

Tikkun

POLITICS + SPIRITUALITY + CULTURE

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

FALL 2014

EMBRACING
GOD'S
QUEERNESS

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Disability Justice and Spirituality



Dispatch from the Freedom Bus in Palestine | Illness and Innocence
Torah Study on Death Row | Confronting the Corporate Expediter
The Poetry of C. K. Williams | Spiritual Progressive Faith Formation

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DON'T GIVE UP HOPE

Chanukah and Christmas both celebrate the return of hope and light at the very moment when the days are shortest and the darkness most overpowering.

For many progressives, broken promises from Democratic Party politicians have given hope a bad name. Many of us feel disillusioned by how President Obama's "change you can believe in" transformed into six years of capitulation to the agenda of the super rich and their corporations, with only minor side steps to help those who suffer most from the capitalist order. We're disheartened by the Wall Street bailout, which saved big banks from a financial crisis they created while leaving millions of Americans unemployed and homeless. We're frustrated that the Affordable Care Act forces people to buy coverage from private health insurance companies but fails to impose serious constraints on how much these companies can charge. We're outraged by U.S. drone attacks against innocent civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan and by U.S. threats to wage war against Iran over its attempt to develop nuclear weapons that the United States and its allies have. We're disheartened by recent trade agreements that enable global corporations to evade social and environmental constraints domestically. And we're horrified that the Obama administration has deported more immigrants than all previous administrations combined. No wonder so many Americans don't bother to vote at all, expressing cynicism about visionary ideas.

These problems are real, but there is still reason to hope. We urge you to let the spirit of Chanukah and Christmas remind you of the fact that most people on this planet yearn for something totally different. Let these holidays speak to you so that you can reconnect to your most hopeful part—and then join with us at *Tikkun*, become part of our campaign for the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (ESRA), our push for a Global Marshall Plan, our call for an openhearted transformation of consciousness in Israel and Palestine, and our creation of professional task forces to envision what a world based on a new bottom line of love and generosity would actually look like. Don't let the light go out—in you or others. Keep the faith and let the spirit of hope return, whether in the form of a holy baby in a manger in Bethlehem, a struggle by the Maccabean guerrilla army against the mightiest colonial power of its time, or whatever other spiritual figures you draw upon to keep hope alive.

And help us keep *Tikkun* alive by joining the Network of Spiritual Progressives at spiritualprogressives.org and buying gift subscriptions to *Tikkun* for friends, co-workers, and people in your civic, religious, and political communities!

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

Visit tikkun.org/disability to read the powerful web exclusives associated with this issue, including contributions from Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black, Shelly Christensen, William C. Gaventa, Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Kevin Kling, Michael Northen, Jillian Weise, and more.

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A NOTE ON LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

THE “PEACE PROCESS”: DOWN AND OUT?

The Palestinian Authority reached out to Hamas to form a unity government. This apparently so upset Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel that he canceled the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians. There will be no peace between Israel and Palestine and no hope for an independent Palestinian state under Benjamin Netanyahu. There will only be hope if Netanyahu is defeated in a future election by Tzipi Livni.

—Robert May, *Portland, OR*

MICHAEL LERNER RESPONDS:

Nor will there be peace under Tzipi Livni or any other probable candidate for prime minister until there is a change of heart in both peoples such that they understand the narrative of the other and have compassion for those whom they've come to see as unrelenting enemies. Though Israel was outrageous and arrogant in refusing to fulfill the terms that created the rounds of talks that ended in May (freeing Palestinian prisoners), the Palestinians made a crucial error by refusing to embrace an idea thrown out by Kerry and momentarily embraced by Netanyahu—the suggestion that settlers could stay in the West Bank but as citizens of a Palestinian state (presumably living under Palestinian laws and giving up their Israeli citizenship). This proposal could only work if Israel also apologized for its part in the 1948 Nakba and agreed to bring back 20,000 Palestinians per year for the next thirty years and provide them with decent housing and jobs. I've written on this idea at more length in *Embracing Israel/Palestine*, where I analyzed the psycho-spiritual post-traumatic stress disorder that afflicts both sides, and in my editorial in *Tikkun's* Winter 2014 issue, where I

defined the only terms that would produce a sustainable agreement that could satisfy the basic needs of both sides.

It's a waste of time to revive those talks. What would work better is for Obama himself to take on the task of laying out the proposal I outlined above in detail to the Israeli people and Palestinian people over the heads of their leadership. After the midterm elections, it is conceivable he could do this because he will never have to run for office again. Obama could simultaneously seek to build a constituency for this proposal among the American people, undeterred by AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, and all other unresponsive bodies. He'd meet with much resistance from the diehards on both sides, but if he had the backbone to try to sell this plan to the American, Israeli, and Palestinian publics, he'd do more for peace than would any agreement that he could impose on the leaders of those countries. (Imposed agreements always risk being defeated in practice, as the Oslo Accord was after having been signed with great hoopla at the White House in 1993.) That path might make it easier for a future president to push Israel toward a reasonable peace position and give strength to the openhearted people on all sides of this struggle who realize that only a generous and just peace can possibly be sustainable. All the rest is commentary.

LITURGY GONE TOO WILD?

I find it hard to understand how someone can find anything to do with Jesus in a couple of naked male dancers at an Easter celebration in church (I'm referring to “When Liturgy Goes Wild, Worship Happens” by Donna Schaper in the Winter 2014 issue). Yes, Christianity is about freedom, but not freedom to do

whatever you want, no matter how ridiculous. It is about freedom from the guilt and eternal penalty of sin, as well as the bondage to sin.

The article goes on to distort the clear meaning of scripture mercilessly by mentioning that about 20 percent of the questions Jesus asked involved clothing and nakedness, citing, as one example, Jesus's question, “Why do you worry so much about what you will wear?” Obviously the question, from Matthew chapter 6, is in the context that your heavenly Father will take care of clothing you, as the subsequent verses attest. They have nothing to do with nudity. And Christ being stripped of his clothing prior to the crucifixion was not meant to be an endorsement of nudity in worship or other contexts.

None of the other questions Christ posed involving nakedness could, by any stretch of the imagination, be taken as some kind of an endorsement of artistic nudity, recreational nudity, or what have you. If you want to make a Christian argument for such things in some contexts, you may do so, but not by distorting the clear meaning of scripture, or, for that matter, of Christianity.

—Dan Hochberg, *Seattle, WA*

DONNA SCHAPER RESPONDS:

In response to Dan Hochberg's letter regarding my article, I want to simply observe two things. One is that nudity seems to bother him a lot. I was writing about something larger than nudity. By making nudity apparent and visible, the vulnerability of nakedness can be more richly observed. I am so sorry to have offended his righteous sensibilities. I would hope for a dialogue in which Jesus's urgency for us to clothe the naked and to worry less about fashion and what we wear would open the doors on understandings of human vulnerabilities. I do want to know why we so often picture Jesus

MORE LETTERS

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as naked on the cross. My direction was vulnerability in letting liturgy go wild. I am sorry that Dan Hochberg doesn't want to go there but prefers the irate self-protection of the so-called "appropriate," which is such a good costume to wear when vulnerability threatens. Secondly, I spend most of my life battling the religion of rules with the religion of compassion. I think the "rules people" spend a lot of time beating themselves and others with a stick. I write to make room for compassion in the ocean of rules that people use and abuse to confuse religion with self-righteousness. Finally, next time I write about liturgy, I hope I'll find a way to get to the "clear meaning of Christianity." Dan Hochberg thinks he has it; I do not. Instead I like to evoke and invoke in worship, even sometimes to provoke so that people who think they have the "clear" meaning of Christianity will be more creatively confused. ■



**Have you read
*Embracing Israel/
Palestine?***

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Tikkun magazine is . . .

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

What Do You Mean by "Spiritual"?

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

What's a Spiritual Progressive?

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

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

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

Tikkun

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PUBLISHER Duke University Press

905 W. Main St., Suite 18B, Durham, NC 27701

Visit Duke University Press Journals at dukeupress.edu/journals.

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

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Tikkun (Vol. 29, No. 4, ISSN 0887-9982) is published quarterly by Duke University Press for the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, 2342 Shattuck Ave., #1200, Berkeley, CA 94704, a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. © 2014 *Tikkun* magazine. All Rights Reserved. *Tikkun*® is a registered trademark of the Institute for Labor and Mental Health. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Tikkun*, 2342 Shattuck Ave., #1200, Berkeley, CA 94704. Periodical postage paid at Berkeley, CA, and additional mailing offices. For individual subscriptions, visit tikkun.org/subscribe. For institutional subscriptions, visit dukeupress.edu/tikkun.

Individual subscription prices for 4 issues:

US residents, \$29.00; all others, \$39.00. Institutional subscription prices: print plus electronic, \$123.00; electronic only, \$96.00; print only, \$114.00. Payment in US dollars required. For information on subscriptions to the e-Duke Journals Scholarly Collections, contact libraryrelations@dukeupress.edu. For a list of the sources in which *Tikkun* is indexed, see dukeupress.edu/tikkun.

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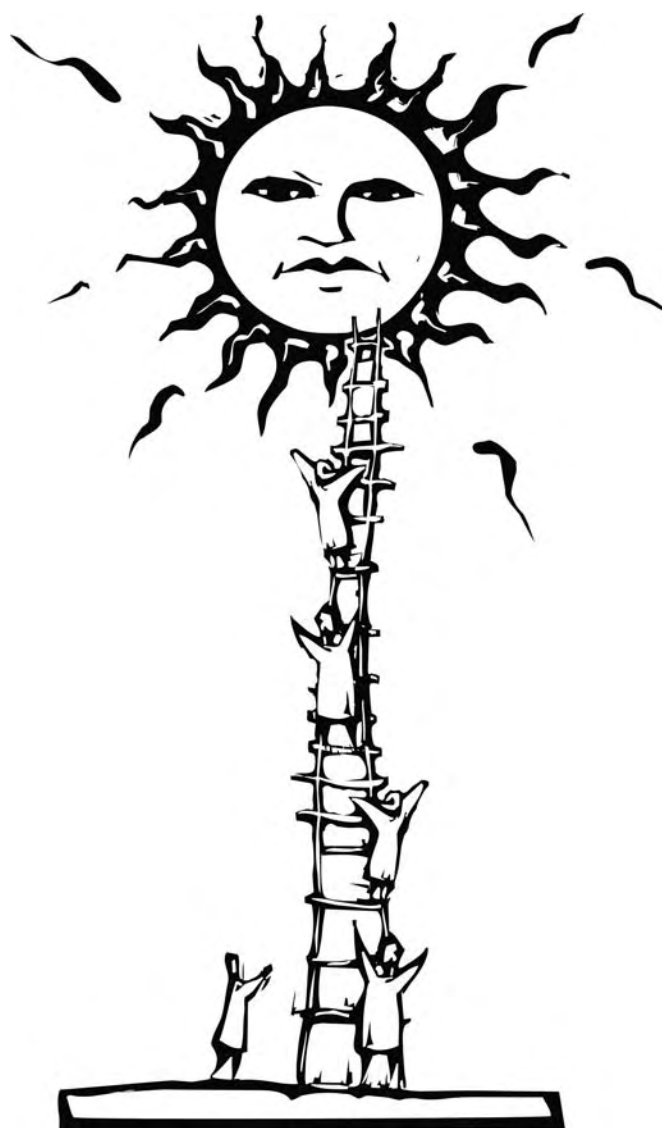
The Big Picture— a Movie I'd Love to Make

I'D START *The Big Picture* with a frame showing the earth: from every spot on it zillions of people reach their hands toward what they imagine heaven to be and shout to the God they believe in: "Please God, please universe, give us a world in which love, kindness, generosity, caring for each other, and caring for the earth have replaced violence, wars, economic and social injustice, and environmental destructiveness."

After that prayer, someone says, "What has God done for me lately? To hell with God. Why should I believe in a God that doesn't deliver for me?" And suddenly the zillions of people fall silent, withdrawing into their own private isolation, despairing that their prayers and actions could ever make a difference. The film thus opens into the planet-destroying phase of human history in which people actually know that they are collectively destroying the life-support system of the earth but feel there's no point in doing anything but maximizing their own advantage because they cannot believe that others will ever act from anything more than selfish motives. How did we get here?

To answer that question, I'd switch back to the history of the universe, showing the evolution of creatures right up to the point of the emergence of humanity. The frames now flash in fairly rapid succession but not so rapid as to prevent viewers from seeing the evolution of plants and animals right up to humans climbing down from trees. Next we see hunter-gatherers forming groups and living in relative harmony with the earth, the development of agriculture, the development of patriarchy, and the development of class oppression. In scenes from the ancient empires of Babylonia, Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome, we see these empires giving rise to religions that both celebrate the universe and also attempt to protest against class domination, patriarchy, and oppression. These protests, however, also reveal themselves to be compromises with existing systems and sometimes capitulations to the powerful.

Next I'd zoom ahead through the collapse of the ancient systems and the emergence of feudalism in China, India, Africa, and Europe—right up to the American and French



revolutions. And then I'd show how quickly things have moved from that moment to this. This part moves quickly because, in fact, in the grand scheme of things, this recent history is very brief. We are only a few heartbeats away from the rise of ancient civilizations, and this is part of what *The Big Picture* is about.

Perhaps next I'd show a discussion between an ancient Israelite and a Roman conqueror about the difference between the ideology of the conqueror and those who have been conquered. Then the film cuts to a more modern version of that same argument replayed between members of the feudal order and the emerging capitalist class. It replays again between representatives of the newly powerful capitalist class and the working class. And it replays yet again between

tech billionaires and some of the factory workers who put together computer systems. In each of these conversations, the voice of skepticism and cynicism reemerges, and we hear the frustration of people who want real change and yet are not heard. Then the film moves on to show the revolutions that dismantled segregation, apartheid, and sexist social structures—and it exposes the incredible amnesia, fostered by mainstream misrepresentations of all those transformations, that leads people who personally witnessed amazing changes to nevertheless conclude that nothing much can be changed.

