism (or veganism) is an ecologically responsible way of maintaining a commitment to eating as a sacred activity—for the universal benefit of the world. The Talmud tells us that one who eats without making a blessing is a thief; modernity tells us that one who eats without attending to the impact of what he eats, or the animal suffering involved in what he consumes, is a brute.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is invariably invoked in estimations of how a substantive engagement with Judaism leads to a fight for (universalist) social justice. Contrary to what many believe, Heschel did not favor the mixing of politics and the pulpit. “Sermons, indistinguishable from editorials in the *New York Times*,... will hardly inspire us,” he argued. While synagogues exist to “inspire the soul and instruct the mind,” political organizations “serve the self-interest of the group” they represent. Yet Heschel’s championing of civil rights, his work with Martin Luther King Jr., and other leaders in the movement, and his declaration that during the civil rights march he felt “as though my feet were praying” are justly a great cause of pride among Jews. It was an instance of a *she’at ha’dchack*—a time of urgency, when usual strictures must be set aside. Heschel accomplished this despite institutional derision from his colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Few understood

his passion. But for Heschel it was derived from the prophetic legacy—the subject of his dissertation—and from the Hasidic tradition that was his birthright.

So what is the responsibility of the Jew in a modern age? There are still many Jews who live in poverty and want throughout the world, whose physical safety is also sometimes at risk. (In travels with the Joint Distribution Committee, I have often been shocked at the conditions of Jews in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.) Yet for the most part, Jews occupy a strange middle space: a prominent, accomplished people who are also the subjects of serious and sustained threat. Jews do not fit neatly into social justice binaries.

Passionate declarations of “justice” are insufficient. Despite Solomon Schechter’s warning that being a “prophetic Jew” was like living on oxygen alone, many liberal Jewish movements for social justice borrow the thundering pronouncements of Amos and Isaiah, but do not anchor them in distinctively Jewish practice or learning. On the other side, insular but deeply committed Jewish traditionalists may do little or nothing to influence the world around them, ignoring groups that have traditionally been marginalized or excluded. Too often their political conservatism is an excuse for indifference to the plight of others. We have learned repeatedly that if “never again” does not mean the struggle against genocide in places other than Nazi Germany, it means nothing.

Judaism cannot be captured or limited by political traditions of either side. Jews who dismiss the reality of racism because of the flaws of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Jews who do not acknowledge the real antisemitism that exists on the left, wield axes in place of scalpels. Jews who rail about the Right’s extremism and do not acknowledge its stalwart support for Israel are similarly blinkered.

Jews are called to heal, to bind up the wounds of those who are bereaved, bereft, frightened, alone. You cannot be a light for others if you do not shine at home. But if you shutter your windows, no light escapes. It is our task to build schools, educate Jewish youth,

strengthen camps and informal activities, create opportunities for single Jews to meet and marry. It is also our task to call out cruelty and genocide around the world, ameliorate the sufferings of people who are in places of deprivation and disease, to give our community opportunities to show Judaism’s goodness to the world. Hillel’s ancient admonition endures—*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Yet if I am only for myself, what am I?* Notice that one who is only for himself is so debased that Hillel cannot even find the words to describe him.

Janice Kamenir-Reznik grew up at Sinai Temple and is one of the co-founders of Jewish World Watch, along with Rabbi Harold Schulweis *z”l*. In traveling to the border outside the Congo, she was confronted by women who had been terribly abused, who had seen their families murdered before their eyes. One of the women asked Kamenir-Reznik, a Beverly Hills attorney, “Why are you here?” She did not say she was Jewish, since neither the Christian nor the Muslim women knew what a Jew was. So she explained, “I am a member of an ancient tribe. And we believe every human being is created in the image of God. And in order to deserve that privilege, we believe that we must partner with God to do acts of righteousness in God’s world.”

The ancient definition has not been improved: “To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). *

What's God Got to Do with It?



WHEN I FIRST encountered Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, I was a sophomore in college. Like Meg Ryan getting to know Tom Hanks through his charming emails in *You've Got Mail*, I met the 19th-century German rabbi through his fittingly titled book *Nineteen Letters* (1836).

Hirsch's initial readers were young German-speaking Jews raised in what we would today call Orthodox homes, living in a Europe that was slowly embracing emancipation. Attracted to the world around them and able to participate in it for the first time, these young Jews doubted the value that Judaism added to their modern lives.

Hirsch spent his life trying to demonstrate that Judaism could enhance one's experience in modernity by investing a life of freedom with purpose. He provided a recipe for mixing secular interests with Jewish tradition, a Jewish particularism that enabled an engagement with the broader world. His vision can guide us today, particularly as we wrestle with the ways that Jews engage with issues of social justice.

As I was trying to figure out how to express my Judaism, Hirsch helped me to situate myself in the Jewish story. He showed me that the very fact that I am aware of my Judaism indicates that I have a necessary role to fill in Jewish history. Particularly in light of today's obsession with race in American and American Jewish life, the book had added value because Hirsch spoke to me, a biracial woman who did not grow up in an Orthodox home, as a whole Jewish human, and not as a Jew of a particular denomination or a fragmented agglomeration of multiple "identities." I simply read him in the way he had intended: as a young Jewish person trying to find my way. Hirsch provided a clear, straightforward elucidation of Judaism and its role in the world, along with establishing that every individual is both a product of and reflection of God. Hirsch's vision gave me a sense of direction and of unique purpose as a Jewish person, full stop.

I was not alone in experiencing this. Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters* was an instant hit with young Jews in the 1830s and remained so for generations. Hirsch was a bona fide celebrity in German lands and in the nearby Habsburg empire. While older, traditional Jews were skeptical of him and his modern ways, young people embraced him with a unique, unrivaled fervor. A young Heinrich Graetz, who would go on to become one of the first modern Jewish historians, was so taken with *Nineteen Letters* that he asked Hirsch if he could become his student. Hirsch agreed, and Graetz spent three years living in Hirsch's home. He dedicated his first book to his venerable teacher.

Although Hirsch remained Orthodox, his ideas, including those related to justice, were embraced by the early leaders of the Reform movement in America. Kaufmann Kohler, one of the movement's most prominent theologians, spoke glowingly of Hirsch, citing him as one of his greatest influences. As Kohler described, Hirsch also had a strong influence on many others—including the great American Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff:

Beyond doubt...Samson Raphael Hirsch, the preacher of a higher Jewish manhood...molded the soul of Jacob H. Schiff

to render him a leader of the American Jew in the best sense of the word, an exemplar of Jewish piety and loyalty, one who does great and noble things for the sake of God and the glorification of His name and [at] the same time prompts many to follow his example in reflecting luster on Judaism by works of large-hearted love for humanity.

The challenges and opportunities that Hirsch explored are still very much with us. The German-Jewish community of the early 19th century was splitting along ideological lines as emancipation inspired many Jews to break from traditional Jewish observances that held them back from participation in the broader world. Rather than discard Judaism altogether, new efforts emerged to “reform” Judaism to accord with modern sensibilities. Hirsch remained Orthodox but nevertheless agreed with the reformers that traditional Judaism was “an inherited mummy” practiced by “a generation which shows veneration for Judaism, but a veneration without spirit.”

Young people were pioneering a new way to be Jewish, he wrote at the ripe age of 26: “I see a younger generation aglow with noble enthusiasm for Jews. These young men [and women] do not know authentic Judaism, and what they believe they know of it they consider as empty forms without meaning.” And yet many of these young Jews were going too far. While they had a passion for Jews as human beings, they lacked Jewish spirit. Attempts to provide young Jews with vehicles to channel their energy and passion into caring for Jewish *people* had failed to capture their hearts and minds for *Judaism*.

I’m now deep in the midst of working toward a doctoral dissertation about Hirsch, but I still read his work with wonder. With regard to the Jewish spirit, it is as if he were describing our condition today. In particular, I see the challenges posed by the current Jewish approach to justice as profoundly similar to those that vexed Hirsch. Over the past few decades, Jewish communities have built an ideal of *tikkun olam* that encourages young Jews to care for people (Jewish

Young Jews, like many young Americans, are starving for a conversation about God.

or otherwise) without inspiring them to care about *Judaism*. Rather than feeling proud of their heritage and living boldly as Jews, many Jews today identify as “Jews of no religion.” They erase — and are encouraged to erase — their Jewish distinctiveness in favor of a bland universalism.

