

AMOTZ ASA-EL

Jews & Activism

*A brief history from Abraham to
Danny the Red*



IT WAS ACTIVISM's finest hour, and Charles de Gaulle's last hurrah.

What began with one shout in February 1968 — a demand to make university dorms coed, hollered by a red-haired student during a politician's speech — triggered a chain reaction that by May had unleashed national mayhem.

The shout at the Sorbonne's Nanterre campus sparked an invasion by male students of the women's dorms. Students occupied the entire campus, paralyzing its work. This led to a second invasion, by police. The fiasco led de Gaulle to shut down the Nanterre campus, provoking a 12-mile protest march to the Sorbonne's main campus in the heart of Paris, which in turn was also closed down, sparking nationwide demonstrations.

The collision was no longer about coed dorms. Now pitting youth against age, and freedom against authority, the unions entered the

fray, inciting workers against employers and spawning wildcat strikes that froze the economy while multitudes marched through Paris chanting “Adieu, de Gaulle!”

Thousands were battling police daily. On May 10, 370 people were injured, nearly 500 were arrested, and more than 100 cars were torched. A policeman was killed in Lyons and a demonstrator in Paris was stabbed to death. The rioting was ultimately quelled, but the tumult resulted in de Gaulle’s departure the following year.

The rebels lacked a solid, hierarchical leadership, but the drama demanded a figure opposite de Gaulle, and the media found one in the red-headed rebel from Nanterre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, whom it called “the Red,” alluding to the color of both his hair and his politics. “The typical student leader today is casually dressed, hoarse and red-eyed....If in addition, he is a slightly chubby, cherubic young man, with blue eyes and reddish hair, then his name is Daniel Cohn-Bendit,” wrote an enamored *New York Times* reporter of Danny the Red. However, there was nothing in that account, or indeed in Cohn-Bendit’s future, that resembled previous revolutionary icons’ violent careers and deaths.

Unlike Leon Trotsky, who led 5 million troops through a bloody civil war before being assassinated at age 60; and unlike Rosa Luxemburg, who at age 47 was executed with a bullet to the back of her neck, Danny the Red—who this year turns 80—ended up a marginal European Parliament lawmaker. His colleagues’ futures were no more heroic. Most were forgotten, and two who were not—physicist Alain Geismar and philosopher André Glucksmann—became deradicalized. The former became a Socialist politician, and the latter veered rightward, advocating nuclear power and backing the American invasion of Afghanistan.

Even so, Geismar, Glucksmann, and Cohn-Bendit did have one thing in common with Trotsky and Luxemburg: They were Jews.

The French upheaval's disproportionate share of Jewish leaders — Jews made up less than 1 percent of France's population at the time — was hardly unique. In South Africa's Treason Trial of 1956 — which indicted key anti-apartheid activists including Nelson Mandela — 14 of 23 white defendants were Jews. In Argentina's Dirty War (1974–1983), an estimated one-tenth of the thousands murdered by the junta as suspected anti-regime activists were Jewish. One of the most prominent anti-junta activists, the editor of the daily *La Opinión*, was the openly Jewish Jacobo Timerman. In the United States, three of seven defendants in the Chicago Seven trial, a landmark event in the anti-Vietnam War movement, were Jews. Before that, American Jews were prominent in the civil rights movement. And Jewish scientists, led by physicist Leo Szilard, dominated the petition to Harry Truman by 70 of the atomic bomb's creators not to drop it on Japan. All this is besides the Jewish activists who starred in European revolutions, from Lenin's deputies Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev through to Hungary's first Communist leader, Béla Kun, as well as the spiritual leader of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, György Lukács.

These Jews' political restlessness fired antisemitic imaginations. But it intrigued Jews, too, including the great Israeli historian Jacob Talmon, who wondered in his 1980 book *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution*: “Should any significance be attached to the disproportionate number of men and women of Jewish ancestry among . . . revolutionary leaders, activists in radical movements . . . [and] the New-Left?”

Is there, then, anything inherently Jewish about political activism? If so, what is it and what is it not?

Activism is the effort to influence the system from outside it. That

surely includes the dissent, agitation, and general spirit of political rebellion with which Hebrew mythology is rife.

Abraham, according to Jewish tradition, was not only the father of all Hebrews but also history's first activist. Appalled by his homeland's idolatrous civilization, he torched a pagan temple before embarking on his fabled journey to the Promised Land. Though not mentioned in the Bible, this tale of political dissent and cultural defiance is what Jewish children have been told since antiquity, as its mention in the Dead Sea Scrolls attests (Book of Jubilees 12:1–14).

Political defiance, which in Abraham's case is part of received tradition, is explicit in the case of Moses. Moses's clash with a regime that murdered babies and enslaved their parents is what the Book of Exodus is about. The moral of the tale that has been retold every Passover to every Jewish child is as simple as it is harsh: Government is sometimes evil, and when it is, it should be fought.

Moses's activism came in two phases. First, he addressed the present by confronting the tyranny he faced. Second, he addressed the future, writing laws designed to prevent tyranny's emergence in the Promised Land. Israel, he ruled, will appoint a king only if the people so choose, and then, too, that king will be subservient to the law, and "he shall not have many wives...nor shall he amass silver and gold to an excess," or "have many horses" (Deuteronomy 17:14–18).