The Current Deficit of Hope

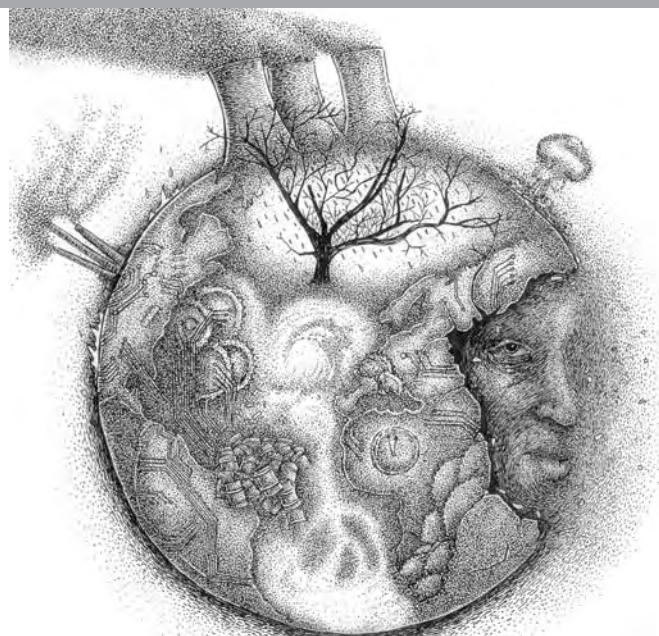
Next I'd dwell on the condition of people in our current consumer-oriented society, depicting how we are surrounded by people who have within them the contradiction of aspiring to a world of peace and social justice while at the same time failing to believe in the possibility of dramatic change.

I'd show people sitting at a local coffeehouse, talking with each other about recycling or the importance of growing their own food. Next they discuss whether or not to give money to a homeless person, or whether to vote for a Democrat or some alternative political party. There's one thing they mostly agree on: they all doubt that much can be done before the worst consequences of global environmental irresponsibility cause chaos, though they have no idea what that would mean concretely and no intention of trying to stop it ("It's too big," they tell each other). They feel powerless and hence want to carve out places where they have a sense they can make some difference.

The camera then flashes to a picture where a woman in the global south is working two jobs to subsist and is struggling to keep her daughters from the sex trade. Her employer, an American corporation, is selling her products at Walmart at bargain prices made possible by her below-poverty wages.

Now the camera switches back to those same Americans who want to do something good in their own lives: two of them get up from the table because they've heard there is "a great sale" at the local Walmart. The camera follows them into that store, where they discuss social change with occasional interjections of, "Wow, this is such a great price," as they look at sale items. They talk about the fact that the store has not allowed unions but they are skeptical that unions can do anything anyway. They are happy about the cheap prices while remaining oblivious about who suffers in order to make those prices possible.

Next we see people voting for candidates from each party who say the whole system is working. Obama visits a Walmart store in May 2014 to commend them for having installed solar panels while ignoring that Walmart workers are underpaid, lack fundamental benefits, and are prevented from unionizing. And to bring the point home, we see Obama sitting in the White House situation room deciding which people our drones should kill without trial. And in the futile hope that making a



Will our story end with a billowing cloud of pollution and nuclear waste or with a new age of peace and ecological sanity? The choice lies in our hands.

concession will win enough Republican votes to pass an immigration bill yielding full citizenship for undocumented people who are already living in the United States, he approves more raids on undocumented workers, continuing a policy that has already led his administration to deport more undocumented immigrants than all previous presidents combined.

The camera then turns to scenes showing how the whole system is contributing to the environmental destruction of the life support system of the planet. These shots show how we are all implicated in this calamity by our consumption of the latest electronic gadgets and autos, and how our drive to consume is fostered by an economy that depends on endless growth and selling to distract people from their sense of loneliness and separation. A group of people hear the idea of an economy based on producing only what is needed and start to allow themselves to imagine a world in which the economy is set up to satisfy basic human needs rather than to maximize corporate profit.

The camera then cuts to a scene in which well-meaning media producers reject the idea of creating a show that would publicize these ideas, expressing their own certainty that nobody really wants to hear about this kind of dramatic change, even as they personally assure each other that they would like to live in that different kind of world.

Next I'd show *Tikkun* readers, members of the Network of Spiritual Progressives (NSP), and other likeminded people trying again and again to get ideas like the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment (tikkun.org/ESRA) or the Global Marshall Plan (tikkun.org/GMP) before the public eye and being rebuffed by media gatekeepers. At first the mass of people bemoan the media and their politicians for not being visionary enough but simultaneously dismiss comprehensive visions of social and economic transformation

because they doubt such visions will ever garner enough support. But then, as time ticks on to the second decade of the twenty-first century, ordinary people learn about the impending environmental collapse and begin to embrace a utopian visionary approach and insist upon it, fight for it, and ultimately win. The demand for a new bottom line of love and generosity catches on as unexpectedly as “make love, not war” caught on in the 1960s.

How Will the Movie End? It’s Your Choice

Whether the movie will end with a successful movement is in your hands. To create the world we want, we need your involvement and help. To be successful, all of us need to begin to embrace a utopian, visionary approach and insist upon it, promote it, and not give up until we ultimately win. This, dear readers, is where *you* come in!

There are thousands of local projects, each motivated by the same desire to create a new bottom line—a world of caring for each other and for the planet. However, most of them lack two critical ingredients. The first missing ingredient is an articulated vision of the world that they want (not just the world they don’t want) and the ability to persuade the people involved in their specific local project to simultaneously embrace such a positive vision and see themselves as part of a larger movement seeking a new bottom line. The second ingredient that local projects lack is a broadly shared strategy about how to connect each of their particular struggles to create the larger changes that are needed in society.

To create change that goes beyond more narrowly defined efforts such as divestment from fossil fuels or a carbon tax, we need a corps of consciousness raisers in each of these

movements, and in every workplace, profession, retirement home, school (at all grade levels), church, synagogue, mosque, ashram, civic organization, political party, social change movement, and beyond. This corps of people could be connected to each other through the Network of Spiritual Progressives and share an explicit agenda—to popularize the idea of a new bottom line.

The success of issue-specific local efforts will be greatly enhanced if they also engage in this kind of consciousness raising so that supporters begin to realize that what they really want is not just the stated outcome of the particular project they are working on, but also a world governed by a new bottom line of love, kindness, generosity, empathy, environmental justice and environmental repair, ethical and caring behavior, and a capacity to see nature around us not simply as a resource to be used but also as intrinsically valuable because it elicits from us awe, wonder, and radical amazement at the grandeur and mystery of all being. We need you to be articulators of this new bottom line and help people involved in these valuable struggles to understand that they are linked to all the other struggles to the extent that they are willing to articulate this new bottom line to their own participants and to the general public, even as they work on more specific struggles.

First Steps

How do you participate in building this movement?

1. Please go to spiritualprogressives.org and familiarize yourself with the Spiritual Covenant with America (tikkun.org/covenant), the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and the Global Marshall Plan. *(continued on page 71)*

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Chanukah and Christmas 2014

Keep Hope Alive

LONG BEFORE Judaism and Christianity entered the world, ancient peoples celebrated the waning of the sun as winter deepened by creating celebrations of light and ceremonies to encourage the sun to return. Jews and Christians took this spirit of hopefulness and applied it to social, economic, and political contexts.

Chanukah originated to celebrate the victory of a small group of people in Judea who rose up to overthrow the power of the Seleucid empire (one of the remnants of Alexander the Great's Greek empire).

Christmas originated to celebrate the vision of a small infant born in the most modest and powerless of circumstances—an infant who was to bring tidings of peace and the triumph of the powerless, who were suffering under the rule of the arrogant Roman empire that dominated Judea at that time.

Sadly for humanity, the revolutionary visions behind these two holidays did not translate into a lasting victory over suffering and domination: the Hasmonean dynasty that took root in Judea after the Maccabean victory over the Seleucids became yet another corrupt ruling force, and those who inherited the Christian message twisted it to justify Western imperialism, the oppression of Jews, and the burning alive of women deemed too powerful and outspoken (alleged “witches”).

All revolutionary visions—not just religious ones—are vulnerable to this sort of subversion and co-optation. Within the last century, secular communist, socialist, and democratic worldviews have similarly been twisted to advance secular totalitarian regimes and global capitalism, which have brought misery to billions of people worldwide, primarily in the Global South but also within “advanced industrial societies.” And America’s promise to take in the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (inscribed on the Statue of Liberty) has been broken and distorted from the beginning. The current push to send tens of thousands of child refugees back to countries where their lives are endangered is only the latest example of this country’s growing hostility to immigrants.

The truth is that any set of ideas rooted in any spiritual, religious, or secular culture can be twisted around to manifest ugliness and hurtfulness, in direct contradiction to the culture’s highest values.

The horrendous immorality of the Israeli assault on Gaza this past summer—the outgrowth of forty-seven years of

oppressive Occupation by the Israeli state—has led many Jews into feelings of despair. Listening to twisted arguments justifying the ongoing Occupation and the wanton killings of innocent Palestinians deepens this despair. How could a people whose Talmud taught that “a Jew lacking compassion is not really a Jew” have turned so far from our identification with the powerless that our synagogues and public institutions celebrate and justify Israeli power? How could we have forgotten that the celebration of Chanukah and Passover and the observance of every Shabbat are meant to re-enforce our identification with the downtrodden? Yes, we know that the horrors of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism have distorted Jewish consciousness. Yet we—the section of the Jewish people who still hold on to the liberation message of Torah and of the prophets—will continue to reclaim, renew, and transform the Jewish religion to create a light in the ethical darkness that has spread through our religious community.

Given our own pain about how some have co-opted Judaism for hateful purposes, we can understand the pain that so many Muslims feel when they witness their religion turned away from its most liberatory and loving instincts and used to justify the violence of ISIS, al-Qaida, and Hamas, as well as the pain that Christians feel when Christianity is identified with reactionary politics. Our task as spiritual progressives is to reclaim the loving and emancipatory messages of our traditions, still shining through in the core of Chanukah and Christmas, even when the dominant society co-opts both holidays for its consumerist and self-congratulatory messages. We insist on keeping hope alive! ■

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Angry Jews on the Freedom Bus

BY MARK LEVINE

WE HAVE TO CHANGE the way we talk about and relate to the State of Israel. And we have to do it now.” So declared one of the almost dozen Jewish participants in the most recent Freedom Bus ride through Palestine.

I recently traveled the length and breadth of the West Bank on the annual Freedom Bus trip sponsored by the Jenin Freedom Theatre, a cultural center and theater based in the Jenin refugee camp. Despite having spent more than two decades living in, working on, and writing about Palestine/Israel, I was struck by the intensity of traveling through frontline communities in the unending struggle over land in the West Bank. Reading a *Haaretz* headline declaring that “Israel authorizes record amount of West Bank land for settlement construction” is one thing; experiencing the realities of constant settlement expansion from the perspective of the residents whose lives are most directly and deleteriously impacted by it, is quite another.

Israeli policies in the West Bank range from broad-brush prohibitions on Palestinians building schools, accessing agricultural land, and hooking up to electricity and water systems, to the demolition of homes and the imposition of rules limiting Palestinian wells to one-tenth the depth of settlers’ wells, to forcing children to walk to school through settlement-controlled territory where they face attacks and preventing the sick from accessing medical care. On the Freedom Bus, passengers who may only have read about these realities are forced to confront them face-to-face.

Art at the Edge

If the Freedom Bus served only to highlight the brutality of the Occupation, it would be hard to remain aboard for more than a few days. What makes the time on the bus as inspiring as it is engaging is the centrality of art to the tours and the communal resistance and solidarity it aims to strengthen. As Freedom Bus cofounder Ben Rivers explained during a Playback Theatre workshop he directed, “The inclusion of theater, music, and song connects us to the creative forces that sustain a people and their struggles.”

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Ben Rivers



Performing in the Jordan Valley community of Al Hadidiya, actors from the Freedom Bus troupe dramatize real-life stories about how Israel’s water policies are affecting individual Palestinians.

Abu Naji, one of the most renowned *zajal* poets in Palestine, sings during a Freedom Bus event in the Palestinian village of Khirbit Samra.



More than merely placing the issue of Palestine “within its context as a human tragedy,” as novelist Elias Khoury put it, regular visits to Palestine by activists foster long-term relationships, a shared commitment to popular struggle, and the possibility to educate a wide swath of the community. This goes for Palestinians, who “need to know what’s happening in other parts of Palestine,” as well as for Israeli and international activists.

The many unique stories shared through various forms of theater and other artistic productions during the ride offer powerful counternarratives to the minutiae of the Occupation. And the inclusion of increasing numbers of Israeli and international activists is laying the groundwork for the kinds of broader identities that will be at the core of any post-Oslo solution to the conflict. If the cultural creation-as-resistance experienced on the Freedom Bus encourages a mental jail break from the multiple layers of the Occupation for Palestinians, it can have an equally profound impact on the Jewish participants on the bus.

Jewish Participation in the Solidarity Movement

The internal debate within the American Jewish community about the Occupation is becoming increasingly heated. As *Al Jazeera* senior political commentator Marwan Bishara points out, American Jews rank as both the biggest opponents and the biggest supporters of Palestinian rights in the United States. Their increasingly rancorous debates and quite natural need to critique the Occupation in Jewish terms—not just from Jewish ethical references but with reference to its effects on Jews—can inappropriately dominate the broader discourse within the Palestine solidarity movement, which needs to be focused on Palestinian desires, needs, and concerns, not those of any other group, however supportive they may be.

Though the Jewish presence in the solidarity movement and vocal support for Palestinians can create problematic dynamics, Jewish support nevertheless remains crucial for spreading the broader movement. This is in part because Jewish critics’ position as Jews offering serious criticism of Israel, and even of the validity of Zionism itself, creates space for non-Jewish Americans to adopt more critical positions. The prominence of figures like Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein in the anti-Occupation and anti-Zionist movements is a good example of how the movement (*continued on page 55*)

Ben Rivers

Illness and Innocence

BY RAYMOND BARGLOW

YOU HAVE THE FLU? How did you get it?" The simple medical answer is, "I was attacked by a flu virus." Ah yes, but what did you do that gave the virus the opportunity to attack you? There is always a way to wring at least a little blame and guilt out of an illness. Perhaps you haven't been eating well, taking the right vitamin supplements, keeping your stress level down, or simply avoiding others who have the flu.

It's easy to extend the list of possible missteps in a spiritual direction: You're sick? You must have done something to separate yourself from God, spirit, good karma, or the life-sustaining force of the universe and now you're paying the price. The link between misconduct and medical consequence is built into the very language we speak; words such as "blind" and "sick" not only describe a physical condition but also point metaphorically to wrong behavior. The word "ill" derives from the Middle English "ille," meaning evil or wicked.

The association between illness and punishment exists in multiple languages and is deeply embedded in many of the world's cultural and religious traditions. Judaism and Christianity, for example, commend kindness to those who suffer, but such sympathy is often compounded with disapproval. The Torah, for example, links piety to health and links impiety to suffering and death, claiming, "If you do not obey the Lord, your God . . . the Lord will strike you with consumption, fever, illnesses with burning fevers" (Deuteronomy 28:22). Jesus, following the healing he performed at Bethesda, remarks, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you" (John 5:14).