To Jewish funders and organizations looking for innovative ways to help young Jews engage with the world around them, I offer, inspired deeply by Judaism, the gems I have found in Hirsch’s *Nineteen Letters*. Hirsch gives us a robust framework for rethinking *tikkun olam* as a movement that embraces God and encourages all Jews to identify their individual calling to heal the world and strengthen the Jewish people.

What Hirsch does in his writing that few others can is situate the individual Jew in a larger whole. In the letter explaining his philosophy of man’s purpose in the world, he writes:

Is it conceivable that everything is to be of service in the world, of service to God, and only man is to be self-serving throughout? Your own inner awareness tells you, and the Torah states, that man’s purpose is to be *tzelem Elokim* — a likeness of God. You are to be more than everything else; you are to exist for everything else. You can know God only through His acts of love and justice; and, in turn, you too are called upon to act with justice and love, not merely to indulge or endure.

Action on behalf of justice and love, Hirsch argues, is how humans fulfill their fundamental purpose of being created in God’s

We are being trained to look at people through the lens of injustices they may have experienced, and not through the gifts they can bring to help repair the world.

image. What is crucial about this, and the way it differs from most *tikkun olam* efforts today, is the centrality of God. Throughout the *Nineteen Letters*, Hirsch fills the heart and soul with a vision of God in the world. As Kohler describes, Jacob Schiff is not associated with greatness for his action alone, but rather because these actions are “for the sake of God and the glorification of His name.” God is at the center. The problem with *tikkun olam* today is that it has been secularized, putting humans at the center; God has largely been removed. Human beings are told to act for their own sake, not for God’s.

There is, however, a limitation that comes with speaking about God, for it is difficult to put into words something that is so abstract. Hirsch creates a mission-based approach to life that helps a person see God in the problem he feels called to fix in the world. Accordingly, everything that a person has, from his thoughts to his money, is to be used in the service of that repair:

Our life’s mission is concerned with what we become, what we make of ourselves, and what we give, not what we get.... Man’s entire life, all of himself, his thoughts, feelings, speech and action—even his business transactions and personal enjoyments—represented service of God. Such a life transcends all vicissitudes. Whether in luxury or privation, abundance or want, whether with tears of joy or of sorrow, such a human personality,

unchanging almost like God, sees in every new blessing, as in every loss, merely another challenge to tackle anew the same unchanging task.

For Hirsch, a person’s mission is not to fix all of the problems in the world. Unlike contemporary *tikkun olam* efforts, which assert that it is a Jewish imperative to help fix any problem that arises, no matter how distant to Jewish individual or collective experiences, Hirsch suggests that we help young Jews identify the problem God has placed in their heart to address during their life. Through identifying this, people can develop a personal vocabulary for speaking about and understanding God, creating the basis for a strong relationship with God based on human action. The notion that we have a moral imperative to remedy every area of injustice wastes an individual’s personal and material resources. Instead of feeling called to fix all of the wrongs in the world, Hirsch tells us: Find your purpose.

Especially in America, where the denigration of religion is a creed in and of itself among most elites, people trying earnestly to help young Jews feel connected to Jewish heritage tend to believe that God is the ultimate turnoff. Mention God and young people will run for the hills. But as a young person, and as someone who is committed to helping other young people feel that Judaism is a treasure given to them, I know that this misses the mark for many. Young Jews, like many young Americans, are starving for a conversation about God. They want to connect to a power that is more personal than “the Universe” or “a Higher Power,” and feel a sense that their existence matters. They want to feel part of a much larger whole, in which their actions have impact. They want a relationship with a Being who cares about their actions. Whenever I write or speak, my most popular content is that in which I speak openly about God, when I engage with the tricky questions of faith in a world that posits secularism and even atheism as intrinsic to intelligence and modernity.

Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters*, which speaks openly about man's relationship with God, was popular because Hirsch was unafraid of bringing God into the picture to discuss faith in a level-headed way. The personal God of Hirsch is, in large part, the God that endows us with mission. This idea, and his writing more generally, is so grounded, so reasonable, that both Orthodox and Reform Jews have felt comfortable citing Hirsch as a great Jewish figure and inspiration.

What is unique about Hirsch's thinking, which we would be well-served to bring into Jewish life today, is his emphasis on individual action in strengthening the Jewish community. Hirsch helps every person understand that he has a unique value to contribute to the world.

Contrast this with our community today. We are so focused on segmenting people according to racial, gender, and class lines that we lose the ability to see the uniqueness of every person, the person he is beneath his so-called identity markers. We are being trained to look at people through the lens of injustices they may have experienced, and not through the gifts they can bring to help repair the world. People have more to offer the world than their pain.

It seems to me that *tikkun olam* work today is only the work that falls into a particular category of justice work, namely issues related to equality in a particularly American context, through an American frame of reference. God did not create every person in order to ask him to care about the same issue. *Tikkun olam* must be seen as a movement of individuals, each on a unique mission. Sometimes those missions will overlap with those of others. But it is for each person to discover what God intends for him, as long as we are alive to help shape the world for the better.

Tikkun Olam has become a Jewish denomination in its own right. The deeds one does in the name of justice now are supposed to connect one to Judaism and satisfy a longing for a personal relationship with the Divine. But we've known for a long time that taking God out of the picture misses the mark. Booker T. Wash-

ington, a close friend of Jacob Schiff's, warned Tuskegee Institute students of this in 1906:

Educated men and women, especially those who are in college, very often get the idea that religion is fit only for the common people. No young man or woman can make a greater error than this....As you value your spiritual life, see to it that you do not lose the spirit of reverence for the Most High as revealed in your own life and experience, reverence for the Most High as revealed in the men and women about you, in the opening flower, the setting sun. Do not mistake denominationalism for reverence and religion. Religion is life, denominationalism is an aid to life.

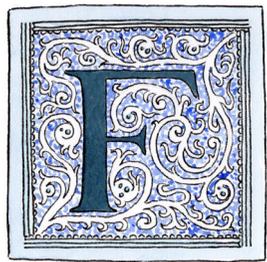
Religion is Godly, while denominations are creations of man. Religion is intended to give space for the inner richness of every individual to come forth and express itself uniquely—and to connect to something transcendent, beyond himself. The modern understanding of *tikkun olam* is obsessed with identity categories that reduce people rather than expand their humanity; it offers particular takes on the political issues of the day rather than a focus on transcendent human questions. By denying the possibility of connecting to the Divine (however defined), it fails to offer a model that will meaningfully—even profoundly—inspire people to do good in the world. *

PART THREE

ISRAEL AND
ITS CRITICS



Eight Tips for Reading About Israel



FROM MY POSITION as a journalist in Israel, perched on the fault line between Western preoccupations and the country where I live, I'm confronted with a growing perception gap. The gap becomes apparent in conversations with visitors flying in for a brief visit (at least when "flying in" was something that happened) or with those who take an interest in this place from far away. These observers have formed a picture of Israel based on stories — stories that might come from home, from college friends or professors, from a Jewish summer camp or day school, or from journalism.

Some of these stories are positive and others negative, but what they generally share is being only tenuously linked to reality. Observers thus find themselves struggling to reconcile the State of Israel as it really is to the narratives in their head — an effort that often ends with either retreat into the imaginary landscape they had in the first place, or frustration with reality's failure to cooperate. It's possible that visitors to any country have a similar problem, but I suspect that Westerners landing in, say, Burundi (to name a country

whose population is about the same size as Israel's) arrive with less preexisting information and emotion, making the perception gap less of a challenge.

People who live in the liberal worlds of Western Europe and North America more often seem to approach Israel with a shared narrative about the place and shared sources of information, chiefly the international press. That's an industry I know well, having spent formative years of my journalism career as a correspondent and editor for the Associated Press, one of the world's biggest news organizations, in the Jerusalem bureau.