Moses thus detected the three temptations that to this day destroy political careers—sex, greed, and war. While he was at it, he also told Israel that the government should be checked. That is why Moses never crowned himself king, or his sons or his successor, Joshua. Instead, he created a loose tribal confederation which lasted for some two centuries before Israel decided to appoint a king.

Then there was Samuel, who warned against government abuse and saw political power as incurably selfish, violent, and corrupt. The prospective king, he predicted, "will take your sons and appoint

them as his charioteers,” and “he will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers” (I Samuel 8:11–13). Though he failed to prevent the installation of a monarchy, his legacy inspired generations of dissenters—the biblical prophets who, for more than four centuries, criticized, rebuked, and confronted Israelite kings and queens.

Some of the prophets scolded political leaders for their personal conduct. Elijah confronted King Ahab for the framing and execution of an innocent citizen in order to possess his vineyard. His struggle for justice stirred hundreds of activists who had to be hidden “fifty in a cave” because Queen Jezebel “was killing off the prophets” (I Kings 18:4). They may have been history’s first dissident movement—idealists who fought tyrants who murdered critics, robbed citizens, and staged show trials.

Then there were the social critics. Amos scolded the rich for having “sold the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of shoes” (Amos 2:6). Zephaniah caricatured corrupt judges as “evening wolves” who “leave no bones till the morrow” (Zephaniah 3:3). Micah admonished the aristocrats who “abhor judgment and pervert all equity” (Micah 3:9). And Isaiah rebuked opinion makers “who call evil good and good evil” and “put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20).

And Jeremiah: Determined to dissuade King Zedekiah from leading Judah to a disastrous war with mighty Babylonia, this quintessential dissenter launched history’s first anti-war campaign. First he took his case to a select forum—the elders of the people and the priests—and then to the public, “in the court of the house of God” where he addressed “all the people” (Jeremiah 19:1–15). The campaign was so audacious that, as would happen to so many other activists, he was flogged, arrested, and dumped in a pit where “there was no water... only mud” (Jeremiah 38:6).

Faced with a pro-war party that demanded his execution, “for he disheartens the soldiers and all the people,” and realizing his struggle

would ultimately fail, Jeremiah lamented his lot: “Everyone jeers at me.” Yet he lived to see Jerusalem sacked and his enemies deported from its ruins. No such vindication came for Elijah, whose activism ended with an escape to a cave in the desert. Alone in the wilderness, the defeated dissident reported that all his colleagues had been “put to the sword,” that “I alone am left,” and that “they are out to take my life” too. In reply to God’s question “Why are you here?” Elijah offered a timeless reply: “I am moved by zeal” (I Kings 19:10–14).

Elijah encapsulated all the innocence, idealism, and frustration that political activism to this day involves—the gist of some seven centuries of Hebrew dissidence. It was a powerful legacy that fed new chapters of political defiance in post-biblical Israel, most notably the revolts against the Seleucid and Roman Empires, both of which were led from below by activists who refused to accept political reality and set out to change it.

Less famously, but even more tellingly, the biblical legacy of political defiance inspired a clash between the most powerful Hasmonean king, Alexander Jannaeus (c. 127–76 B.C.E.), and the supreme court’s president, Shimon ben-Shetach, who forced the king to come personally to his court as a witness in a certain case and, like any other witness, testify while standing on his feet.

That tale’s historicity is unclear, but it echoes a civil war driven by a social movement whose activists—the Pharisees—wanted a weaker government. The same spirit fed another Jewish activist, Jesus of Nazareth, when he overturned the money changers’ tables in the same place where Jeremiah was once arrested for agitating against the king.



Considering this legacy of dissent, one might conclude that political defiance is an inherent Jewish value. It isn’t.

The monumental failures of the anti-Roman revolts inspired the political attitude that is the antithesis of activism: fatalism. The Jewish rebels' vow, as cited by the leader of Masada's defenders in Flavius Josephus's *The Jewish War VII* (8:6), "never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself" made way for the Talmud's sweeping ban on Jewish political rebellion as such, "that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured the Jews that they should not rebel against the rule of the nations of the world" (Ketubot 111a).

According to the Talmud, history's management was then handed over to God, who "adjured the nations of the world that they should not subjugate the Jews excessively." An activist's attempt to reshape history now constituted interference in God's work. The Jews would become a docile lot who silently accepted inequities far worse than segregated dorms.

This political passivity plagued some of Jewish history's greatest luminaries. The great exegete Rashi (1040–1105) lived in France while the Crusaders massacred thousands of Franco-German Jews, including some of his students. Even so, he did not respond in any political way. Instead, he filed a complaint to God, asking him in a poem, "How is it... that your wrath has not subsided?"

That is also what Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215–1293) did after he witnessed the public burning of the Talmud at the Place de Grève in Paris, near Notre Dame Cathedral. The smoke billowed only a short walking distance from where Danny the Red would later confront de Gaulle. But Rabbi Meir was no rebel. Other than pouring his heart out in a poem recited in synagogues to this day, he did nothing to affect the reality he decried.