The Qur'an similarly asserts that human beings are responsible for their own misfortune: "Whatever of good befalls you, it is from Allah; and whatever of ill befalls you, it is from yourself" (Qur'an, *Surah an-Nisa'* verse 79). Some forms of Buddhism attribute sickness and suffering to unrighteous behavior in a past life or in this one. According to Tibetan lama Sogyal Rinpoche, for example, "Whatever is happening to us now mirrors our past karma."

A Non-Dualist Approach to Illness

None of these faith traditions attributes *all* illness to wrong thoughts or actions; the illness and poverty visited upon Job, for instance, are not caused by anything he has done, and God admonishes Job's friends for assuming that somehow he must be to blame for his own suffering. And, while it's easy to find religious texts that attribute illness to sinfulness and portray God as a punitive figure, there exists in these scriptures as well

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Illustrating the biblical quote, "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch," Sebastian Vrancx's *The Blind Leading the Blind* invokes a link between blindness and sin, portraying men with cataracts and corneal leukemia who do not notice the church behind them.



Seventeenth-century humanists such as Spinoza and Milton called into question the age-old link between illness and wrongdoing. In this seventeenth-century etching, the *Hundred Guilder Print*, Rembrandt represents those who seek to be healed as burdened but not wicked.

a counter-tradition that associates illness not with divine retribution, but with the inherent vulnerability of being human. The Book of Isaiah, for example, suggests that our lives are fragile as blades of grass and that illness should be met with compassion and all the support we can give.

This counter-tradition provides a foundation for a nondualist, integrative approach to health and healing that views the body in its wholeness and interconnection with all life. The human body is at once astonishingly resourceful and inherently vulnerable—and it is never “fallen,” alien, shameful, or mechanical. Perceiving human beings as embedded in nature, not as masters over it, unhinges the traditional Cartesian binaries of mind and body, self and other, health and sickness, and reward and punishment. Mediation of these opposites becomes

possible within a seamless reality that at once enables and constrains the scope of our actions.

Buddhism approaches health and healing in this way, recognizing that aging and illness, like birth and growth, are integral to the human condition. Our bodies are subject to laws (*niyama* in Pali) of physical and biological determination that interact with, but are relatively independent of, human purpose, will, and action (karma). Illness, then, is not blameworthy any more than health is praiseworthy. Like the proverbial eddies in a river and passing clouds in the sky, we arise, reside in the world for a brief time, and then vanish. Yet we can make the most of that brief time and cherish this wonderful thing called life!

Illness as Personal Failure

People who are moderately healthy are apt to assume that in the normal course of their lives and, despite missteps here and there, they are doing their part, and life will continue to meet them halfway. When serious illness strikes, however, and this illusion collapses, our ability to respond in a thoughtful way may get trampled on by the way we feel inside, and we may imagine that somehow life or destiny has condemned us and cast us aside.

Replacing the traditional dualism of spirit and flesh with a more unified view does not always lead to more charity and forgiveness but can actually intensify negative self-judgment and guilt. For if body and mind are one, then does not a “fault” in the body signify a fault in the mind as well? Thus we arrive at a view not so far removed from the punitive ideas of the past: something is profoundly wrong with those who fall ill; removed from grace, they fall and fail.

The view of illness as punishment is reinforced within a culture that regards health and happiness as the inevitable outcomes of an optimistic frame of mind. Faith is packaged as a promise to overcome human limitation altogether and becomes, as it were, a magic carpet that sails over the human condition and conveys the believer to a land of boundless wealth and health. “We are Creators of the Universe,” proclaims life coach Kate Corbin. “Quantum physics takes a spiritual perspective in which there are no separate parts, in which everything is fluid and always changing. . . . As we focus our thoughts on what we want to attract, we can literally call into existence whatever we desire.”

Such spiritual counsel is commercially successful, but how well does it work? Author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich points out that the United States, homeland of the prosperity and happiness gospel, accounts for two-thirds of the global consumption of antidepressants and is ranked twenty-third among nations in self-reported happiness. “How can we be so surpassingly *(continued on page 57)*

Creative Commons/Rembrandt

Confronting the Corporate Expediter

Building the Religious Counterculture

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS

SO I'M AT A dinner party chatting with the guy sitting next to me, and he asks me what I do for a living. I tell him all about ministry, and then I ask him what he does for a living.

"I'm an expediter," he says.

"An expediter," I say, "I've always been curious about this. What exactly *is* an expediter?"

"I help companies do their business. I mostly handle violations."

"What do you mean violations?"

"Well," he explains, "I hate waiting in line. So I usually don't get permits for stuff. My client just does their thing and if they get a violation for it, I'll try to buy them more time or get it waived or whatever they need."

"So," I say, "It's easier to beg forgiveness than to ask permission?"

"It's best to not get caught," he says with a wink.

"Do you enjoy your job?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's pretty good," he says. "I get to do all kinds of violations—environmental, health, a broken elevator, what have you."

"Huh."

I was appalled! I had always assumed that expediters actually make things more efficient and solve problems, not enable companies to avoid fixing broken elevators. I wanted to say to him, "So in other words, for a living you help broken things stay broken." But I said nothing.

I think I was stunned into silence because he was so matter-of-fact, so unashamed about the whole thing. It was just what he does for a living. No different, in principle, from what I do for a living. Value neutral. This is business in our culture. It's just playing the game. You hire this guy to grease the wheels and un snag you from any snags your business encounters, whatever they may be. No matter that the polar ice caps are melting as I write this or that people are dying because of all the carcinogens in our environment. Keep the flow of goods and services moving expeditiously no matter what. If regulations are getting in your way, this guy can help you get around them. And he'll do it cheerfully.

Unapologetic Amorality

There seems to be a shift in the public discourse recently: not only do people feel free to act solely in their own material self-interest, but they also don't feel the need to pretend

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When did it become socially acceptable to flaunt one's role in environmental destruction and social harm? *The Expediter* by Olivia Wise.

With so many politicians pledging allegiance to corporate expediency, morality is falling by the wayside. We need a religious counterculture to stand for justice. Illustration by Jim Meehan.



that they're doing otherwise. They don't try to hide it; they don't try to justify it by appealing to any larger values. It has become socially acceptable to broadcast one's indifference to the social and environmental implications of one's work. Clearly there are exceptions: companies try to "greenwash" their images and some even genuinely try to make better choices. But it's shocking how often public figures still feel no need to advance any kind of ethical or spiritual justification for their actions.

It would have been funny, for example, if it weren't so sad, how the politics played out back in February when conservative organizations in Arizona tried to pass a so-called religious freedom bill. The new legislation would have explicitly allowed businesses to discriminate against customers on the basis of an undefined "sincerely held religious belief." The bill followed a New Mexico court case between a gay couple and a wedding photography company that wanted to deny them service, so it's clear which customers and which "sincerely held religious beliefs" the bill's authors had in mind.

The bill passed the state senate. It was then up to the governor to either sign it into law or veto it. But then something changed. The business community flew into a panic. In the words of the Borowitz Report, the bill's proponents were forced to confront "the awkward realization that gay people have money and buy stuff." This bill was going to be bad for business. Suddenly the concern about "religious freedom" evaporated and everyone was backpedaling, including some of the original proponents of the bill, and begging the governor to veto it, which she did.

No one even pretended that the change of heart was about anything other than money. John McCain explained, "It's not an accident that our Arizona Chamber of Commerce and our business leaders came out with a very strong message yesterday that they don't want the governor to sign this. This is going to hurt the state of Arizona's economy and, frankly, our image." The National Football League, having scheduled next year's Super Bowl for Arizona, opposed the bill on similar grounds.

Granted, John McCain and the NFL are not generally known as paragons of progressive values, but it's still remarkable that their public rationale for opposing the bill was that it's bad for business, not that it's discriminatory and unethical. And on the other side of the issue, where did all the "religious freedom" people go? Where were all the diehards insisting that we protect the freedom to discriminate even if it costs us money? Where were all those people? Nobody in power on either side was ultimately arguing on the basis of principles. The issue was decided on the basis of financial expediency, and everyone could agree on that.

We Are All Complicit

There are countless examples these days of this kind of shameless, amoral advancement of self-interest. Take the Koch brothers' pushing for a tax on renewable energy to make it more expensive and less competitive with oil and gas. They don't pretend that this is altruism; they don't have to. Take Republican efforts to restrict voting rights across the country, knowing the impact that such restrictions will have on poor and nonwhite voters. Republicans sometimes make a halfhearted claim that these measures will prevent voter fraud, but it's such a flimsy argument, they usually don't even bother—they don't have to.

They don't have to because we don't make them. We are all, myself included, complicit in creating a culture in which people like the Expediter, the Koch brothers, and political fearmongers can exist. We let them work with impunity and confess it shamelessly. We tacitly give their careers and their worldviews legitimacy through our silence: interpersonal silence (like mine at that dinner party), consumer silence when we continue to buy products from companies with destructive practices, and political silence when we continue to support lawmakers who answer slavishly to the financial bottom line. We don't want to be impolite, we don't want to be disliked, we don't want to be too inconvenienced, and we don't want to seem like freaks. There is *(continued on page 58)*

The Rabbi Who Visited Death Row

BY SONIA JACOBS

RABBI CHAIM RICHTER and I met on death row during my second year of isolation in a maximum-security women's prison in the Florida Everglades. I was the only woman on death row at the time.

Having been wrongfully convicted in the murder of two police officers, I remained under sentence of death for five years until 1981, when the Supreme Court of Florida changed my sentence from death to life imprisonment. After twelve more years of imprisonment, I won my federal habeas corpus and the federal district court overturned my case. Rabbi Richter visited, counseled, and befriended me throughout those long years. Our relationship continues today.

Five years after my release, the rabbi officiated at my friend's funeral. I rode with him to the reception afterward. What a strange feeling to be riding in a car with the very same rabbi who visited with me on death row.

"I remember when I first went to see you," he told me, as we drove along I-95, the wind blowing in our faces. "The prison chaplain asked me how I felt about the death penalty—would I have a problem visiting with a woman on death row? I accepted the assignment without hesitation."

A Welcome Visitor

Back when we first met, Rabbi Richter had already been visiting Broward Correctional Institution for about five months, since its opening in April 1977. The newly built facility was originally intended for men but ended up housing women instead. In those days, more and more women were finding themselves in the system and ultimately in prison. Visiting the prison was a part of his outreach program.

After accepting the assignment by the prison chaplain to visit a Jewish woman on death row, he told me he wondered: "How could I relate to someone on death row? What would her needs be?" He said he thought of Ethel Rosenberg and how she and her husband, Julius Rosenberg, were convicted of being spies during World War II and then executed. "Would this woman be executed too?" he asked himself. "What would one say to a person on death row? How long had she been in isolation? Would she be sane?"

I heard his footsteps long before they appeared at the door to my private death row. In fact, I could hear the elevator even though it was at the other end of the long hallway that ran the entire length of the building. My hearing had become extremely sharp in its hunger for stimulation. I went to the door to see who was coming. Could I be getting a



Every month at the prison, the author writes, Rabbi Richter would lead Shabbat, "lighting the candles, bringing the feelings, sights, and sounds of our heritage into the space that was, for the moment, a sanctuary." *Shabbat in Prison* by Olivia Wise.

SONIA JACOBS and her present husband, Peter Pringle, who was wrongly sentenced to death in Ireland, have established the Sunny Center, a sanctuary for wrongly convicted people worldwide. She campaigns against the death penalty and promotes healing and forgiveness through yoga and meditation. Visit sunnyandpeter.com to learn more.



“The prison administration wasn’t going to let me sit Shiva in the prescribed manner,” Jacobs writes. “Rabbi Richter was instrumental in my being able to go to my parents’ funeral.”

neighbor? The only neighbors I ever got were either suicide risks or violent. Suicide risks would mean fifteen-minute checks. I stood on my toes to see out of the small square of security glass in the otherwise solid steel door and my mind raced over the possibilities of who this could be.

“Hello, I’m Rabbi Chaim Richter,” he said. “Did you want to see me?”

“Rabbi, I would like to go to services with the others,” I replied. “Do you think you can arrange that?”

“I will ask the person in charge.”

Even though I was not yet allowed to participate, I knew that Rabbi Richter held regular monthly Shabbat services in a small, partitioned room to the left side of the prison’s chapel. There had been sixteen to eighteen women attending the makeshift services, a number that varied drastically through the years. The Bubbies, older Jewish women from

the area who donated their time to help the rabbi, would officiate over the latkes or the blintzes sizzling on the warmer set up on a side table. This *feastele* (meal), the Oneg Shabbat, offered a welcome change of fare at the conclusion of the service. The Bubbies would hand out and collect the song sheets and tell jokes (Jewish jokes, of course). The rabbi would sing and play his guitar—Lecha Dodi, the Shema—telling the stories and lighting the candles, bringing the feelings, sights, and sounds of our heritage into the space that was, for the moment, a sanctuary.

Sitting Shiva

The first day I met Rabbi Richter, I declared with great pride to him that I had my own prayer books and jumped up to get them from my cell. I looked forward to talking about the Bible from a Jewish perspective. I was kept in solitary confinement so it was hard enough to get a decent conversation. But a Jewish one, forget it! This was going to be a pleasure on many levels.

My parents were so relieved to know there was a rabbi who would come to see me regularly. It was one of my main concerns to be able to reassure my parents that I was OK. The rabbi talked to my family after that, fairly often. It made them feel so much more at ease about my situation.

Neither of us mentioned my sentence—Rabbi Richter treated me as any other shut-in congregant.

At the end of our time together, we prayed with hands joined, heads bowed in toward one another, and eyes closed. I knew when we prayed, and the rabbi placed his hand on my head for blessings, that Judaism was and would remain a pillar of strength and comfort for me. And I knew, once again, why I had chosen the path that I had. I felt such a strong energy in the room as we held hands and prayed together. I think we both felt an important connection had been made. So making the trip to death row after finishing services in the chapel became a regular part of his routine.

One of the roughest spots Rabbi Chaim Richter helped me through was the death of my parents in the TWA plane crash over Kenner, Louisiana, in 1982, one year after my release from death row into the prison population. Wind shear brought the plane down shortly after takeoff with a full load of fuel. No one survived. I saw it on the news. I couldn’t accept that my parents had been in that wreckage, but I knew they were. I had known something was wrong from earlier that morning when I awoke from a nightmare of flames shooting up into the sky. I tried to call my parents but they had already left for the airport. I was devastated. What would become of my children who had been living with my parents? And what would become of me? The prison staff let me call Rabbi Richter, and he explained to me the steps for sitting Shiva. (*continued on page 59*)

Both Wilderness and Promised Land

How Torah Grows When Read Through LGBTQ Eyes

BY JOY LADIN

B'REISHIT—in the beginning of the Torah, and the beginning of the world—there was God, a very queer God. Unlike other deities described in Iron Age texts, this God didn't have a form or face or identifiable role in the natural world. In other Iron Age creation stories, deities are action heroes, creating order out of chaos by slaying monsters, other deities, and occasionally their parents. In Genesis, God brings order out of chaos simply by speaking. No blood, no pantheon, no rivals, no triumphs to portray on temple walls, nothing to visualize or imagine. God says, "Be, light." And light is.