This shared narrative is largely a negative one. It grows increasingly negative as the ideological landscape of the West becomes more polarized and inflamed, keener to split the world into categories of good and evil, and as too many mainstream journalists abandon old ideals such as objectivity for the idea that journalism is a tool to effect social change. Similar trends are afoot in the related world of elite universities, where the goal of educating knowledgeable people is losing ground to the goal of training activists, and where Israel is presented as a potent symbol of what a right-thinking person is meant to be active against.

I'm often asked how to find good information about Israel. Sometimes this actually means "How can I get positive information about Israel?," which isn't my job. (There are many Jewish organizations and Israeli consulates who will be happy to oblige.) But often the questioner is seeking to get a handle on a complicated place amid a blizzard of misinformation, and here I might be able to offer a small measure of help — at least to an observer willing to suspect that not everything that appears in a newspaper is simply "news" but might contain more complex sentiments and stories.

Israel is a Jewish country, home to a plurality of the world's Jews. The powerful story being woven around Israel is a story about Jews. This is an ancient category of Western stories, typically moralistic in nature, in which Jews are used to illustrate

the perceived ills of a given place and time. That doesn't necessarily mean (to cite a tired debate) that "anti-Zionism" is or isn't "antisemitism," whatever those two terms are taken to mean. It doesn't mean that the Israel story of the mainstream press is wrong in every way, or necessarily motivated by dark intentions. It just means that this story belongs to a narrative tradition with a long history, and tragic side effects, and shouldn't automatically be taken at face value.

When consuming news from Israel, there's a list of questions I ask when deciding if I'm getting sane information or a narrative of a different kind. Having thought, written, and spoken about this over the past decade or so, I've condensed them to eight. The questions are based on my experience here in Israel and elsewhere around the Middle East over the past 25 years—but they might be of use in thinking about other powerful narratives as well, foreign and domestic.

1 | DOES THE SOURCE SPEAK THE LANGUAGE?

Americans would never accept as an expert on America someone who doesn't speak English. If someone can't read a U.S. newspaper or speak to an American in her language, no one would take the person seriously about American society or politics. But many or most of the people explaining foreign societies to Westerners are that person. That includes most of the correspondents and NGO staffers in Israel, which is the social bubble producing much of the information in the press. Observers, commentators, and activists who don't have a deep understanding of the place they're in will cling to preexisting narratives and copy their colleagues. This is why reporters often not only get things wrong but get them wrong in the same way.

So one easy way to vet purported expertise about Israeli politics and society—from a speaker, a newspaper article, a professor, any-

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one—is to ask whether the person speaks and reads Hebrew. This is a good rule not just about Israel. One of my favorite quotes is from the Korea expert B.R. Myers, who once wrote in *The Atlantic*, while passing judgment on a few silly books about North Korea, "The question of where Europe ends and Asia begins has troubled many people over the years, but here's a rule of thumb: If someone can pose as an expert on the country in question without knowledge of the relevant language, it's part of Asia."

This is a good rule (and it also clears up some uncertainty about which continent Israel is on).

2 | WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME THIS?

Is your source of information an observer whose job is to explain things, or an activist with a political plan? Being an activist is fine, but it's important to understand who's who. An activist doesn't need to tell you everything, just the things that will draw you to his point of view. To take examples from the Israeli context, groups such as Breaking the Silence or B'Tselem are activist groups, and so, on the other side of the spectrum, are groups like StandWithUs. Their material isn't meant primarily to explain what's going on, but to induce you to support a particular position. Contradictory information won't be included. Their role is

You'll find that most criticism of Israel doesn't compare it with anything. That's a sign the discussion isn't about a real country.

like that of an attorney at a divorce trial: If you're representing the wife, your job isn't to offer a fair assessment of the husband. Your job is to savage his character in your client's interest and to get the judge on your side.

What makes sorting journalists from activists more and more difficult is that many journalists have become activists—that is, they see their job not as helping you understand events, but as pushing you toward their conclusions. They engineer their reporting to that end. Many Western reporters here in Israel, supported by the world of activist NGOs and international organizations (which is the same social and professional world inhabited by reporters, with much movement between them), believe that Israel is the problem. It follows, if you're an activist, that what's needed is not an understanding of Israel's concerns, but a character assassination that will stoke anger and punish the guilty party. The goal is less to inform than to enrage. That's why bloodshed during a Hamas attempt to penetrate the Gaza border (to cite one example from 2018) isn't described as the result of actions, however imperfectly pursued, by Israeli soldiers to protect their citizens. Such a description would be true, but as activism it's ineffective. Instead, the event must be presented as a kind of murder, even a massacre.

As soon as the press becomes activist, it becomes impossible to understand what's going on. Anyone hoping to understand should be looking for knowledgeable observers capable of understanding different points of view.

3 | ARE YOU SUFFICIENTLY SUSPICIOUS OF SHOCKING IMAGES AND DETAILS?

We're all bombarded with photos and 17-second videos, not just from Israel. But the camera saturation here and the press-savvy nature of the players tend to mean that this place produces more than its fair share of troubling images. It shouldn't need pointing out in 2021, but photos and videos don't always show what they purport to show. Even if they're true, they're often not the whole truth, and even if they're the whole truth, they often say nothing about the broader context in which they occur.

For example, during the American advance from Normandy into occupied Europe at the end of WWII, U.S. troops committed war crimes, such as the murder of German prisoners. Videos of this, should any have surfaced, would have been shocking. But they would say nothing about the wisdom or justice of the Normandy invasion, let alone about the American cause in that war. If your understanding of a situation is driven primarily by shocking details or images, you're likely to get things wrong.

4 | WHAT ARE OTHER COUNTRIES UP TO?

The world is broken, and countries in the world are thus sullied, at least to some extent. Israel is a country in the world, so discussions of Israel must compare it with other countries in similar situations and not to abstract ideals like "democracy," or (as I sometimes see Jewish people doing) to "Judaism," or to the social-action committee at their synagogue. If someone is claiming that casualties in an Israeli operation in Gaza are "high," for example, as reporters frequently do, that needs to be compared with similar operations, like the Marines in Fallujah, or the British in Northern Ireland, or the French in Mali. If you're critical of open-fire orders on the Gaza fence, you should know how that

works on the India-Pakistan border, or the Turkey-Syria border, or on the perimeters of U.S. military bases in Afghanistan. Same goes for refugee absorption, press freedom, minority rights, or anything. Israel doesn't always come out looking great. But you'll find that most criticism of Israel doesn't compare it with anything. That's a sign the discussion isn't about a real country.

When I have spoken to groups of Americans and been asked about Israeli soldiers killing civilians, which is one of the themes of mainstream press coverage these days, I sometimes ask whether anyone knows how many civilians the U.S. military has killed in the past year. I've asked hundreds of people at this point, most of them educated and politically aware, and I have yet to meet a single person who can give me even a ballpark number off-hand. (The Pentagon's official number for 2019, for example, was 132, but the UN put the number in Afghanistan alone at 559.) If someone is going to criticize Israel's behavior in the world, it's important to understand what the world is, and how other countries behave in it. A few comparisons of this kind go a long way toward turning a symbolic discussion into a sane one.

5 | IS THE SCOPE RATIONAL?

Israel is 0.01 percent of the world's surface and 0.2 percent of the landmass of the Arab world. The population is roughly the same as New York City's. The death toll in the conflict here last year (2020) among Israelis and Palestinians, combatants and civilians, was about 30, nearly all of them Palestinians. That's an awful number, and some instances were tragic mistakes for which Israelis are responsible. Thirty is also less than one-sixth the number of people (202) murdered in the same period in New Orleans, a place that gets little attention from reporters in America, let alone the rest of the world.

When I was an AP reporter in Jerusalem between 2006 and 2011, the American news giant had more staff covering this story

An anti-Jewish narrative isn't always constructed by invention. Sometimes it's done by inflation and the omission of context.

(involving about 14 million people, Israelis and Palestinians) than it had covering China or India, each with a population of over a billion. That focus, which was standard for the press from North America and Western Europe, is a good sign that the people telling Israel's story are not attempting a rational analysis of the world but are engaged in something else. In my opinion, this "something else" is a symbolic story in which Jews are used, often subconsciously, to illustrate the problems that preoccupy the storytellers in their own societies. One good way to differentiate a symbolic story like that from a factual analysis is to ask: Does the story make the scope of the problem clear?