Equally passive was Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), who, though he was Saladin's personal physician, made no political use of his access to government. Despite his close contact with the man who defeated the Crusaders, Maimonides never asked the sultan of Egypt and Syria to

sponsor some kind of Jewish restoration in the Jews' ancestral land.

The paradox of Jewish activism emerged most forcefully, and tragically, in the life of Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), a philosopher and exegete who served the Portuguese and Castilian crowns as a treasurer and so was intimately familiar with statecraft. As the leader of Iberian Jewry in 1492, Abravanel led the failed effort to cancel the Alhambra Decree expelling Jews. He then joined the deportees, ultimately landing in Venice with his political instincts intact: He understood that the discovery of the maritime route to India, and its diversion of Europe's spice trade from the Mediterranean to the oceans, was a strategic threat to Venice.

Abravanel wrote a blueprint for a commercial arrangement between Venice and Portugal and handed it to the Venetian government, which adopted the proposal. Abravanel was involved in the talks and therefore a mediator between the world's two leading naval powers as they shaped the future of global commerce, a remarkable fact noted in Benzion Netanyahu's *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher*.

Abravanel, in other words, understood the international system thoroughly and was eager to shape it even while outside the system. In this, he was an activist. However, when it came to his own people's situation, even after experiencing Jewish powerlessness in the most personal and traumatizing way, he was a fatalist.

That is why the theological trilogy in which Abravanel responded to the Spanish Expulsion (begun with *The Wellsprings of Salvation*, 1496) offered nothing like the political plan he devised for Venice. Instead, it offered a discourse on mysticism, numerology, and eschatology arguing that the Spanish Expulsion was part of a divine plan that would culminate in the Jews' final redemption by the year 1531. Political action was not part of this encouraging, but ultimately failed, prediction.



What, then, is activism to the Jews?

It certainly isn't part of Jewish DNA, as Rashi, Maimonides, and the rest of the Jews who were politically submissive for some 17 centuries attest. Is it, then, Jewish culture? No. Danny the Red, Abbie Hoffman, Jacobo Timerman, Leo Szilard, and the rest of recent history's many Jewish activists usually had limited commitment to Jewish heritage and, in many cases, no acquaintance with its texts.

If not biological or cultural, did Jewish activism reflect a social condition? Considering the traumas of discrimination many Jewish activists absorbed at home, including Danny the Red, whose parents had fled Nazi Germany, it's safe to say yes.

Before the violent trauma of the Holocaust, there was the social trauma of emancipation's failure. The persistence of antisemitism in 19th-century Europe, despite the removal of anti-Jewish laws, is what prompted thousands of frustrated Jews to abandon their medieval ancestors' political passivity and emulate their biblical forebears' activism: some by embracing social radicalism, some by seeking national liberation.

Jewish social radicalism flourished in both Western and Eastern Europe. In the West, its protagonists' impact on history proved limited. In Eastern Europe, Jewish radicalism became a tragedy, often ending in its protagonists' merciless and murderous demise.

This cannot be said of the Jewish activists who turned to national liberation. Zionism, the effort to restore Jewish nationhood in the Jews' ancestral land, was a remarkable, unlikely, and rare feat of political activism, and so was its crowning cultural achievement—the Hebrew renaissance.

The language that is spoken today by more than 10 million people, but which 120 years ago was spoken by almost no one, was revived

not by the work of any power's decree from above, but by thousands of activists who labored from below.

What began in the 19th century with poets such as Y.L. Gordon, novelists such as Abraham Mapu, and linguists such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was fanned in the 20th century by activists who opened hundreds of Hebrew kindergartens, elementary schools, and high schools, first in Ottoman Palestine and then abroad. By the 1930s, Hebraist activists dotted Europe with 498 schools that taught the entire curriculum in Hebrew, 34 in Latvia alone. The revival of the ancient language is as wild an activist achievement as could have been fathomed even by Moses when he said, “Let my people go.”



“Let my people go.” It is a telling phrase, the spirit of which animates the story Jews tell every Passover in the Haggadah (literally the Hebrew word for *telling*). It is a phrase that launched two great Jewish exoduses, first from Egypt and more recently from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia. First, it was said by Moses on behalf of the enslaved. Later, as Gal Beckerman recorded in *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone*, it was said by “housewives and students” — as a KGB officer put it scornfully — and politicians and community leaders at countless rallies, vigils, sit-ins, and picket lines in multiple cities in six continents on behalf of their imprisoned brethren behind the Iron Curtain, which it ultimately brought down.

The phrase itself encapsulates, and tells us, what activism is to the Jews.

The activism of Moses and ancient Israel is the story Judaism has been telling about itself for the last 120 generations. It is the story Jews tell one another and that parents tell their children, every spring. Jewish activism is not a gene or a meme. It is not an inherited trait, but an inherited language and practice. Like any practice, it exists only by being practiced.

That is how ancient Israel's legacy of political activism and the biblical celebration of liberty were revived by modern Jews. It is a revival worth celebrating, the springtime of Jewish history. *

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