It may seem anachronistic or heretical to call the God we encounter in the Torah "queer." But when I call God queer, I'm in part drawing on an older understanding of the word, which has been used for centuries to refer to identities that don't fit established norms and categories. The Torah's God is disembodied, incomparable, and incomprehensible in human terms. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam developed theologies based on the God we encounter in the Torah, but by Iron Age standards, this God is utterly queer. Later Jewish traditions and texts normalize this queer God, imagining God as a king or emperor surrounded by an angelic court. But the God we encounter in the five books of Moses has no normalizing context, no divine hierarchy to define God's kingship, no divine family for God to patriarchally dominate, no consort, and no body. As a result, despite the masculine pronouns and verb forms assigned by the text, God has no gender, masculine or otherwise, because God has no way to demonstrate or perform a gender. Gender is a system; even the simplest form of that system, the gender binary, requires at least two of a kind, and God, as Jews affirm in the Shema prayer, is One.

And, as many of us know, being singular, living outside recognized human categories and relationships, makes one very queer indeed.

Recognizing God's Queerness

People often ask me how I reconcile being trans with being a religious (though non-Orthodox) Jew. Clearly, when Moses proclaims at the end of Deuteronomy that "God is our life and the length of our days," he doesn't have lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) lives in mind. But when I read Genesis as a child, I felt akin to

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God's declaration at the burning bush summons us to "follow God beyond human categories and explanations, queering ourselves in pursuit of the absolute queerness that is God," Ladin writes. *Burning Bush* by Jeanette Kuvin Oren.



“When queer Jews read Torah as our own, we help all Jews recognize and reclaim our heritage of radical queerness,” Ladin writes. This image, *Feygeleh*, by Micah Bazant, originally appeared in *Tikum: A Trans Jew Zine*.

the God it presents. Both of us were struggling to find a place in a human world without bodies, genders, or categories that would make us visible to others. We were both voices emanating from selves that couldn't be known or understood.

Like me, struggling with the inexplicable desires and sufferings created by the conflict between my male body and female gender identity, God has emotional responses that don't make sense in normative terms. Why does God prefer Abel's sacrifice over Cain's? Why does God decide simultaneously (so it seems) to “blot out” all life on earth and to spare Noah's family and pairs of each animal? Midrashic stories fill in missing motivations and backstories, generations of commentators offer moralizing glosses, but the Torah gives us no way of answering these questions, confronting us instead with a God whose responses and actions make little sense in human terms.

As God tells Moses at the burning bush, God *ehyeh asher ehyeh*: God is whatever God is. Again and again, the Torah summons us to seek God, to follow God beyond human categories and explanations, queering ourselves in pursuit of the absolute queerness that is God.

The queering effects of a relationship with God are evident from the moment God first speaks to Abraham (then named “Abram”). Without introduction or explanation, God orders the seventy-five-year-old to “Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.” In Hebrew, God's first words to Abraham—the words from which the Jewish people will grow—are *lech l'cha*, which can be understood as, “Go to yourself,” or, according to Hasidic tradition, “Go to the root of your being.” Abraham has spent seventy-five years living “in his father's house,” being his father's son. To respond to this queer, nameless God, who appears in none of the pantheons, rituals, myths, or histories Abraham would have known, Abraham has to queer himself—to estrange himself from his father, his heritage, his culture, and everything that has to this point defined him—and follow God toward a nameless place, “the land that I will show you,” that represents an incomprehensible future.

When we recognize God's queerness in the Torah and the queerness built into the foundation of Jewish history, we see that the very exile from conventional roles and categories that can make being queer so painful can also make being queer a profoundly spiritual path. To become who we are, each of us has had to follow God's first command to Abraham: we have had to go to our truest selves, even when that required us to “go forth” from our families and homes, leaving the heteronormative lives and assumptions we inherited, for the sake of futures we couldn't yet imagine.

When we recognize God's queerness in the Torah and the queerness built into the foundation of Jewish history, we see that the very exile from conventional roles and categories that can make being queer so painful can also make being queer a profoundly spiritual path. To become who we are, each of us has had to follow God's first command to Abraham: we have had to go to our truest selves, even when that required us to “go forth” from our families and homes, leaving the heteronormative lives and assumptions we inherited, for the sake of futures we couldn't yet imagine.

The Torah Is Ours

The Torah isn't an enemy stronghold we have to conquer, a house we have to break into, a fixer-upper we need to renovate, a tirade we have to shout over, a script we need to edit, or a nightmare from which we need to awaken. Whether or not Joseph's coat of many colors made him a cross-dresser, or Ruth's love for Naomi made her a lesbian, or Jonathan's love for David qualified him as gay, the Torah is about us, to us, and for us.

Thanks to the growing number of LGBTQ Jewish rabbis and lay leaders, there are more and more commentaries that read the Torah through what my Keshet colleague David Shneer has called “the bent lens” of LGBTQ perspectives (see *Torah Queeries*, the groundbreaking collection of queer readings of Torah he edited with Gregg Drinkwater and Joshua Lesser). But we don't need lenses, however fabulously bent, to see that the

Micah Bazant (micahbazant.com)



Whether or not Jonathan's love for David qualified him as gay, the Torah is "about us, to us, and for us," Ladin writes. *David and Jonathan* by Cima da Conegliano.

Torah speaks to our lives as queer Jews because, in the Torah, queerness is built into the foundations of Jewish history, identity, and theology. To paraphrase the Song of Songs, the Torah is ours, and we are the Torah's.

Over the past two thousand years of exile, dispersion, and persecution, mainstream Jewish readings of the Torah have understandably focused not on its queerness—its stories of people whose devotion to God leads them beyond communal norms and bounds—but on how the Torah commands and models unchanging laws and norms. Indeed, that shift begins in the Torah itself, as the family-fracturing wanderings of Genesis give way to the mass movement in Exodus whose goal is the founding of a nation in which social norms are transfigured into sacred law. God makes this goal explicit when giving Moses and Aaron instructions for the still-enslaved children of Israel to celebrate the very first Passover on the eve of the exodus from Egypt: "This day shall be to you one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time" (Exod. 12:14). The first Passover was a radical innovation, a first step toward transforming downtrodden slaves into a sacred community. But that innovation is presented in profoundly conservative terms as "an institution for all time."

Here, and throughout the rest of the Torah, the queerness of private revelation (God speaking directly to individuals) is presented as a means for articulating sacred norms for all Jews, "for all time." These sacred norms are intended to make holiness a normal part of daily life by making the normative holy.

The Establishment of Sacred Norms

Moses's conversations with God lead to wandering and wilderness, but Moses is leading the children of Israel toward a Promised Land that is within their grasp, a near future in which wandering will give way to settlement, and individual life-changing revelation will give way to priestly administration. There is no need or place for queerness in the sacred society Moses envisions, whose laws and norms would be so in tune with God's will that God would literally shower the land and people with blessings: rain at the right time,

“God has no way to demonstrate or perform a gender,” Ladin writes. “The gender binary requires at least two of a kind, and God, as Jews affirm in the Shema prayer, is One.” *Union of Opposites* by YoHana Bat Adam.



abundant harvest, plenty for everyone, and safety from enemies. The direct relationship between God’s blessings and Israel’s adherence to sacred social order would be so obvious that Israel would become “a light to the nations,” a model of a human–divine relationship that, like a viral Iron Age meme, would spread to and transform every nation.

That was the idea, anyway. Jewish history worked out rather differently; in terms of the Mosaic vision, it didn’t work out at all. There’s little evidence in the Torah’s historical accounts that Moses’s utopian vision ever had large-scale political buy-in. In fact, when the prophet Samuel presides over the transformation of Israelite society from the decentralized confederation of tribes into a monarchy in response to popular demand for “a king . . . to govern us like all other people,” God tells Samuel, “It is Me they have rejected as their king, like everything else they have done since I brought them out of Egypt” (I Samuel 5–7). Samuel anoints a king, but only after offering the first of what became a centuries-long series of scathing social critiques by biblical prophets.

But even as they dramatize Israel’s failure to establish Moses’s God-chartered nation, these critiques establish Moses’s vision of Judaism as a set of unchanging sacred norms as the goal toward which Jewish communities should strive and the standard by which they are judged. The specifics have changed drastically over the course of Jewish history—Moses’s Iron Age utopia bears little resemblance to Ezekiel’s idealized Temple-worship fantasies or the rabbinic vision of individual Jewish communities centered on study and prayer—but from Moses’s day to ours, Judaism has been conceived of as a collective effort to establish sacred norms as “institutions for all times.”

(continued on page 59)

Disability Justice and Spirituality



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel by Michal Kwarciak.

Disability activism often starts with a call for accessible spaces—for ramps, interpreters, braille copies, and fragrance-free gatherings. But a deeper engagement with disability justice requires more than a series of accommodations: it requires a transformation of our core values and institutions.

Disability justice demands that human lives be valued not for their ability to create profit but for the divine spark within each of us. Meeting this demand in practice requires nothing less than what *Tikkun* has been calling for since its founding: a radical turn toward a society based on love and care rather than on profit and domination.

In this special issue, we share the perspectives of activists, theologians, and theorists writing from the front lines of disability justice work. Some expose the threat of violence against people with disabilities, from the everyday violence of harassment and exclusion to the acute violence of coercive medical interventions and electric shock treatments. Others describe beautiful new rituals and deep spiritual insights arising within disability culture. Some wrestle with scriptures that seem to equate disability with sinfulness, while others celebrate the fact that so many biblical prophets are people with disabilities—including Moses, who has a speech impediment, Isaac, who is blind, and Jacob, who develops a limp while wrestling with an angel. Together they articulate a prophetic approach to disability justice that is at once spiritual and political.

Check out the powerful web-only articles on this topic at tikkun.org/disability.



Participants in ADAPT, a grassroots disability rights group, demonstrate against proposed cuts to Medicaid in Washington, D.C.

Deepening Disability Justice

Beyond the Level Playing Field

BY TOM SHAKESPEARE

I WAS VERY LUCKY to be born disabled in 1966, just as the disability rights movement was gaining strength worldwide—I was born into an era of disability activists agitating for recognition that we are human beings like any other, and that we should be treated with respect and dignity.

This is a political claim, but it's also a theological one that has resonance with the fundamental precepts of most religions. As a Quaker, for example, I am taught to look for "that of God in every one," in the words of George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement.

In most cultural contexts and for many centuries, disabled people have struggled for inclusion and survival. Throughout history, many disabled children have died or been left to die. Although a few disabled adults achieved prominence in

previous eras—including a blind Syrian poet, a dwarf civil servant from ancient Egypt, and a naval hero with multiple impairments—the majority have found it extremely hard to stay alive.

Over the ages, religion has been a mixed blessing to people with disabilities. The ethos of charity—understood as *dana* in Buddhism and Hinduism, *zedakah* in Judaism, and *zakat* in Islam—has enabled some disabled people to find support and comfort. But traditional scriptures also describe impairment in terms of uncleanness (Leviticus 21:16–23) or view problems in terms of possession by devils (Matthew 12:22 and Mark 5:2–20). Some scriptures also imply that a person is disabled as a punishment for their own sin or that of their parents (Exodus 20:5 and Matthew 9:2).

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Tom Olin

In the current moment, there exists much potential for religious communities to ally with the disability rights movement in creating accessible spaces of worship, new theological approaches to disability, and a new religious approach to disability justice.

The Social Model of Disability

Disabled people have organized powerfully within the last half-century to challenge our social oppression and cultural exclusion. As a group we have demanded the right to speak on our own behalf. We have rejected the idea of charity and pity. We have promoted the concept of human rights and equality. We have condemned institutions and asylums—which were once posited as appropriate oases of protection—as venues of segregation and abuse. This movement has been wide and profound, and very welcome.

The key ideological principle at the core of the global disability movement is called “the social model.” The social model of disability contends that disability is not a medical issue but rather an equality issue like gender, race, and sexuality: the problem is one of social structures, not individual bodies. In other words, environmental barriers, negative attitudes, and the inaccessibility of systems and structures are what render a person with impairment *disabled*. A slogan associated with the social model is, “Disabled by society, not by our bodies.” This phrase is deeply resonant with a verse from Hebrews, “Make a level path for my feet, so that the lame be not disabled” (12:13), which sums up how physical environments can either enable or disable people with different forms of embodiment. The social model enables people with impairments to stop thinking of ourselves as the problem—the true problem is the oppressive context.

A Level Playing Field Is Not Enough

The social model of disability results in a “level playing fields” approach to equality. It is reflected in legislation such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and many other pieces of national legislation. By drawing an analogy with gender, race, and sexuality, the social model of disability builds on the analyses and work done by feminists, racial justice movements, and LGBT organizing to stake a claim for disability rights. And to a large extent, this approach works. If people can get access to health and rehabilitation, rely on accessible transport from accessible homes to accessible schools and workplaces, and receive what human rights lawyers describe as “reasonable accommodation” in education and employment, then they can learn and earn and lead “normal” lives. Removing discrimination and making a few changes to equipment and schedules can often equalize the situation. This has been my personal experience.

However, are such changes enough? For someone with a physical or sensory impairment such as paraplegia, blindness,



All Barriers Crumble and Fall by Adrean Clark. The hands in this artwork are making the sign for “sledgehammer.” The written sign language at the top is a quotation from the first female valedictorian at Gallaudet University: “This day women have many barriers. We must come together in support and tear them down!”

or deafness, they may well be. Remove the barriers, give us access, and we should be able to compete.

But what about someone with an intellectual disability or a serious mental health condition? What about someone with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome who can never work the same hours and at the same intensity as a nondisabled person? In these cases, the level playing field argument breaks down. Many people with disabilities are not able to earn a living in a wage-based economy or have a restricted capacity to do so. Barrier removal and equal treatment are not enough to ensure that all disabled people enjoy an equivalent standard of living, let alone achieve a good quality of life in the fullest sense. Some people will never be able to compete in a liberal, free-market order. Even if everyone is seen as having equal value as a citizen or in the eyes of God, not everyone is equally able to meet their own needs within a market-based society. And many people with disabilities find themselves isolated in their communities. (*continued on page 61*)

Holy Access

BY DARLA SCHUMM



Building ramps is important, but congregations must also examine their theologies and metaphors to make sure they are not hostile to people with disabilities. *Accessible Churches* by Chris Johnston.