An anti-Jewish narrative isn't always constructed by invention. Sometimes it's done by inflation and the omission of context. For example, someone who wants to illustrate the ills of capitalism by using nefarious Jewish bankers can do so without lying. There really are nefarious Jewish bankers. All you need to do is omit the fact that most Jewish bankers aren't nefarious, that Jews aren't more nefarious than other bankers, and that most bankers aren't Jewish. The same goes for the stories about Jewish Bolsheviks that were once current among anti-Communists. The negative Israel story that's spreading among Western liberals does something similar — it tears Israel from its context and inflates it, turning it from a real place into a symbol of what's wrong in the world. This is when a factual analysis starts to resemble older, familiar stories, with older and familiar effects, like calls for Jews to be boycotted until they conform to a subjective

If you see only an ‘Israeli–Palestinian’ conflict, Israel’s decisions won’t make sense.

and unique list of demands, or until they disappear. That has happened repeatedly in the past, and it’s happening now. When a story starts having that effect, a reader should respond not by asking what she can do to reform the purported behavior of the Jews, but by asking who’s telling this story, and why.

6 | IS THE REGIONAL CONTEXT CLEAR?

To envision regional context, an example I like to use is the America–Italy war of 1944. The U.S. military was indeed fighting in Italy in 1944, but have you ever heard of that war? Probably not, because it’s called the Second World War. Anyone knows that understanding the America–Italy component of the war requires understanding Pearl Harbor and Poland and a global conflict in which most participants weren’t American or Italian.

Have you heard of the “Israeli–Palestinian conflict”? You probably have, even though most of Israel’s wars haven’t been against Palestinians (but rather Egyptians, Jordanians, Iraqis, Lebanese, and others) and even though Israel’s key opponent at the moment is the theocratic regime in Iran, a country that is neither Palestinian nor Arab. The “Israeli–Palestinian” story is a simplified framing that crops out most of the actual conflict. Reporters like simple framing tricks in part because our tools are so scant—a few hundred words in a news story, 90 seconds in a TV segment, 280 characters in a tweet. The complexities of the real world just don’t fit. What’s needed is one good guy and one bad guy: Palestinian vs. Israeli.

If you see only an “Israeli–Palestinian” conflict, Israel’s decisions won’t make sense. In the Western mind, for example, the West Bank and Syria are two completely separate stories. In the real world, they are so close that the drive between them takes the same time as a subway ride across New York City. If you don’t understand that context, it’s hard to understand why many sane Israelis are afraid that a power vacuum in the West Bank might not become a “Palestinian state,” as the press story assumes, but might actually become like Syria, where a civil war just killed 500,000 people. The Arab world numbers about 330 million people, a tiny portion of whom are Palestinian. The Arab minority under Israeli control, the Palestinians, are part of the regional majority. The broader Islamic world is (depending on whom you ask) about 1.5 billion people. There are 6 million Jews in Israel. The entire Jewish population on Earth, about 13 million, is a lot smaller than the population of Cairo.

The context doesn’t mean that all of Israel’s decisions are right—just that they’re being driven by factors that many people miss. With the addition of regional context, many of the problems with the story are solved, and the discussion of Israel is likelier to be sane.

7 | IS THE CHRONOLOGY STRAIGHT?

The stories told about Israel often start in 1967. This is done to set up the military occupation of the Palestinians, which began that year, as the cause of the conflict, and to suggest that a solution to that problem would bring peace. This, in turn, makes it seem like the problem is one Israel could solve if it wanted to, which sets up the Jews as villains, rather than as people caught up in a complex situation where everyone has made mistakes and no one really knows what to do.

The conflict began decades before 1967. The Palestine Liberation Organization was founded in 1964, before the West Bank or

Gaza came under Israeli control. The military occupation in the West Bank is one symptom of the conflict, not the cause. Many Israelis (including this one) argue that we've done a poor job of treating this symptom. Very few believe that healing the symptom would solve the problem, which is objectively older and broader than the symptom. Understanding the simple progression of events makes things much clearer.

8 | WHAT ELSE IS GOING ON?

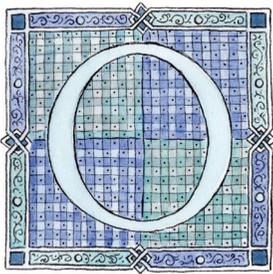
In discussions of an urgent American problem such as gun violence, Americans understand the issue as one aspect of life in their country, part of a complicated mosaic of factors that constitute the existence of the United States. But when reading press reports about foreign countries, single topics become isolated for Westerners as “the story.” A good example is cartel violence in Mexico or the figure of Vladimir Putin in Russia. These are important stories, but if you're in Mexico or Russia, you understand that there is much else going on.

So when presented with a portrait of Israel, a good question to ask is whether it's a complete picture of an actual country. Most Western press coverage is concerned with the military occupation in the West Bank, particularly the settlements, and with Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. This is an important issue for Israelis, but one that exists in the broader context of the life and security of the country, where 9 million Jewish and Arab citizens enjoy a level of stability unavailable anywhere else in the region. The settlement movement has only minority support among Israelis, most of whom understand the occupation, with the very real evils and inequalities it involves, as a necessary military action that enables that safety. The mindset is similar to the way Americans have filed away their Afghanistan occupation under “self-defense” and don't see it as defining American life over the past two decades. If you

see the occupation of the West Bank as a disembodied moral issue that dwarfs all else, then normal parts of Israel's existence — LGBT life, for example, or the tech economy, or food, or tourism — begin to look like dark plots meant to distract from the “real” story, and people begin to hallucinate about “pinkwashing,” “veganwashing,” and so forth.

Countries are very complicated, and if the picture you're getting of Israel is simple — simply good or simply bad — then you can be sure the picture isn't real. *

How Not to Think About the Conflict



OVER A YEAR AGO, pre-COVID, when delegations of students were still coming to Israel on planes, I met with a group to discuss Israel, Zionism, and the conflict. During the Q&A session, I was asked by one student to comment on how “colorism” affects the conflict between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. While I had often heard this question framed in the context of racism, it was the first time I was asked about the conflict as one of “colorism.” Reflecting on this question, I thought that perhaps it had finally dawned on those studying the conflict that, to the extent race means anything, Jews and Arabs definitely do not constitute two separate “races,” so perhaps someone thought variations of skin tone — “color” — would make sense of the conflict in a way that Americans could understand.

Since analyzing the conflict in terms of skin tones made about as much sense as race, and since the talk took place in a hotel meeting room in Jaffa, I simply challenged the young student to go out into the city, where the population is a mix of Arabs and Jews, and, upon her return, tell me whether she could tell Jews apart

from Arabs based only on their “color.” Even without going outside, she admitted she was not likely to be able to do so. Marshalling all my patience gained from years of having to address false parallels and analogies, I explained that Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians are engaged in a century-old conflict that rests on issues of nation, religion, theology, tribes, receding empires, carved-out states, history, and geography — all great and relevant lenses from which to analyze it. Race and color are not.

Normally, we expect people to try to understand things that are foreign to them by placing them in familiar frameworks and by drawing parallels with their own situations. Having discussed the conflict over the years with groups from India, China, Japan, Europe, Africa, and Latin America, I was always struck by the parallels they found between, on one hand, the history of the Jews, Zionism, and the conflict and, on the other, their own countries’ and peoples’ histories. Those were always interesting for me to hear, and I considered them an honest effort by people to grapple with a place and a people that were not their own.

But unlike these earnest attempts to understand a foreign place and people, some parallels are more ill-intentioned, drawn for the express purpose of intervening in the conflict on behalf of one side, or for reasons that are more about the domestic issues of the people drawing the comparisons than about the conflict itself.

Drawing parallels to cast one side in the conflict as evil and the other as good might have the effect of marshaling support and resources for the side that one favors, but such a strategy is counterproductive, and even just plain stupid, if the goal is actually to engage with the real issues at hand, to solve the conflict and attain peace. “Evil” must always be fought and defeated — so to cast the conflict as a fight between good and evil is effectively to argue that no compromise can be made until the other side disappears or signs an unconditional surrender.