I AM LYING COMFORTABLY on the table in my acupuncturist's office. Mellow music plays in the background while my acupuncturist soothingly talks me through my treatment. As we chat casually about the different approaches between Eastern and Western medicine, she suddenly stabs me with a metaphorical needle, puncturing our trust: in the same calm tone she has been using all morning, she tells me that, within Chinese religions, physical illness and disability are often understood as “a result of mistakes made in a previous life—a disability is an indication of a lesson that one's spirit needs to learn.” Inaccurately conflating the rich diversity of Chinese philosophical and religious systems of thought under the single blanket of “Chinese religions,” my white

acupuncturist has simultaneously disseminated incorrect information and made me feel inferior and unmeritorious.

Her suggestion that I am to blame for my disability jolts me back to a similar experience from the previous year, when I was traveling with my guide dog, Papaya, and needing to catch a connecting flight. An airline employee assisted me with the transfer while discussing the unending bounties of Jesus's love. In what appeared to be her characteristically upbeat and friendly tone, she stated, “You know, Jesus heals all sins; if you just pray hard enough, Jesus will take away all your sins and heal your blindness.”

Neither my acupuncturist nor the airline employee knew the details of my life story when they spoke these unintentionally hurtful words. Noting that I am blind, they drew on their own spiritual traditions to make sense of my disability, not imagining that I have been engaging with issues of religion and disability, on my own terms, all my life.

Growing up as the daughter of a Mennonite minister in a tight-knit, relatively insular, Protestant denomination, I attended Mennonite schools and was surrounded by Mennonite friends. After much personal and academic reflection, I earned a Ph.D. in religious studies and now teach world religions at a women's college. My spouse is an Episcopal priest. My lifelong engagement with religion has thus shaped my perspective on disability, making me acutely aware of how words—especially when linked to religious teachings and ideologies—annex uncanny power in shaping our understanding of ourselves and others.

The words uttered by my acupuncturist and the airline employee raise important questions about how religious traditions teach about disability and, in turn, how religious practitioners understand disability. How many religions teach that disability is a result of individual sin or karma? How many sacred texts communicate messages of exclusion to people with disabilities?

Oppressive Metaphors

For religious communities that aspire to promote inclusion of and justice for people with disabilities, expanding the

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definition of “accessibility” is an important starting point. Legislative efforts such as the Americans with Disabilities Act define accessibility in terms of equal access to education, employment, public spaces, health care, and legal protections. To make deeper change, however, we must go beyond these necessary forms of institutional accommodation, redefining accessibility to include shifts in attitudes about people with disabilities, which in turn will promote their full participation and inclusion in our religious communities. One means of cultivating these attitudinal adjustments is to engage in an honest examination of potentially exclusive metaphors, stories, and language found in our sacred texts and canons.

Imagine a Christian community that adheres to the standard definition of accessibility: it equips its buildings with ramps and accessible bathrooms, provides interpreters for the deaf and hard of hearing, makes large print and braille copies available for all print material, and so on. Now, imagine a blind person at a worship service at this same congregation, which, by all accounts, prioritizes justice for and inclusion of people with disabilities, and one of the main scripture readings is John 9: “The healing of the man born blind.” In this biblical story, Jesus restores sight to a man who has been blind all of his life by spitting on the ground to make mud, spreading the mud on the blind man’s eyes, and instructing him to wash the mud off in a pool. The passage goes on to describe the astonished reactions of those who had known the man when he was blind. Throughout the conversations following the miracle, metaphoric, symbolic, and literal linkages are drawn between the state of being blind and living in darkness and spiritual ignorance, on the one hand, and between physical sight and the ideas of living in light and spiritual insight, on the other. In John 9:39, for example, Jesus says, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

In our article “Out of the Darkness: Examining the Rhetoric of Blindness in the Gospel of John,” religious studies scholar Jennifer Koosed and I note: “In John 9, the physical condition of blindness always also connotes metaphorical blindness as a mental or spiritual condition, or ignorance. Both the literal and metaphorical meanings of blindness are always present every time the words ‘blind’ and ‘to see’ are used in the story.” Further reinforcing these connections is the question the disciples ask when they first encounter the blind man at the outset of the story: “His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” (John 9:2).

In her book *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems argues that “metaphors matter,” asserting that commonly used metaphors reflect the values of any given group and can justify and reinforce the oppression of marginalized members of the community. Weems warns:



A church may have obtained braille copies of the Bible, but if it consistently uses blindness as a metaphor for spiritual ignorance, it will not be a welcoming place for worshippers who are blind.

Metaphors matter because they are sometimes our first lessons in prejudice, bigotry, stereotyping, and in marginalizing others—even if only in our minds. They deserve our scrutiny because they are intrinsic to the way we live and shape reality.

The dominant metaphors in John 9 not only imply that those of us who are blind do not, or worse, *cannot* have “spiritual sight,” but this story, like the other miracle stories found in the Christian Scriptures, also implies that bodies that are disabled must be made physically “whole” before those who inhabit them can be spiritually whole. As Australian disability advocate Elizabeth Hastings writes:

With all the respect due to the ten lepers, the various possessed, and the sundry blind, lame, and deaf faithful of scripture, I reckon people who have disabilities may have been better off for the last two thousand years if our Lord had not created quite so many miraculous cures but occasionally said, “your life is perfect as it is given to you—go ye and find its purpose and meaning,” and to onlookers, “this disability is an ordinary part of human being, go ye and create the miracle of a world free of discrimination.”

Rejecting the idea that disability is an undesirable trait to eradicate or a pathology to cure, Hastings joins other proponents of the social model of disability in asserting that disability is just one of the many forms of human variation.

In raising concerns about the Bible’s miracle stories, it is not my intention to gloss over the real, physical challenges of living with disabling conditions, nor do I want to suggest that all people with disabilities interpret religious stories and metaphors in the same way. To be sure, there are Christians with disabilities who find the miracle stories as empowering



The use of braille in this painting, *live*, by Amy Monthei, ensures that neither a blind nor a sighted person can experience its entirety alone. Only through interaction “will the mystery be revealed,” writes Monthei, who is legally blind.

sources of hope and inspiration. But when religious communities understand their commitment to accessibility as a limited obligation to address physical barriers and challenges, they more easily fall into the trap of reinforcing the medical model of disability, which focuses on fixing or eliminating disability, instead of emphasizing how our religious organizations can integrate people with all forms of human variation into the life of the community. Many religious communities are satisfied to fix the problem of physical access to religious spaces, but they still bracket the real-world consequences of exclusionary attitudes, practices, and sacred stories and metaphors for people with disabilities. Thus, once people with disabilities are safely ensconced in the building, religious communities genuinely believe that they have “fixed” the problem and fail to notice that people with disabilities all too often remain on the margins of the life of the community.

Other religious traditions are not immune from the use of problematic language and metaphors. The book of Deuteronomy in the Jewish Hebrew Bible details a long list of curses that may befall those who disobey God which include, among many other things, physical and mental afflictions: “The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind; you shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help” (Deuteronomy 28: 28-29). The inclusion of blindness in this list of curses does not imply that everyone who is blind is suffering from God’s punishment, and there are other passages in the Hebrew Bible that explicitly demand respect for the dignity of people with disabilities, such as, “Do not curse the deaf and do not put a stumbling block before the blind”

(Leviticus 19:13-14). Nevertheless, the passage from Deuteronomy cuts against the inclusion of people with disabilities by raising the specter that blindness in any given case might be the result of God’s disapproval.

In the Theravada Buddhist Pali Cannon, one passage from *Khuddakapatha* (The Minor Readings) also utilizes metaphors of sight to illustrate how the three jewels of Buddhism—the Buddha, *dharma* (teachings), and *sangha* (community)—aid those on the path to enlightenment:

Or else the Buddha is like a lancet-user because he dissects away the cataract of delusion; the dharma is like the means for dissecting the cataract away; and the sangha, whose eye of knowledge is cleared by the dissecting away of the cataract of delusion, is like people whose eyes are cleared with the dissecting away of the cataract.

In his forthcoming chapter on Buddhism and disability, which will be published in a textbook with the working title *World Religions and Disability: Making the Connections*, Buddhism scholar Stephen Harris observes that although explicit representations of disability in Buddhist texts are often negative, there are also currents within Buddhist thought that offer an alternative way of thinking about disability. Harris writes:

Buddhist texts value the recognition of suffering as conducive to a strong motivation to obtain liberation and develop compassion for others, which suggests Buddhists ought to value aspects of disabled experience. Further, the Buddhist commitment to the universal salvation of all beings implicitly commits them to making their teaching accessible to persons with mental or physical disabilities. (*continued on page 62*)

Amy Monthei

God on Wheels

Disability and Jewish Feminist Theology

BY JULIA WATTS BELSER

AT KIDDUSH ONE DAY, I was welcoming a visitor to synagogue when she popped the question. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked as her eyes flicked from my face to my wheels. I’ve been asked this question in an astounding array of inappropriate venues; I didn’t flinch. “I have a disability,” I said, though it was plain she’d already noticed. A firm full stop followed that statement, though I knew full well I didn’t answer her question. I’m more than willing to talk about disability, but I’m disinclined to do so while waiting in the buffet line for my salad.

In truth, my answer was something of a lie. *What’s wrong with me* has more to do with objectification, pity, and disdain than with honest muscle and bone. The primary problem lies in social attitudes, architectural barriers, and cultural conceptions of normalcy that value certain modes of being over others. In other words, the problem is ableism—a complex set of power relations and structural arrangements that privilege certain bodies or minds as normal while designating others as abnormal and that afford the “able” the right to exercise power and influence over those considered disabled.

The Transgressive Potential of Disability Culture

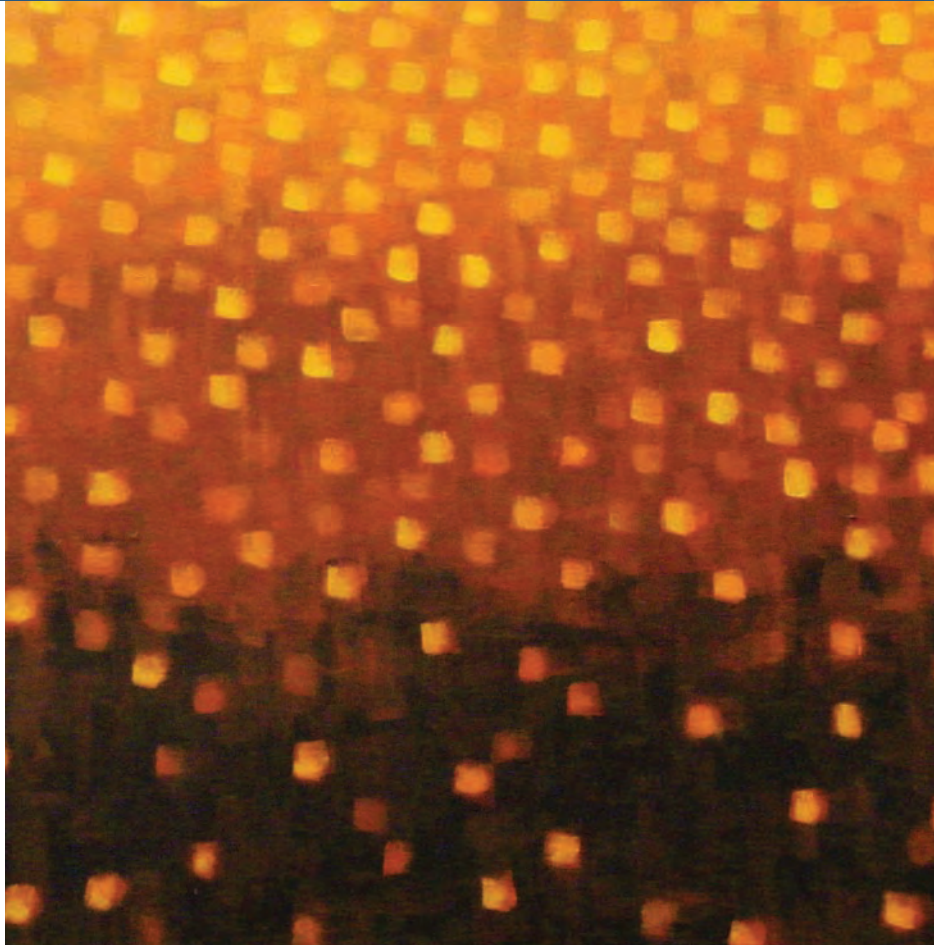
The disability justice movement has drawn many of us together for activism, artistry, and passionate community. In these circles, disability isn’t a medical diagnosis, but a cultural movement. Approaching disability through the lens of culture allows us to appreciate disability as a dimension of human diversity. This perspective has often been overlooked in religious communities. But like the critical interpretive insights of feminist, queer, womanist, and liberation theologies, disability culture can bring vital, transformative insight to questions of spirit.



“Ezekiel’s vision split open my own imagination,” the author writes. “I think of the delight I take in my own chair . . . the way wheels set me free and open up my spirit.” *Whirlwheel* by Olivia Wise.

I claim disability as a vibrant part of my own identity, as a meaningful way of naming and celebrating the intricate unfolding of my own skin and soul. A student once asked whether it was appropriate for someone with a disability to recite the blessing *Asher Yatzar*, the blessing that Jews recite to praise the One who creates the body with wisdom. My bones say *yes*. I bless God for crafting this holy house of skin and blood: these clear eyes and bony hips, this leg a bit shorter than the next, this hip unwilling to bear weight. When I walked as a child, my heel used to strike ground in its

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Falling Embers
by Amy Monthei.

own distinctive rhythm. Though my walk was subject to scrutiny and no small disapproval, I remember listening to the off-beat of my quirky stride, loving the sound of my own step.

Growing up disabled, growing up queer, the stakes were stark. It was either kindle tenacious love for myself or swallow the world's projections whole. In the luminous words of Ntozake Shange in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, "I found god in myself / and I loved her / I loved her fiercely." Muscle, heart, body, and bone testify to the One who made me, to the Source of wind and rain and soil who cobbled my elements into form and breathed soul into my veins. Who had the brilliant audacity to call it good and know it whole.

As a feminist, as a queer woman, and as a disabled bisexual Jew, I insist on honoring the integrity of a self that has often been disdained. These days, I also find myself increasingly moving through spaces that are opening toward welcome. As growing numbers of religious communities strive to include people with disabilities, they increasingly undo the structural and attitudinal barriers to our engagement. This is vital work, urgently needed. In recent years, such commitments to inclusion have led synagogues to invest in religious education for children with intellectual disabilities, to negotiate community standards around amplification on Shabbat, to provide large-print *siddurim* (prayer books), to rethink prohibitions that limit the participation of those who

are Deaf, to provide barrier-free access to the *bimah* (the platform used for Torah reading), and to publically affirm welcome for people with disabilities. I value these efforts. I believe they are essential for the vitality and integrity of religious community. But I fear that by conceptualizing disability primarily as an access problem to be solved, we fail to invite in the vibrant, transgressive potential of disability culture: of a "crip" sensibility that celebrates disability as a way of life, a radically different way of moving through the world.

God's Wheeled Chariot

On the morning of the holiday of Shavuot, Jewish communities around the world chant from the book of Ezekiel, reciting the Israelite prophet's striking image of God. The prophet speaks of a radiant fire borne on a vast chariot, lifted up by four angelic creatures with fused legs, lustrous wings, and great wheels. The wheels, he says, "gleamed like beryl." They were "wheels within wheels," which could move in any direction—"for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels" (Ezekiel 1:15-21). In Jewish tradition, Ezekiel's wild, uncanny vision has been the site of much mystical speculation. In late antiquity, a group of Jewish mystics left impassioned writings about drawing closer and closer to the divine throne. For them, the wheels Ezekiel saw formed God's chariot, the divine seat that bore God's glory through the heavens.

(continued on page 63)

Amy Monthei



Participants in “Helping Dances” gather outdoors to enact loving interdependence, offering caring touch and affirmation to other people with disabilities.

Crip Time

BY PETRA KUPPERS

LIVE LIFE IN SLOW MOTION. The world I live in is one where my thoughts are as quick as anyone’s, my movements are weak and erratic, and my talk is slower than a snail in quicksand,” writes Australian author and activist Anne McDonald, reflecting on her perception of time. “I have cerebral palsy, I can’t walk or talk, I use an alphabet board, and I communicate at the rate of 450 words an hour compared to your 150 words in a minute—twenty times as slow. A slow world would be my heaven. I am forced to live in your world, a fast hard one. If slow rays flew from me I would be able to live in this world. I need to speed up, or you need to slow down.”

In this way McDonald explains the difference between her time and “normate” time (to use a term coined by disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, making “normal” a little more strange). Many disabled people will recognize

this “crip time,” the traces of temporal shifting, in their own lives. There is the day we lie in bed, the time of pain blooming in our bones, the end of the street impossibly far for limping legs, the meeting and its noise assault set against the reassuring tick of the wall clock at home.

To many disabled writers, writing in crip time becomes a sanctuary. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands*, “It is dark and damp and has been raining all day. i love days like this. as i lie in bed i am able to dive inward. perhaps today i will write from the deep core.” Diving inwards. Deep core. Sanctuary. A snail in quicksand.

These moments out of time, out of productive, forward-leaning, exciting time, can become moments of disability culture politics. As McDonald reminds us, these time experiences might be born out of pain and frustration, and these moments shouldn’t be romanticized. And yet, many disabled

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“Is this what disability spiritualities might look like?” the author writes. “Here is a sanctuary, created by nothing but bodies, attention, and soft fabrics.”

people speak or type or gesture to the blossoming of attention in attenuation, in waiting, in abeyance. To the other side of crip time.

Many spiritual traditions know these times out of time, these nondriven moments that turn their back on modernity’s insistent tick. Meditation and prayer bring many people to a welling of empty time, to a fulfillment, in halting.

Dancing Out of Time

I am a disability culture artist, and as an artist, I find studies that focus on the wellness aspects of prayer to be very seductive. I wish for artful self-care for disabled people, and the work of the collective I lead, The Olimpias, often starts from this premise. Drawing on this vision, my partner, Neil Marcus, and I have initiated a practice called Helping Dances.

Marcus’s spasticity influences his communication: he speaks very slowly, and his speech difference can be hard to listen to by people who want to communicate in normate time. My own disability is pain-related, and at times it can immobilize me, leaving me momentarily breathless, retracted—a large woman caught in her wheelchair, turned inward.

Here is our Helping Dances invitation:

Neil and I love each other, and we love to move. But we can no longer move the way we used to—our bodies are getting older, more painful, less flexible. So we would love to ask for your help. Can you lend us your strength, your ability, your care, your attention?

Every week or so, in public places, parks, street corners, join us as we enact interdependence. Together, we activate thoughts and emotions about the network of helper economies we are part of, and their relations to issues of class, age, ethnicity, race, disability, and sexuality. Experience the joy of helping, respectfully.

Helping Dances started a few years ago, and the dances are still going on. If you follow the invitation and join us, you will

find yourself in a public site, often an outdoor park, and you will sit in a circle with others, and us, giving thanks to people who have helped you on this particular day. The circle is slow and relaxed, and you might lean back on colorful cushions and lushly textured spreads. You will hear people give thanks to their helpers, to strangers in the street, to their families and loved ones, to God, and to other entities. And the world settles around us as we speak our thanks out loud, leisurely, in our own specific rhythms. Likely, you will support people speaking: Marcus might shift out of his wheelchair, arranging his limbs and torso into the best way for him to address a crowd. He’ll likely stand on his twisted leg, hopping a bit, and cast his magnetic blue eyes around the circle. He will sway, reach for us, and rely on all our support to come to voice.

In the second part of *Helping Dances*, circle members get to ask for what they want. Marcus and I have asked many times for help to allow us to dance: to be supported, our limbs held, as we slowly move around each other, distributing the energies of our movement across a field of bodies. Others ask for what they need. Some have asked to be looked at with loving-kindness. To just stand there, seen. Others have asked for energy, for hands laid on them, to help feel themselves. Some like touch, others don’t.

What would you ask for?

There is a politics of engagement here, a slow world, an attention to comfort that sometimes allows us to slip into a mourning, a keening, a sense of out-of-jointness that is part of the celebration of opening space.

Creating Sanctuaries

Is this what disability spiritualities might look like? Here is a sanctuary, created by nothing but bodies, attention, and soft fabrics—a holding place in the upright space of city life.

We know that not everybody can get to the sanctuary: navigating any kind of space is hard for many disabled people, as well as for others excluded from the public. But there is a reaching here, outward and inward.

We are not wholly with ourselves, and we try to stay porous. Our circle calls others into it, others who have touched our lives this day. We are not wholly open to all, either: sitting in the circle creates a boundary, even if it is a permeable one. This is sanctuary, for a time.

Marcus and I are wheelchair users, but many of us are not visibly marked as disabled but have instead experienced exclusion on the grounds of cognitive or emotional difference. Our clustered wheelchairs act as visible signs, demarcating our space as disability-land, a flag seldom flown in public space. While we engage in our actions together, the outside world is still there—dogs bark, people come up and hover near us, and others pass by and wonder what is going on. Inside we sometimes float in each other’s arms. Some of us cry when we touch each other both deeply and impersonally, when our vulnerable envelopes open (*continued on page 63*)

Cheryl Kaplan

The Crisis of Disability Is Violence

Ableism, Torture, and Murder

BY LYDIA BROWN

ANDRE MCCOLLINS was eighteen years old in 2002 when he was a student at the Judge Rotenberg Center in Canton, Massachusetts. Like many of the students at the center, a residential institution for people with disabilities, Andre is autistic and has other mental disabilities. One day in October 2002, a staff member told McCollins to take off his jacket. He said no. That was direct defiance and disobedience to directions from staff. The Judge Rotenberg Center staff then pressed a button on a remote control connected to a powerful electric shock device that McCollins, like dozens of the center's students, was required to wear. McCollins screamed and dove under the nearest table in a futile effort to hide from staff members who were already clambering around chairs to grab his arms and legs. They hauled him from under the table, physically pinning him as they strapped him facedown into restraints. Once McCollins was immobilized on the restraint board, the staff continued to administer shocks. Over the next seven hours, they shocked him thirty-one times. On the mandatory report, all but two of the subsequent shocks were for screaming in pain or tensing up in fear of the next shock.

Since 1971, six students have died in separate but preventable incidents at the Judge Rotenberg Center, which was forced to relocate from Rhode Island and close its sister facility in California following continual allegations of abuses such as food deprivation, forced inhalation of ammonia, and prolonged use of restraint and seclusion (isolation in solitary confinement). Originally founded for the ostensible purpose of treating those with the most severely dangerous self-harming or aggressive behavior, the Judge Rotenberg Center now houses children, youth, and adults with a variety of disabilities, as well as some residents referred through the juvenile justice system as an alternative to incarceration. Over the past four decades since its opening, the center's practices have spawned numerous state investigations, a



Members of Occupy the Judge Rotenberg Center demonstrate outside the FDA headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Department of Justice investigation, and condemnation from two United Nations Special Rapporteurs on torture.

The center continues to operate today. Dozens of parents and other relatives of the center's residents turn out in droves for the annual hearings on Beacon Hill, clamoring that the center's treatment is necessary and life-saving for their children, who they claim would die from their self-injurious behaviors if left untreated by the Judge Rotenberg Center's shock device. And so, year after year, the hearings function as little more than well-practiced ceremonies in which disabled activists like me come to protest the abuses at the Judge Rotenberg Center while parents deride us for daring to suggest that they stop trying to help their children in the only way they can conceive of.

LYDIA BROWN, president of the Washington Metro Disabled Students Collective, is an activist focusing on violence against multiply marginalized disabled people. Lydia previously worked for the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and was the Institute for Educational Leadership's Patricia Morrissey Disability Policy Fellow.

Forced Labor, Sterilization, and Homicides

For a large segment of the autistic activist community, the Judge Rotenberg Center represents the pinnacle of evil, the height of torture in the name of treatment. Yet for all of the egregious human rights abuses that take place there, this institution is merely one of many that continually enact violence on disabled people. I know adults with developmental disabilities living in group homes who are not permitted by staff to spend time alone with their romantic and sexual partners. This is in fact common practice, as we who are disabled are frequently presumed incompetent. I know others who were once forced to slave away at monotonous tasks like sorting paper clips, earning only a few dozen cents per hour. As if to further underscore the inhumanity of these practices, at the Judge Rotenberg Center, students are shocked for pausing or slowing down while counting popsicle sticks. Grossly underpaid labor such as this is legal for people with disabilities under a section of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, as long as the employer claims that the workers' disabilities adversely impact their productive capacity. The law explicitly states that blind workers, as well as those with intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, or mental illness, may be paid less than minimum wage. Another provision in the law further wedds this practice to the inherently exploitative nature of institutional settings by authorizing subminimum wages for disabled people working for the institutions in which they live.

In 1927, the Supreme Court decided in *Buck v. Bell* that involuntary, forcible sterilization of disabled people in the

name of public health and welfare constitutes no violation of rights. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes went so far as to argue in his decision that the Virginia law permitting sterilization of those with mental disabilities was in the public interest, to prevent the nation from "being swamped with incompetence." When referencing Carrie Buck, whose case the court was considering, Holmes wrote, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." That decision has never been overturned. Not much later, in Germany, the societal fear of disabled reproduction led to the mass internment of disabled people in concentration camps under the Nazi regime. In addition, in the United States, this fear led to vociferous arguments for legislation that would prohibit deaf people from marrying or having children.

One of the most chilling ways in which our media and legal systems participate in violence against disabled people is in the lenience and understanding shown toward parents who murder their disabled children. In these cases, the justifications abound—disabled children are described as burdens on their families who are thus stressed from caring for them and who one day might just snap from that stress. While there are undeniably elements of sexism, racism, and classism that impact media coverage of cases in which parents are accused of murdering their nondisabled children, the differences are stark.

In October 1993, Robert Latimer of Wilkie, Saskatchewan, murdered his daughter, Tracy, who had cerebral palsy, and claimed it was a compassionate killing. Latimer consistently argues that he did the right thing. During a CBC News interview in 2011, eighteen years after Tracy's death, he said, "It was something that had to happen . . . she'd had enough, that was it, we were done."

Unlike most parents who murder their disabled children, he served seven years in prison. Of the few even charged with murder, only some parents who murder their disabled children serve any prison time. After the November 1996 murder of Charles-Antoine Blais, for instance, his mother served only a year in a halfway house, after which the Montreal autism society hired her as its spokesperson.

On March 16, 2012, ten days after the murder of autistic man George Hodgins by his mother in Sunnyvale, California, autistic activist Zoe Gross organized vigils in memory of our dead across the United States. The very same evening, Latimer appeared live on a Global News internet discussion, defending his crime alongside a mother of two disabled people who argued that parents should have the legal right to murder their disabled children. Two weeks later, four-year-old Daniel Corby, who was also autistic, was murdered by his mother.

The vigils have since become an annual observance. Each year, the list of names that we read grows longer. Even as we speak the names of our dead, more of us fall victim to the violence of ableism. *(continued on page 64)*



At a candlelight vigil in Sacramento, a mourner from the Autistic Self Advocacy Network weeps for the hundreds of disabled people who have been killed by their parents or caregivers.

Who Can Be Commanded?

Disability in Jewish Thought and Culture

BY TZVI C. MARX

RECENTLY TWO DEAR FRIENDS asked me to advise them about their pregnant daughter, who just discovered that her fetus has Noonan syndrome, a genetic condition that can result in heart defects, unusual facial features, short stature, and learning problems. The pregnant daughter wanted to keep the child, but her husband was afraid that the child would have a difficult life and was concerned about possible consequences for the rest of the family. My friends presented the possibility of abortion in this case as a Jewish legal question. May a person, they asked, decide over life and death? What is our responsibility to act on this, and where are the limits?

My reply:

Though such children have a difficult path to follow, yet it is a life with many possibilities for fulfillment. When in doubt, choose for life. The concern about discomfort to the other children is not a relevant consideration. The prime and only issue is the potential of this child to live a life of reasonable quality. This fetus should be allowed to be born.

I start with this story to make the point that, however much we may theorize over the issues of impairment and handicap, an actual lived encounter with impairment touches one's emotions more deeply and makes one especially mindful of how precious life is—including lives that some may deem "limited." This incident also reveals how consequential our interpretations of religious law can be: in this case, a life-or-death decision hinged in part upon an interpretation of Halachah (Jewish religious law).



In a religion that values divine commandment, exemptions from religious obligations carry high stakes. Moses's speech impediment did not obviate his responsibility to lead the people of Israel out of slavery. *Follow Me* by Shoshanna Bauer.

Conflicting Messages Within Judaism

Judaism stands strongly against the exploitation of those with disabilities, which are described in Hebrew as *moom* (blemish, impairment, disability, or handicap). Nevertheless, Jewish law also poses religious obstacles to the full integration of people with disabilities into the Jewish community.