For decades, critics have cast Jews, Israel, and Zionism as the evil side in the conflict through their consistent and persistent

employment of the “Placard Strategy”: utilizing simple equations such as those that might appear on a placard in an anti-Israel demonstration. On one side of the equation are Israel, Zionism, and images such as the Star of David. The evil *du jour* is the other side, whether it is Imperialism, Colonialism, Racism, Apartheid or — for the truly determined — Genocide and Nazism. Most recently, White Supremacy was added to the list.

The Placard Strategy is so effective that it is employed everywhere and anywhere, from the UN (Zionism = Racism), to the International Criminal Court (Israel = Crimes Against Humanity), to various media and social media, where anti-Israel speakers invariably manage to respond to any question regarding Israel with the words “Apartheid,” “Racist,” and “Colonialist,” regardless of the question or topic discussed. These words are considered a standard reply to Israelis posting photos of themselves eating ice cream in Tel Aviv.

The Placard Strategy has never been about actual facts and policies. If there was ever a time when it was at least used for purposes that had to do with the conflict itself, that time has passed. Nowadays, the equations and parallels reflect more on the domestic concerns of the protesters than they illuminate any real issues in Israel and the Middle East.

I first saw this phenomenon when visiting Ireland and Northern Ireland several years ago. As I traveled around and met with officials, the analogy emerged: Israel = Protestants/Northern Irish/Britain, and the Palestinians = Irish Catholics. As I visited sites throughout Belfast, the Protestant areas were flying Israeli flags, and the Catholic areas had Palestinian flags, creating an eerie feeling that the Northern Irish conflict, supposedly ended by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, was still simmering.

It wasn't just the flags: Catholics and Protestants alike described the Israeli–Palestinian conflict with intense emotion, usually coupled with remarkable ignorance. One Sinn Féin member of Parliament even went so far as to accuse Israel of committing genocide — which is when I realized that these emotions had nothing

‘Evil’ must always be fought and defeated — so to cast the conflict as a fight between good and evil is effectively to argue that no compromise can be made until the other side disappears or signs an unconditional surrender.

to do with our conflict and everything to do with their own. It was as if, with their struggle officially resolved, the Catholics and Protestants couldn't let go — they needed a new way to channel, experience, and display the full range of intense emotions that had fueled them during their own struggle.

But this time, of course, they bore none of the consequences of these feelings and opinions. My colleague Igal Ram once termed this a “Disneyland of Hate”: For those outside the actual Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it was a safe — Disneyland — way of experiencing a roller coaster of intense emotions missing from their dull post-peace lives. In a world that is actually more peaceful than ever, and where negative, violence-related emotions, such as hatred — and especially hatred of groups and collectives — are less legitimate than ever, the continuing acceptance of hatred for Israel endures. Couching it in terms of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict enabled some Irish Catholics a rare and safe outlet for the open expression of the least legitimate emotion of all, hate, in a world where their own official peace agreement had failed to eliminate intense negative emotions built over decades of conflict.

A visit to South Africa provided me with a similar experience. Especially after the 2010 World Cup, South Africa had successfully rebranded itself as the post-apartheid Rainbow Nation. But the

In an act of blatant neocolonialism, the American story is viewed as the universal prism through which all societies should be understood and analyzed.

situation on the ground was one where apartheid and its effects continued to exist in practice, if not in name. Challenges of rampant poverty, inequality, illiteracy, and corruption plagued the country. Yet, many of the young people I met seemed possessed by what they viewed as the urgent need to fight “Apartheid Israel.”

Noticing once again the intensity of their emotions, I realized that they, too, had bought a ticket to this “Disneyland of Hate.” Their parents and grandparents had actually fought apartheid in South Africa, paying a hard price but also experiencing the glory not only of common struggle, but of victory. Life for their children was not so dramatic — their job, instead, was the dull and exhausting work of solving the deep-seated problems that apartheid had created. Continuing the glorious battle — just transposing it onto a faraway land with no regard for the actual situation there — meant they could tap into the glory without experiencing any of the pain.

In the United States, the discussion of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict increasingly resembles this “Disneyland of Hate.” If American discussions of the conflict were once focused on the conflict itself and on specific policy proposals designed to advance its resolution, this is clearly no longer the case. Like in Ireland and South Africa, the conflict has become a stand-in for American positions, where self-styled social justice warriors substitute the hard and tedious work of addressing domestic challenges with the vicarious heroism of fighting for the grand ideal of “Palestinian Rights.”

America is increasingly removed from its years of glorious global victories and celebrated domestic battles. The last war it won was Cold, and its recent “hot” wars have been a string of sorry messes; even the military-industrial complex has realized that it can sell more weapons by promoting peace. The grand battles for civil rights and liberation have attained so much that the current battles for equity and equality now require a consistent focus on far more tedious issues like infrastructure, health, and education. In the absence of these exciting opportunities to defeat real Nazis in actual wars, or to attain decisive gains for civil rights, those who claim to promote social justice have latched on to the conflict in Israel in a desperate effort to appear, if only to their own in-group, as heroic warriors for “justice.” It is as if the conflict serves as a hallucinatory drug for those seeking to escape a dull reality and tedious long-term challenges, allowing them to imagine themselves engaged in a heroic struggle between good and evil, where victories are swift and definitive — to be Captain America and save the day.

And so, in an act of blatant neocolonialism, the American story is viewed as the universal prism through which all societies should be understood and analyzed. Blithely ignorant of the specificity of their own experience, the neocolonialists fit the square peg of the conflict into the round hole of American history. Jews are bizarrely cast as “white,” and Zionism as a movement of “white supremacy,” while Arabs, who look exactly like Jews (*Fauda*, anyone?), are cast as “people of color.” The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is cast as a mirror of race relations in America, but without the relevant local context of slavery, Jim Crow, or any of the specificities of Jewish, Arab, or Middle Eastern history.

Since these analogies have nothing to do with Israel and everything to do with projections of domestic issues and animosities, the best response is simply to refuse to give them the respect of treating them as honest arguments and dismiss the pretension that these issues have anything to do with Israel or Zionism. At

most, the response should acknowledge and address the underlying domestic issues rather than their anti-Zionist mask.

The irony is that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict doesn’t provide much in the way of heroism anymore either. It is one of the least violent conflicts in the world, leading to far fewer violent deaths than most American cities experience each year. The contours of the slow separation between the State of Israel and an emerging Palestinian state are becoming more defined, and Israelis and Palestinians continue their close security cooperation. The growing normalization between Israel and many Arab states points to a regional exhaustion with “the conflict,” and a sense that Israel is part and parcel of the Middle East. A dull gray envelops a region that once seemed to promise grand battles between good and evil, black and white, Armageddon and salvation.

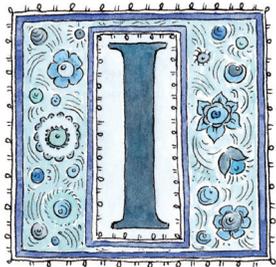
Yet, in a world where so much is colored in dull gray, the market for black and white is as strong as ever. If actual, real-life Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians are not going to supply the grand battle for right and wrong, then those who are addicted to this hallucinatory drug will have to invent it.

Yes, there are serious, complicated, and appropriate ways to understand the conflict between Israel, its Arab neighbors, and the Palestinians. None of them includes a grand battle between good and evil. But I can testify that when I sit with audiences and talk about the history of Ottoman decline, or the rise of nation-states to replace receding empires, or the interplay of various imperial and Cold War interests with those of various ethnic and religious groups, the eyes of most people glaze over. They want to know: Who are the good guys? Who are the bad? Which side should I root for — who is my team?

But Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, are not sports teams. They are not stand-ins for good and evil, symbols for the struggles in one’s own group much closer to home — they are not a drug for generating intense feelings in a dull reality. Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, are real people. They are struggling to

resolve centuries-long conflicts, which they are slowly doing. That is a far better use of their time than serving as props and collateral damage in the domestic morality tales of other countries, giving an outlet for people to channel negative emotions with which they should be dealing on their own. Which is why, increasingly, Israelis and even Palestinians watch the intense debates taking place halfway across the world in their name and are left wondering: What does all of this have to do with us? *

When Progressives Meet Israel



IT WAS A SIMPLE GESTURE: a colleague calming a crying infant so the baby's mother, a co-worker, could speak to a group. Five years later, everyone who was in the room remembers that moment like it was yesterday. Why? Because the four-month-old baby was the child of Meredith, who was an Orthodox Jew, and her colleague was Muhammad, a Palestinian Muslim. The two were leaders of a people-to-people program, speaking in a church in East Jerusalem to a group of liberal Christian and Jewish clergy from across America. The visitors immediately grasped—personally, concretely—that trust is possible, even in the center of one of the world's most famous and confounding conflicts.

Another moment: a reception for LGBTQ leaders from across North America with members of the Israeli LGBTQ community. No panel discussion, no history lesson, not even an archaeological site. Just a group of diverse leaders, Israeli Jews and Arabs, American Jews, Christians, and Muslims, hanging out on a Tel Aviv rooftop bar, getting to know one another. Sharing difficult stories from their lives as activists, but also eating, drinking, laughing, connecting.

Why have Jewish communal organizations been so focused on travel to Israel over the past 60-plus years? Because beautiful human moments like these can flip a switch in people's heads that will forever change how they relate to this complicated place a world away from their daily lives. These "aha" moments illuminate the reality of Israel and the essential humanity of those who make the country so special.

Most people have been introduced to Israel through a two-dimensional lens—newspapers, television screens, or their computer monitors. As a result, the people of the land are too often reduced to characters in a biblical drama or a wargame, caricatures of good and evil. It is precisely this unidimensional formulation that compels people to find "solutions" for the conflict that involve punishing the side they view as evil and that close off the imagination to the humanity of people trapped on *both* sides, who deserve peace-building rather than condemnation.

Quite often, perceptions are most challenged in the unscripted moments of a tour. Stories like these are the ones shared in reflection sessions on trips and in the immediate post-trip evaluations. Their true impact, however, is best demonstrated in follow-up interviews several years later. Participants may not recall the brilliant points shared in academic presentations, but they can often paint scenes like Muhammad calming Meredith's little boy.

Showing the human face of Israelis is essential, and putting real people and their experiences at the center of our programs allows visitors to care about Israel, its future, and the people who live there.

Support from Israel on the American left has declined by double digits over the past 20 years, leading to considerable and understandable consternation. This unhealthy trajectory bodes poorly for the success of Israel and the security of the American Jewish community. As unquestioningly opposing Zionism and boycotting Israel become increasingly de rigueur in social justice circles, more efforts have emerged to bring progressive leaders to Israel. Rather than simply rebut anti-Israel claims, host pro-Israel speakers, or create sexy marketing campaigns, we need to bring

progressive leaders—especially skeptical or hostile ones—to the country itself. While we may not be able to convince the committed anti-Israel ideologues to see Israel for themselves, we have a lot of opportunity with the so-called fence-sitters, those for whom seeing the situation in real life and connecting honestly with Israelis and Palestinians help in forming educated opinions.

Just as we customize travel to Israel for any group, connecting them to people and experiences that will appeal to their interests, trips for progressive leaders showcase the dimensions of Israel that resonate with audiences for whom social justice is a core imperative. Unlike those who are already strong supporters of Israel, progressive fence-sitters are, not surprisingly, less religious and more distrustful of the use of force to resolve conflict. They value human rights, diversity, inclusion, and acceptance of difference. They may believe that Israel falls short in all of these areas. In order to form a closer attachment to Israel, they must connect to Israelis through a recognition of shared values.

Far beyond the slivers of reality that American media and political debates provide—an Israel dominated by religious, political, and military conflict—introducing American progressive leaders to social justice activists in Israel enables them to connect to three-dimensional, relatable Israelis who share their values: peacemaking, advancing full LGBTQ inclusion, helping underserved communities, building a more equitable future, and overcoming past inequality. Trips enable progressive audiences to appreciate that, like America, Israel is a work in progress, far from perfect, but grounded in a commitment to fairness, compassion, and decency.

What doesn't work is just giving people more information. A common trap in Israel engagement efforts is to assume that those who criticize Israel lack sufficient information—and that by laying on facts, they will join the “converted.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

Research has also shown that the shopworn messaging common to most Israel engagement work, including detailed history lessons

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and double-standard arguments, are little more than self-reinforcing rhetoric. They don't shift opinions. As atrocious as the actions of the mufti of Jerusalem might have been during the Second World War, knowledge about his anti-Jewish animus and relationship with Nazi German leaders does little to change perceptions about the imperatives of Israelis today—especially when contrasted with a conversation that is grounded in the present tense.

Another ineffective strategy with progressive audiences is attempting to define the “other side.” Pro-Israel Jews can never be the authorities on the prerogatives of Palestinians. And one of the least helpful pro-Israel messages is to frame Palestinians as barbarous or uncompromising antisemites. Such approaches lack empathy on their face. At best, they resonate with those who are already allies, but they badly alienate the very audiences that most need to be reached. “Vilifying the opposition doesn't work anymore,” a prominent conservative pollster has said. “It makes you look close-minded and overly aggressive.” (And the converse is true—arguments that frame Israel in brutal terms fail to persuade progressive fence-sitters to become more pro-Palestinian.) For this and many other reasons, such approaches belong in the dustbin.

If we respect our audiences, we must let them draw conclusions from what they observe. “Show them. Don't tell them.” There is

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tremendous power in mingling and breaking bread with activists who are working on environmental problems that transcend borders, fighting for trans inclusion, bringing disparate communities together, connecting West Bank Palestinians and their Israeli settler neighbors, demanding justice in the Knesset—and the courts—while leading everyday lives. Such interactions offer much more than any set of talking points ever could.

And we must not shy away from bringing our audiences to hear from and meet with Palestinians where they live, in all their diversity. The Palestinian condition is undeniably a core social justice concern for progressive audiences. When we trust our trip participants to reconcile what they hear from Palestinians with what they hear from Israelis, without contextualizing it for them, their respect for the complexity of the conflict expands, including questioning simplistic solutions and zero-sum formulas, such as BDS.

Demonstrating genuine empathy for Palestinians may be challenging for those wishing to make the case for Israel. And for many it may feel counterintuitive. It is, nonetheless, wise. While the 2014 Gaza war was raging, pollsters on both the left and right searched for what people were thinking about the war and what we should say. They discovered the same thing: The most important points

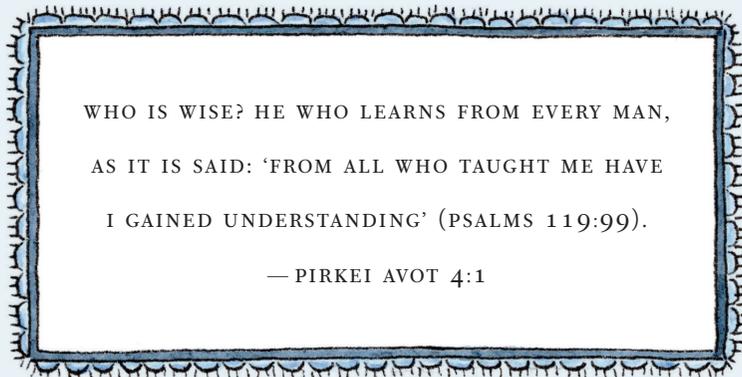
to make were grounded in empathy for both sides. Bringing Americans to meet with people like Meredith and Muhammad, whose lives are caught up in a conflict that they work every day to mitigate and humanize, is powerful.

A perennial critique of those who show a softer side of Israelis is that we are “_____—washing.” The trend started with the infamous lie about “pinkwashing”: the myth that friends of Israel promote its inclusive policies for LGBTQ people only to distract people from their oppression of the Palestinians. In a similar vein, discussion about Israelis who work on protecting the environment is ridiculed as “greenwashing.” The list goes on. Those who celebrate Israeli cuisine are accused of “dishwashing.” (Really.) Of course, none of this is true. We can walk and chew gum at the same time—introducing people to Israelis and Palestinians, learning about the complexities of the region, and eating delicious food, home-cooked if possible.