Judaism's concern for people with disabilities is evidenced in the teaching of Leviticus: "Do not curse the deaf and do not put a stumbling block before the blind" (19:13–14). Another Jewish reference to disability occurs in the Book of Commandments (Precept #317) by the Torah scholar Maimonides, who defines the primary meaning of "the

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When disabilities are diagnosed in utero, some turn to religious authorities for advice. “My friends presented the possibility of abortion as a Jewish legal question,” the author writes. *Self-Portrait as a Schizophrenic* by David Planka.

blind” in Leviticus to include anyone who is blind to anything. Visual blindness is only one of many kinds of blindness, he argues, and we all share in the experience of blindness because each of us is inexpert or blind in some area of life. This interpretation indicates an inclusive strategy that establishes a continuum of ability/disability.

There are other claims within the Jewish tradition, however, which seem to chafe with that inclusive strategy. One example occurs in the talmudic dispute between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Meir regarding a blind person’s ability to bear the responsibility for carrying out mitzvot (religious injunctions). Should people who are blind be included and participate in the community’s religious practices? Rabbi Yehuda seeks to disqualify people who are blind for the most part. Rabbi Meir’s view, on the other hand, is consistent with Lavonna Lovern’s assertion in this Fall 2014 issue of *Tikkun* that “a difference or damage in the body does not indicate damage to the spirit.”

Who Is Able to Follow Religious Injunctions?

Judaism is a highly achievement-oriented culture that valorizes those who are the most competent at fulfilling the demands of the mitzvot. In the Talmud (Kiddushin 31a), Rabbi Hanina taught *gadol metzveh ve’oseh*—greater is the one who is commanded than the one who is not commanded!

The challenge of mitzvah performance is a source of joy that enables one to live in freedom. Regarding the expression, “Engraved upon the tablets [*charut al haluchot*] the sages comment” (Pirkei Avot 6:3), read not *charut* (engraved) but *cherut* (freedom). This means that one is not really free unless engaged in Torah study. To become a bar or bat mitzvah (literally a “son or daughter of commandment”) is a token of pride. This rite of adulthood marks a teenager’s newfound capability to discharge the responsibilities of Jewish culture.

One way in which underlying attitudes within Jewish culture toward people with disabilities (*continued on page 65*)

David M. Planka (plankomatic.com)



“Does love mean protecting your privacy while displaying your daughter’s body and story?” the author writes. “I know you intend ‘pillow angel’ as an expression of love, but I feel those words in my bones as separation, exclusion, a denial of humanity.” *Pillow Angel* by Laura Beckman.

Love

A Letter To Ashley’s Father

BY ELI CLARE

LET ME LAY IT DOWN. I am furious with you—you who are known in the media only as the father of a disabled girl you call Ashley. You say she has the consciousness of a three-month-old. You chose a surgeon to lift her six-year-old uterus out of her body, another doctor to slice her breast buds away, and an endocrinologist to flood her with estrogen. Together they froze your daughter’s body in time, making her a perpetual child. The ethics committee at Seattle Children’s Hospital supported your decisions. You call Ashley your “pillow angel.”

In spite of my fury, the questions I have for you are all about love. You say that you love your daughter very much

and that love motivated all your medical choices. Let me try just for a moment to trust your love, to accept the terms upon which you made your decisions. You wanted to protect Ashley from the discomfort of menstruation and large breasts, the damage of sexual assault, and the risk of pregnancy. You wanted your daughter to stay small so that you could more easily take care of her, keep her safe and happy. You and Ashley lack a shared language, and she quite possibly lacks the ability to process and use words. She couldn’t tell you what she wanted with her body, couldn’t have a voice in these huge medical decisions, and so you decided out of love. But love is not unassailable. Let me ask: how is a father to love, nurture, and protect his disabled daughter who has no language and no way to walk or roll through the world on her own?

I know women who can only move one finger, women who operate their wheelchairs by sipping and puffing, women who never leave their beds, women who speak with computers or alphabet boards or not at all, women who lost all their words at age seventy, women who never had words, women who as girls were thought to be without communication. Busy women, bleeding women, women—all disabled—who

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stay safe, comfortable, and happy. Does love mean reshaping your disabled daughter's body so she will never stretch into womanhood?

A "Pillow Angel"?

You claim that Ashley has the emotions, psyche, spirit, and selfhood of a three-month-old. She has a condition named with some long Latinate word I can't wrap my slurring tongue around. I recently learned that her disability is also known as cerebral palsy, which means she and I faced the same crapshoot at birth, a simple matter of which brain cells died when. I know that you say that this medical treatment—"Ashley's treatment," as you've dubbed it—is meant only for "profoundly" disabled children, and that those of us with less significant disabilities shouldn't be fearful or outraged. You don't mean to inflict this treatment on those of us who can walk or roll, or who have language to communicate about abstract concepts. Let me not question your assessment but instead return to love. Does love mean defining Ashley's consciousness, however you and her doctors quantify it, as not needing a growing, shifting, aging embodiment?

However much you argue, I see my body in Ashley—her tense and wiry arms, taut neck, and lopsided smile. I see her crip beauty. I didn't walk or talk for a long time. The difference between your daughter and me is slight, the crapshoot of brain damage. I've not been able to read the news stories, your website, the medical articles, the opinion pieces. Your story is too much, too close. In that crapshoot, I could have easily joined Ashley in being a "pillow angel."

That phrase, pillow angel, brings me to a full stop. Those two words paired together are a landslide, an avalanche, a brick wall. I imagine Ashley as a cushion giving you comfort, a cherub resting passively among pillows, a spiritual abstraction. Does love mean denying your daughter's earthbound, everyday, messy body? Do you love her angry, cranky, profane self too? And it's not only your daughter you name a pillow angel but also other significantly disabled children like her. You use those two words in your interviews and on your website as if to refer to a whole class of people, leveraging deeply ingrained associations among disability, innocence, passivity, and blessing. I know you intend "pillow angel" as an expression of love, but I feel those words in my bones as separation, exclusion, a denial of humanity, almost hate. Could Ashley simply be a disabled girl without language and the ability to grasp the decisions you're making about her body—not passive or angelic?

Does Her Privacy Mean Nothing?

Through all your love, you so fiercely protect your anonymity, claiming no identity except as Ashley's father. On your website, you've posted many photos of you and your family. In one, you all pose in front of the fireplace next to a Christmas tree. Ashley, your other daughter, and your wife are dressed

in red; Ashley and her sister wear matching tops and polka dotted pants. Ashley sits on your lap, your arms clasped around her as she grins into the camera, eyes bright, body wiry, chin tilted slightly. She looks ready for mischief.

Really, you all are the picture-perfect white, heterosexual family, except for one thing: black bars cover everyone's eyes except Ashley's. I imagine you justify this choice as a way of protecting your privacy on your website, which you use as a platform to explain and promote the growth attenuation treatment Ashley underwent. Does her privacy mean nothing?

The reversal stuns me. For well over a century, disabled people, fat people, intersex people, people with facial distinctions, and/or people of color have lived among the pages of medical textbooks. They have posed naked, or nearly so, against blank backgrounds, the resulting images captioned with various medical jargon, black bars positioned to cover their eyes. The medical industrial complex claims these photos as necessary teaching tools, arguing that the black bars protect the subjects' anonymity. But I agree with intersex activist Cheryl Chase when she declares, "The black rectangle over the eyes accomplishes only one thing; it saves the viewer from having to endure the gaze of the subject."

In your Christmas photo, the black bar is for once placed upon nondisabled rather than disabled people. Yet in this context, the bars covering your own eyes only serve to focus more attention on Ashley, revealing her body even more. I, for one, am glad to see her lopsided grin. The familiarity of her bent wrists, taut neck, and tilted head catches me; I find glimmers of my body reflected in hers. But I'm left needing to ask again about love. Does love mean protecting your privacy while displaying your daughter's body and story on your website and in interviews?

Love braids itself with the desire to protect. Certainly you express that desire repeatedly—a yearning to protect Ashley from discomfort and abusive care, from the possibility of pregnancy and the danger of sexual violence, and from potential institutionalization. But protecting her privacy isn't high on your priority list. I'm struggling to trust your love.

You rail against the laws that conflict with the medical choices you've made. You write:

While we support laws protecting vulnerable people against involuntary sterilization, the law appears to be too broadly based to distinguish between people who are . . . capable of decision making and those who . . . [like Ashley] will never become remotely capable of decision making.

Not so long ago, eugenicists would have designated Ashley an idiot, locked her up, and sterilized her, regardless of what you wanted. Who is worthy of protection in a country where, between 1900 and 1982, the state authorized and performed more than 60,000 involuntary sterilizations?

I want your love of Ashley to yield not an operating room where individual surgeons reshape (*continued on page 67*)

Embracing Difference

Native American Approaches to Disability

BY LAVONNA LOVERN

MOST U.S. PROGRESSIVES share the view that the destigmatization of “disability” is a positive thing. Translating that vision into widespread social practice, however, is proving difficult to do. The U.S. mainstream has much to learn from Native American communities, many of which have lived experience with non-stigmatizing approaches to differences in community members’ talents and abilities.

Western knowledge systems establish opposition concepts such as day/night, good/bad, and able/disabled. These dichotomies form the basis of Western social hierarchies by establishing certain identities as superior and others as inferior, and they shape how people with disabilities are defined and treated within Western communities and institutions.

While there is no single, unified Native American culture, language, spirituality, or way of being, it is generally accurate to say that Native American worldviews do not adhere to this same dichotomous logic structure. Instead, they focus on an interrelatedness of all things. It is useful to draw generalizations such as these in order to illustrate how Native American approaches to disability offer a counter-model to Western approaches. Before I proceed in contrasting these two approaches, I would like to ask the many distinct and unique Native American communities’ forgiveness for the generalizations made in this article.

Native American Concepts of Talent and Difference

Within Native American worldviews, all aspects of the universe are generally seen as connected in a mode of spirit or energy beyond dichotomy or hierarchy. Each being can be thought of as a tripartite self with mind, body, and spirit. While each component is of value, the spirit is often understood to be the most significant, as it is the enduring element



“Native American concepts of difference are informed by the interdependent structure of traditional Native American communities,” the author writes.

of self and is always whole and connected to other spirit beings. Because the spirit is always whole, there is no designation of some people as able and others as disabled. A difference or damage in the body does not indicate damage to the spirit, nor does it limit communication between individuals. Even individuals who cannot communicate verbally can communicate with others who are trained to do so.

Native American concepts of difference are informed by the interdependent structure of traditional Native American communities. Individuals within these communities traditionally understand themselves in terms of their position in the community and the responsibilities that are associated with that position. For example, a person might think of herself as a daughter, granddaughter, mother, sister, friend, and community participant.

Western communities, in contrast, tend to focus more on independence, defining the self in terms of rights owed and

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“Because the spirit is always whole, there is no designation of some people as able and others as disabled,” Lovern writes.



individual success. This orientation establishes patterns of interaction that involve competition and conflict as a means of establishing or maintaining one's success.

Native American communities, on the other hand, tend to designate conflict as the result of childlike immaturity that can be outgrown. Competition is used to establish talent differences, but not as a means of establishing an individual as more successful than or superior to another. Individuals are deemed successful according to their character and community achievements, not by talents of body or mind, which are finite and will pass. Thus “success” means making progress toward balance with the self and the self's contributions to all of his or her relations.

In following with their understanding that all beings participate in the collective spirit, these communities treat issues of wellness and difference in a community-based fashion. The community assists people with differences in whatever ways they may need, attending to their personal requirements for balance and offering any assistance necessary to enable them to participate in the community. However, it remains the responsibility of each individual to work to gain balance or harmony and thus wellness. Balance is not a state that, once achieved, is permanently retained. It is a continuing process. Balance is a process of becoming, not being. In addition, balance does not necessitate the elimination of the difference. Whether or not the difference (what Western frameworks would call a “disability”) is permanent, it is not seen as a betrayal or as something with which one

must continually struggle. The goal in Native American healing is not the overcoming or elimination of these differences, as is seen in Western cultures. Instead, healing is a matter of coming to balance with the whole self, *including* the difference. The individual is not defined by the difference; rather, the difference is incorporated into the whole being.

Every being is understood to have a role in society, and the balanced self promotes the overall success of the society. Traditional Native American communities recognize all talents as gifts from the Creator and consider them to be of immense value to the community. One individual may have limited or no sight, but may have a talent for making Piki bread. Another individual may have a talent for storytelling or song, but no talent for walking. One child may be seen by the Native American community as less book-talented but instead as skilled in listening and retaining information, and thus able to serve society as a historian or medicine person. Another child, who may be considered “slow” by Western standards, may have a talent with animals, farming, or sewing, all of which are necessary abilities for the community's survival. For this reason, the preference for the “normal” functioning of the body and mind is itself suspect.

Debunking Abandonment Myths

I imagine that some readers may have a skeptical response to my positive assessment of Native American approaches to disability, due to the widespread circulation of myths about Native American groups abandoning (*continued on page 67*)

High Holy Days in the Hospital

BY BONNIE GRACER

ON ROSH HASHANAH it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by Roman soldier and who by cancer. . .”

“No, that’s not how it goes,” I wearily chided myself from my hospital bed. I knew I was making up my own words. But alone in the wee hours of the morning, as the High Holy Days approached, that was the best rendition of the *Unetanaah Tokef* (the central prayer of the High Holy Day service) that I could muster. And my brother Jeffrey later told me that spending the eve of Yom Kippur with me in the hospital was the most meaningful Yom Kippur of his life.

I had been acting strange for a few weeks. I am usually conscientious and punctual, but that month I had slept through work and two piano lessons. My friend Barbara grew concerned and called me, only to learn that I was sitting outside my doctor’s office on a Sunday, confused about why the building was locked. I thought it was Monday. I had been so tired that I had requested medical leave from work to get tested for mononucleosis. Mono was the only thing I could imagine that could account for such relentless fatigue. After Barbara whisked me to the ER for a brain scan, I learned that a brain tumor also has that power. My sister Ann, on learning that I was in the neuroscience ICU, drove down to Virginia from New York in the middle of the night to help.

And so I found myself, several days later, under the surgeon’s knife, just when I should have been getting ready to fly to Boston to attend High Holy Days services with one of my favorite rabbis, Jonathan Kraus, and my best friend, Sandi. Instead, Sandi flew to Baltimore to be with me in the hospital, leaving her family and community to be by my side.

After surgery at Johns Hopkins, I moved to Sinai Hospital in Baltimore for rehabilitation before returning home. My sister Ann, who is Orthodox, was staying with our dear friends of over twenty years in a nearby Orthodox Jewish



A Year of Peace by Ruth Cohen Golmant.

community. Before I knew it, those friends and others started visiting: all the wonderful people whom I love brought fresh fruit, homemade macaroni and cheese, and funny stories to sustain me during my long hospital stay. They likely had walked one to three miles to visit me, since by tradition there is no driving on Shabbat and many Jewish holidays.