Those who advance these sorts of accusations are again reducing Israelis to caricatures; they deny reality in order to conform to a preordained narrative. These are fundamentally illiberal distortions that endeavor to silence a set of progressive voices—ironically, the very people who tend to articulate the keenest sensitivity to the Palestinian cause. Israeli LGBTQ protections are the result of hard-fought battles, not a propagandistic governmental plot. It is possible to celebrate some parts of a society and continue to work for further progress in others.

One key takeaway from this past year, while travel has been suspended because of the pandemic, is that much of the necessary educational work that we do on our trips, bringing participants up to speed on Israeli history and politics, can happen virtually in advance of a trip. When travel resumes, it will enable us to do much of this “information” work virtually, freeing up our time in Israel for even more opportunities to meet in personal ways with Israelis and Palestinians.

And along the way, we will no doubt have the kinds of unscripted, authentic moments that will stay with us for a lifetime, building badly needed common ground. *



SUMMING UP



LEARNED the concept of “resilient listening” on an Encounter trip to meet with Palestinians in the West Bank several years ago. Engaging views that were contrary to my own stirred confusion, compassion, and, at times, fury. It challenged me to open my heart and mind. It also strengthened my analytical abilities and clarified my own perspectives.

The years I’ve spent in the Jewish philanthropic world, often working to harmonize differing opinions, have reinforced my belief that being willing to change one’s mind is an essential element of leadership — not to mention of *menschlichkeit*. Embracing free expression and free inquiry helps us to create more resilient, diverse, flexible, and open communities.

The goal of SAPIR is to speak to those who are open. To that end, each issue will offer a final summary of the essays’ key ideas and recommendations that can inform conversations among Jewish communal leaders.

We invite you to share your thoughts with us at SapirJournal.org.

— Felicia Herman, *Managing Editor*



THE FRAUGHT POLITICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The volume begins with four provocative essays on the challenges inherent for Jews in contemporary social justice movements.

Pamela Paresky and James Kirchick explore the thicket that is contemporary antisemitism on the left, examining movements that claim to treasure diversity and inclusion, yet often prove to be astonishingly hostile to Jews.

Paresky analyzes the still largely unacknowledged manifestations of illiberalism in critical race theory (CRT) and its fashionable by-product of “antiracism.” In arguing, for example, that unequal outcomes are evidence of systemic bias, the advocates of these ideologies posit that disproportionate success, such as that achieved by Jews, must be a sign of unmerited privilege or outright discrimination. CRT’s concept that society is driven by forces of “greed, appropriation...and hidden power” also echoes long-standing antisemitic conspiracy theories. Add in the argument that American Jews have been willing partners in white supremacy by “opting into” whiteness, as well as a resistance to logical analysis and empiricism (as markers of “whiteness”), and you get a worldview “that does not merely make it easy to demonize Jews...it makes it difficult not to.”

What to do? Paresky offers important suggestions: Jews should refuse the victim/oppressor binary and its attendant glorification of victimhood; “denounce the ascription of moral virtue or blame” to race; seek truth and embrace complexity and critical thinking; preserve core liberal and pluralist values; and “articulate a Jewish social justice story...that allows agency even for victims, forgives rather than shames, and embraces rather than condemns.”

James Kirchick widens the lens both historically and globally as he explores the paradox that defines left-wing antisemitism: namely, that those who practice it also deny that it exists. He also explains its durability. The screenwriter Ben Hecht observed in the 1940s that, by accepting the covenant with God, Jews agreed “to think as an individual in the teeth of all Kings and Causes.” This mission would forevermore leave them “unimpressed,” as Kirchick describes, with earthly rulers. Their commitments lay elsewhere. This provoked unending resentment—antisemitism in all its forms, a response to the Jewish refusal to conform.

Jews can resist left-wing antisemitism, Kirchick writes, by being unafraid to acknowledge it, by being honest about its dangers, and by being willing to “graduate” from abusive liberal institutions and build new ones that “maintain the purported but abandoned values of the old.” Above all, he urges, Jews must re-

tain their “skepticism toward the promises of their fellow men.”

Jeremy Burton and Joshua Muravchik bring these ideas into the realm of practice by exploring the complex, evolving, and sometimes difficult relationship between black and Jewish Americans. Although they come from different sides of the ideological spectrum, the authors share fundamental premises. They agree that black and Jewish communities share a profound interest in preserving the American liberal project. They urge us to resist ideologies that demonize and delegitimize America’s ideals and institutions, however incomplete or flawed they may be.

As with all relationships, this one must be characterized by honesty. The romanticization that frequently attends discussions about black-Jewish relations obscures its complexity, as does the reluctance to acknowledge diverse viewpoints, especially hostile ones. Black and Jewish leaders need to strengthen those who would build bridges, while calling out those who would burn them. Ignoring black antisemitism and Jewish racism is not only dishonest; it also prevents authentic connections and real solutions.

The essays do differ in emphasis. Muravchik’s focus on calling out examples of black leaders’ antisemitism is not to make the case that Jewish racism does not exist; it is to note the considerable harm caused by the prominence of overt antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Refusing to denounce these views as unacceptable erodes what ought to be a storied, enduring alliance. Burton agrees, but he also exhorts us not to let the most extreme voices on either side define the relationship, or to see the Jewish fight against racism as transactional or conditional. It is in the best interest of all Americans for us all to fight racism and antisemitism alike.

JEWISH TEXTS, JEWISH HISTORY

The five essays in *SAPIR* that discuss the prominent place of social justice in Jewish texts and history offer a path forward for Jews who

Policies that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives can create incremental change — unpopular in a world that likes quick fixes, but ultimately more sustainable, humane, and just.

want to embrace these ideals without compromising their integrity or succumbing to political fashions.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg takes us back to a *clal gadol*, a core principle, of the Torah: that all human beings are created in the image of God. This means that they are “endowed with the intrinsic dignities of infinite value, equality, and uniqueness.” Not surprisingly, given its centrality to Jewish thought, several pieces in the issue reference this idea.

By this standard — does it respect the image of God in *everyone*? — Greenberg finds much of today’s “antiracism” movement wanting. We must judge movements not only by their goals but also by their tactics. Greenberg calls out some of the most serious problems: the propensity to label dissent evil (i.e., “racist”); a call for radical change over incrementalism; stereotyping and shaming entire groups based on skin color; and promoting a legal and social system that would create different rules for different groups.

The oft-quoted *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, Greenberg points out, does not mean only “justice, justice shall you pursue”; it also means “pursue justice justly.” The ends do not always justify the means.

Rabbi Shlomo Brody draws out eight primary social justice principles from biblical texts to demonstrate the ways that the tradition builds a “just and righteous” society by harmonizing

what we would today consider to be liberal and conservative views. Equality under the law, human dignity for all, empowerment and self-reliance, solidarity and mutuality through shared ideals, empathy with the vulnerable, the careful emendation of the law to account for unintended consequences, and a model for moral leadership that embraces righteousness at its core: These principles ought to guide communal leaders in policy debates.

Moshe Halbertal and Rabbi David Wolpe mix Jewish thought with Jewish history, ethical principles, and the quandaries of application. Halbertal’s essay demonstrates that medieval Jewish communities responded to nearly unrelenting hostility by encouraging kindness, care, and resilience. A people with limited political, physical, and economic might could not meet violence with violence. Nor could they revolt against their inherent state of powerlessness. Their response was to create communal structures focused on education, mutual care, and economic empowerment, grounded in principles of compassion, equality, and dignity. But they did not aim to create perfect communities, either; they accepted that there would always be unequal outcomes. The goal of aiding the vulnerable would not be advanced by flattening out human difference.

In the modern period, as “the ghetto walls burst open,” a new, universalist dimension of social justice became possible: caring for those beyond Jewish communities. Wolpe notes that this created a demanding balancing act between particularism and universalism. He argues for striving to find a balance: anchoring calls for universal justice within Jewish practice and learning. Jews must reject simplistic binaries, refuse to allow Judaism to be “captured or limited” by particular political traditions, and embrace the complexity of the Jewish condition: simultaneously strong and weak, privileged and threatened, focused within and without.

Kylie Unell emphasizes that the work of social repair (whether labeled *tikkun olam* or something else) is supposed to be done in service to, and partnership with, God. Young people, she argues, are craving conversations about God. Avoiding the subject does not

erase the universal longing for purpose and mission: It simply transposes it to causes and ideologies that become religions in and of themselves. This is precisely the opposite of what Jewish organizations should try to achieve, either in social justice work or elsewhere.

All of these essays demonstrate that the very diversity of Jewish ideas is a core feature of their timelessness. They endure because they beautifully reflect the spectrum of human experience and are honest about human strengths and weaknesses. They do not prescribe perfection or utopia. They call on us to accept and develop policies that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives, which can create incremental change—unpopular in a world that likes quick fixes, but ultimately more sustainable, humane, and just.

ISRAEL AND ITS CRITICS

Arguments about social justice are typical of conversations about the Jewish state. Matti Friedman, Einat Wilf, and Ethan Felson share an understanding that discussions about Israel are frequently characterized by myth, misinformation, and a depressing dearth of critical thinking. Israel, as Friedman often puts it, is rarely treated like “a real place on the planet Earth.” Instead, stories about Israel often fall into the realm of what he calls the “ancient category of Western stories, typically moralistic in nature, in which Jews are used to illustrate the perceived ills of a given place and time.”

Friedman offers eight ideas about how to become a more discriminating consumer of information about Israel, and he reminds us of the wildly disproportionate attention that Israel receives in the media and in contemporary social justice discourse. This profound lack of context—historical, statistical, cultural, geopolitical—leads to double standards and distortion, and, ultimately, to destructive consequences for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Wilf discusses a particularly strange area of cognitive distortion: The projection of other people’s grand struggles and narra-

tives (apartheid, race, imperialism) onto Israeli society is “an act of blatant neocolonialism” that ignores or discards the uniqueness of Israel’s past and present in favor of simplistic slogans. The response, she suggests, should be to refuse to treat these as honest arguments, to acknowledge and address what they are *really* about, and to reject the framework of narratives that do not apply.

Felson shows us the ways that these challenges play out in Jewish communal life. How can the facile preconceptions of many progressive activists about Israelis and Palestinians best be addressed? Through unscripted, in-person encounters that make no attempt to propagandize and that offer the unique “aha” moments that come at points of ordinary human connection, often across lines of religion, politics, and ideology. They can also be addressed by showing that Israel’s struggles and achievements when it comes to human rights or environmental stewardship are not a form of “pinkwashing” or “greenwashing.” They are a result of the hard work of countless activists of all persuasions, which need to be seen and understood firsthand, without any preaching or proselytizing.



It’s no surprise that the essays in this volume are deeply in conversation with one another. No matter the topic, time period, or author’s predisposition, particular themes recur from essay to essay. They are the same principles of dignity, equality, and compassion that weave like radiant threads through the cacophonous Jewish tradition and the long, complicated Jewish past and present. To build a strong and creative future, we need to check our beliefs, behaviors and policies against these ideals. We need, in Kirchick’s word, to remain “unimpressed” by simplistic theories that fail to account for the complexity, diversity, frailty, strength, and beauty of the human condition. The Jewish way, these essays argue, is to remain in the middle, neither wholly one thing or another, in an unending effort to perfect the world. *

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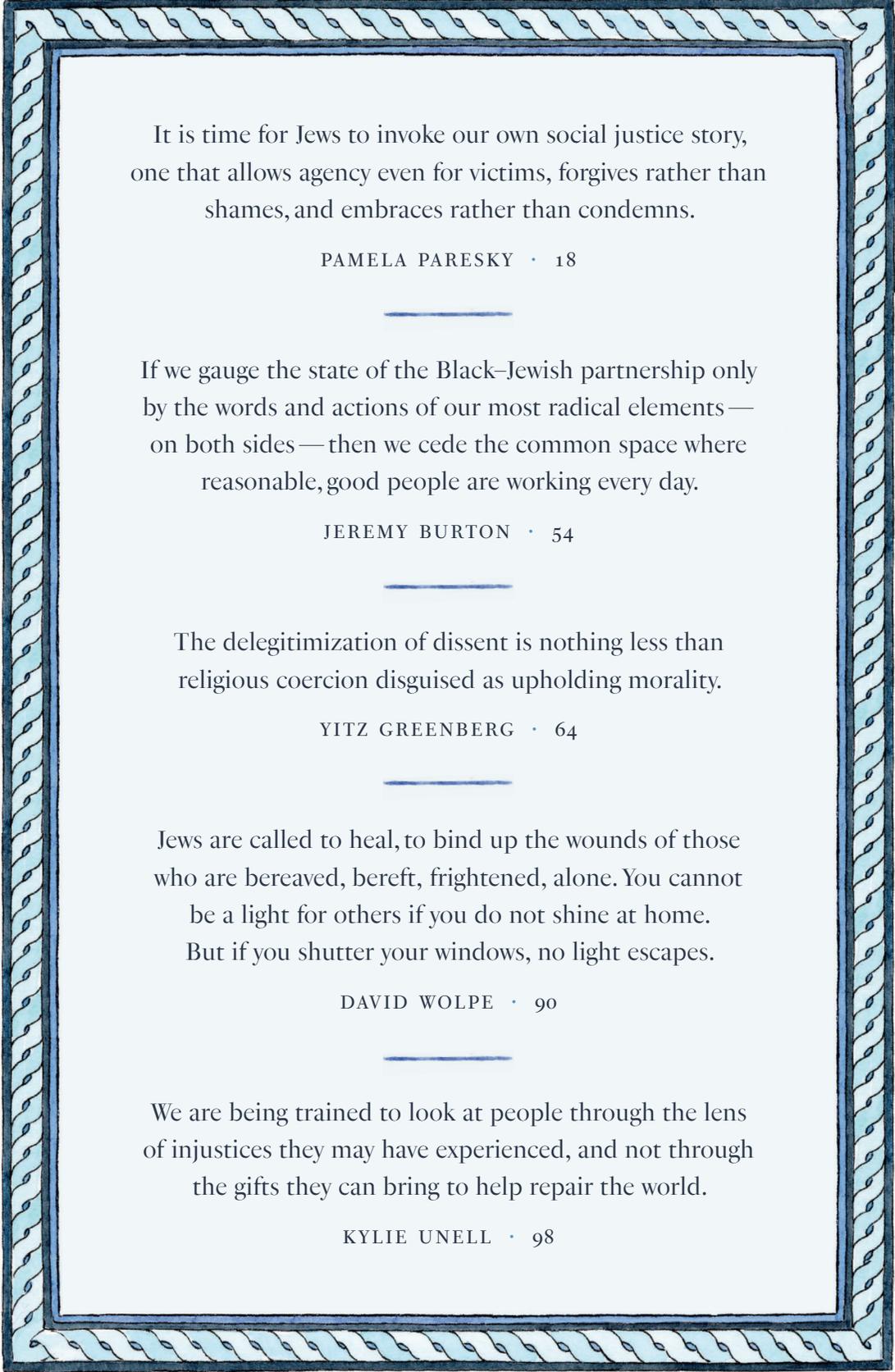


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וְיִרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתַחַת
רַגְלָיו כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה לְבִנְת הַסְּפִיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר:

— שמות כד:י



It is time for Jews to invoke our own social justice story,
one that allows agency even for victims, forgives rather than
shames, and embraces rather than condemns.

PAMELA PARESKY · 18

If we gauge the state of the Black–Jewish partnership only
by the words and actions of our most radical elements—
on both sides—then we cede the common space where
reasonable, good people are working every day.

JEREMY BURTON · 54

The delegitimization of dissent is nothing less than
religious coercion disguised as upholding morality.

YITZ GREENBERG · 64

Jews are called to heal, to bind up the wounds of those
who are bereaved, bereft, frightened, alone. You cannot
be a light for others if you do not shine at home.
But if you shutter your windows, no light escapes.

DAVID WOLPE · 90

We are being trained to look at people through the lens
of injustices they may have experienced, and not through
the gifts they can bring to help repair the world.

KYLIE UNELL · 98