They were also fulfilling the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *bichor cholim*, often translated in prayer books as “visiting the sick.” I’ve always been uncomfortable with the term “the sick” because it emphasizes the disease, not the person. But I’ve developed a new understanding for why it is a mitzvah to visit *people who are sick* (notice my use of the people-first language favored by the disability rights movement). The love, visits, and support of my family and friends were critical in

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Created by Ruth Cohen Golmant, the author's longtime friend, this oil pastel is called *Tefilah L' Batya: Drawing Strength*. Its title translates as "Prayer for Bonnie."

keeping up my spirits and helped set the course for my very positive mindset through the months of radiation and chemotherapy that followed.

I had so many people visit, pray for me, and send texts, food, and love, that I dictated an email to my brother on Erev Yom Kippur titled, "The luckiest person in the world." My brother typed as I dictated:

As I lay here in the hospital a few days past surgery, I wanted to share the thoughts going on in my head. Primarily, all I can think is I'm the luckiest person in the world. No matter how I think about this, that's the conclusion I come to. It's not lucky to have a brain tumor or to need emergency surgery. But when I think about all the people I have in my life I couldn't be happier or feel luckier.

Jeffrey sent the full email to our family and to many of the friends and co-workers who had showered me with love.

Of course, I did have my down moments too. The day before Yom Kippur, just when I was at my lowest, my cousin Rabbi Judy Shanks sent me and my brother the words to what I now know is a Shlomo Carlebach tune, "Return Again." She said that her California congregation sings this song at every service in the Jewish month of Elul.

Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.
Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.

Return to what you are, return to who you are,
Return to where you are born and reborn again.

The instant Jeffrey read me the words, I was infused with a new spiritual energy. The song's lyrics helped focus me on things that give me joy and they propelled me forward with purpose, helping me to get through the difficult months ahead. The song's words stayed with me, and I committed to learning to play it on the piano.

Now I am many months post-surgery and indeed am returning to life as I get stronger: spending time with family, friends, and my pets; playing the piano; preparing to walk in the 17th Annual Race for Hope to cure brain tumors; and even going to the beach with my brother.

I've spent my entire professional career promoting civil rights and inclusion for people with disabilities, but now I am learning firsthand about many disability issues that were never in the forefront of my personal experience as a hard-of-hearing person—issues involving personal care aides, independent living, self-determination, accessible transportation (paratransit), cognitive impairment, and cancer. So even though I had to take time off from work to heal from my cancer surgery and treatment, I have been deepening my knowledge of disability every day.

I also am learning more about the disability rights movement's perspective on end-of-life issues. The basic idea is that disability is not a fate worse than death. In fact, some of us, including me, are just fine using a wheelchair and/or managing additional disabilities. If certain doctors do not consider lives like ours to be "worth living," that may be their perspective, but they should not impose it on someone else. The organization Not Dead Yet addresses this issue in its very name. Post-brain surgery, I have a few cognitive issues to deal with, but so what? I handle them like I have handled the rest of my disabilities—by learning new ways of doing things and by figuring out effective rehabilitation strategies and accommodations.

The brain tumor and its aftermath (and all the people who love and support me) have taught me how to live, enjoy, and appreciate. I intend to keep a positive attitude moving forward because doing so is necessary in order for me to heal and be happy. There is no sense wasting precious time on earth being miserable: there are so many beautiful things and people to cherish. During the High Holy Days, we pray for our lives, but we do not add conditions ("but only if I can walk, talk, hear, speak, and think perfectly"). We just pray to be sealed in the Book of Life. The rest is up to us. ■

Ruth Cohen Golmant (facebook.com/golmantgallery)



When Strangers Read My Body by Olivia Wise.

When Strangers Read My Body

Blurred Boundaries and the Search for Something Spiritual

BY WILFREDO GOMEZ

THE ENCOUNTER WAS NOT all that different from others I’ve had on the street—a rupture in my peace of mind. It was well past midnight, and I walked the streets alone, delighted to bask in the warmth of a productive day. A figure came into focus, dressed in colors dark as the night.

At first the stranger’s words were muted by the music blaring through my headphones—my temporary barrier against the many interlocutors who feel entitled to interaction once

they notice my limp. This visibility is something I cannot hide, and I don’t attempt to do so. However, I take pride in having the opportunity to engage, interact, and experience the world on my own terms. The interactions others feel entitled to have can feel like a disruption of my attempt to have privacy while out in public.

“Tú estás vendiendo Biblias?” the stranger asked. [Are you selling Bibles?]

“No,” I replied, “Estos son libros y libretas con varios notas

WILFREDO GOMEZ is a graduate student in the Cultural Foundations of Education program at Syracuse University whose research interests center on educational anthropology, cultural studies, and disability studies. He holds an M.A. in Africana Studies from the University of Pennsylvania.

Olivia Wise (oliviawisestudio.com)



“What is it about my body that invites these questions about selling Bibles and these spontaneous blessings?” Gomez asks. *Pop on Top* by Carol Es.

del día.” [These are books and notebooks with various notes from today.]

I might have looked like a salesman of sorts—suit, tie, messenger bag, and camel coat—but I couldn’t put a finger on the nature or context of the interaction. Surprisingly, the stranger spoke to me in Spanish, a bit unusual since I am often read as white in a predominately Latino/a community, despite being Latino.

“Dios está a tu la’o, vaya con Dios” [God is always by your side, go with God], the man said as we parted ways.

Just as so many others have done before, the stranger chose to bestow the blessings of God on me—a Latino man with cerebral palsy—in particular that night, singling me out among all the people in the street that evening. Did he single me out because he assumed I had a disability? If so, did he see me as having a special spiritual status because of it?

Anonymity and Agency

Experiences such as these—strangers pulling over to offer me a ride, a woman struggling to make eye contact with me before speaking, fellow shoppers at a local Wal-Mart pausing in my presence and offering “God Bless You”—are an ensemble of others’ attempts to construct my body linguistically, spiritually, and physically. Sometimes these interactions upset me; other times I find myself performing the expected script of the humble and thankful individual exchanging a

pleasantry. Some strangers conflate my physical disability with other emotional, cognitive, psychological, or learning disabilities. What goes unsaid speaks volumes: the assumptions, expectations, prejudices, dominant narratives, language barriers, and behaviors that already seem to frame the extent and context of these interactions, even before they occur. Some of them are easy to identify and name; others are as mind-bending as the context clues in a crossword puzzle. What is it about my body that invites these questions about selling Bibles and these spontaneous blessings?

I struggle to make sense of these interactions that, while well intentioned, nevertheless work to erase my anonymity and agency. I manage to be invisible in some contexts and all too visible in others; on a number of occasions I have fallen in public and no one has responded, as if I were the only person walking the streets. My body is marked as worthy of attention and intervention, yet perceived as receptive of that conversation—my interlocutors do not imagine that I may feel disagreement, anger, or resentment in response to their interventions.

I occupy a position of privilege in these interactions as an able-bodied disabled man who has the education and communication skills to ask that others be more sensitive and understanding toward “difference.” When approached by these strangers, am I read as a dynamic human being with multiple identities and ties to a *(continued on page 68)*

Carol Es (esart.com)



Disability rights activists from ADAPT talk with U.S. Department of Labor Secretary Seth Harris about federal rules governing personal attendants.

Beyond Wage Labor

The Politics of Disablement

BY RAVI MALHOTRA

THE RECENT CASE of a blind Jewish camper, Solomon Krishef of Grand Rapids, Michigan, who was told he could not be accommodated by Camp Ramah in Canada despite already being at the camp for some weeks, powerfully highlights how accommodation of disabled people continues to be regarded as a burdensome afterthought. In a similar vein, many workplaces and union offices frequently fail to have the ramps in place that would allow disabled people who require wheelchairs for mobility to flourish.

Even for religious progressives and advocates of social justice who incorporate anti-racist and anti-sexist practices into

their daily work, disability politics too often is new and unfamiliar ground. For far too long, leftist organizations have been deficient in ensuring that meeting spaces are accessible to disabled people. Our disability issues are not identified as priorities, and the left press far too often ignores demonstrations by disabled people.

Once progressives make a more widespread commitment to incorporating disability politics into their social and political frameworks, they will find that disability politics will also expand and strengthen their efforts to envision a more inclusive economic system: a thorough understanding of disablement actually provides a starting point for the creation of a

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Creative Commons/U.S. Department of Labor



A bus in Virginia extends a ramp to ensure access for wheelchair users.

post-capitalist economy that values people for their humanity rather than for their wage labor.

By promoting the decommodification of labor (in other words, pushing for a new socioeconomic order in which social services and supports are treated as universal rights rather than conditioned upon an individual's ability to earn wages), disabled people could be strongly allied with those who seek to end the plutocratic system that enriches a tiny minority while providing increasingly precarious—if any—work for growing numbers. This decommodification perspective is all the more relevant in the post-2008 economic crash environment, in which the stock market recovery has not translated into a significant number of new jobs for the working class.

Gains and Challenges in Disability Rights

The focus of the disability rights movement that emerged in Britain and the United States in the 1960s is clear: it is the structural barriers in society, such as the lack of physical access to wheelchair users, that prevent the participation of disabled people in daily life, rather than the medical impairment of a person. Disability is a social construct that can be challenged through political action. The fact that someone cannot walk and must use a wheelchair does not mean that she cannot attend college unless the college fails to provide wheelchair accessible washrooms, classrooms, and dormitories. By making a sharp distinction between physiological impairment and disability, the disability rights movement has fostered wide-ranging community mobilizations on an

array of issues spanning employment, transportation barriers, and more.

In many areas, the American disability rights movement, a vibrant coalition of various impairment-specific groups, has been a stunning success. As early as 1977, disability rights activists mobilized to occupy the Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) offices in San Francisco to protest the failure of the Carter administration to release disability access regulations pursuant to the Rehabilitation Act. After several weeks, the protests resulted in the successful release of the regulations. In the 1980s, activist groups like American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT) used both colorful direct access tactics and strategic litigation to draw attention to transportation barriers on buses, which were an affordable and critical mode of transportation for unemployed disabled people. Building on the symbolism of buses in American society (which gained political significance as a result of the Civil Rights movement) and aided by the influence of returning disabled Vietnam veterans, wheelchair users overcame the resistance of bus companies and the hostility of some bus drivers to implement a system of lifts and ramps to allow wheelchair users to independently use fixed-route bus systems. Years of activism culminated in the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, which prohibits discrimination against disabled people in employment, public transportation, and other arenas. ADAPT went on to fight for the provision of attendant services for disabled people to ensure people who require assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, and toileting can live independently in the community. *(cont. on page 69)*

Culture

BOOKS

Spiritual Progressive Faith Formation

*Sounding the Trumpet:
How Churches Can Answer
God's Call to Justice*

by Brooks Berndt and
J. Alfred Smith Sr.
A Pair of Docs Publishing, 2013

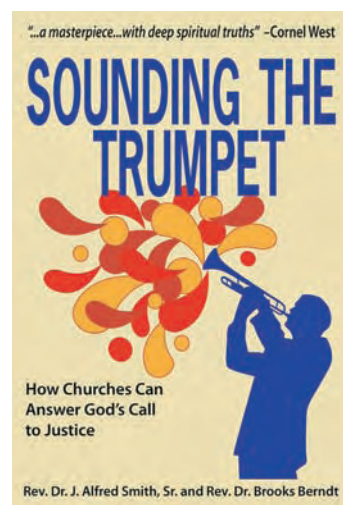
REVIEW BY PETER GABEL

FOR FORTY YEARS, J. Alfred Smith Sr. served as the senior pastor for the Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, a church with a national reputation for its ministry of black empowerment and liberation. Anyone who has been in Rev. Smith's presence has likely been altered by the experience. He is a profound and eloquent person who carries within himself a joyful spiritual confidence coupled with a deep concern about the abiding presence of social injustice in our world. I would say that it is a relief to be around him because he affirms in his being the central message that we all long to hear—that hope and wisdom are reconcilable, that we can see the world exactly as it is with its suffering, pain, and injustice, and still feel with a full heart that we can transcend what is toward what ought to be.

In his new book *Sounding the Trumpet: How Churches Can Answer God's Call to Justice*, he has joined with Rev. Brooks Berndt to try to convey—through an exchange of letters between Rev. Berndt and

himself—how a church can seek to become a force for social transformation. Beginning in 2002, Rev. Berndt began attending services at Rev. Smith's church; he was inspired and ultimately mentored by Rev. Smith before leaving the Bay Area to become pastor of a church in the predominantly white suburb of Vancouver, Washington. While a student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and a regular attendee at Smith's church services in Oakland, Berndt participated in many church-supported social justice and organizing campaigns, and in that context the relationship between spirituality and social and political activism seemed self-evident.

Once in Vancouver, however, Berndt found himself facing the challenge of transmitting his own spiritual and political conviction—his belief that spiritual redemption and fulfillment requires transforming not only the self but also the social world—to a middle-class congregation for whom that was a new, unfamiliar, and even threatening idea. As an aid in addressing this challenge, and also out of a desire to create a record of Berndt's efforts for the benefit of others seeking to build socially transformative churches and congregations across the country, Smith and Berndt settled on the idea of exchanging letters on a regular basis for a year's time. In the letters, Berndt describes his ideas for sermons, his efforts to integrate scripture with calls



to congregational action, his efforts to organize his members, and his attempts to involve his church in social justice campaigns. Smith responds with his own reflections, encouragement, and suggestions based on his lifetime of engagement in just this kind of effort.

Shaped into six parts entitled “From Crisis to Resurrection,” “Launching the Moses Project,” “Honing Your Craft and Sounding Your Trumpet,” “An Expanding Notion of Care,” “Teachable Moments,” and “A Great Time to be Alive,” the book tells two stories through these letters: the story of Berndt's first year as a pastor in Vancouver and the story of two men devoted to transforming the world and offering their loving relationship as a way of doing so.

Challenging Secular Activists to Address Spiritual Issues

The challenge facing Berndt (or “Brother Brooks,” as Smith addresses him in his letters) is the opposite of the challenge facing most liberal and progressive readers of *Tikkun*. We who work in secular Left contexts and who subscribe to *Tikkun*’s spiritual progressive vision often have difficulty persuading those with whom we work to embrace the “spiritual” side of that vision. Our colleagues in social action projects and in philosophical and social-theoretical conversations are often passionately committed to democracy, economic equality, and the expansion of political rights to historically excluded groups, but they are closed to, put off by, or simply uncomfortable with the notion that these social and political objectives should be inherently linked to the realization of our collective spiritual being, to our common longing to live

in a loving world in which our highest selves, our divine nature, could be made manifest on earth.

For those of us who are spiritual progressives working and living primarily in the secular activist world, it has for many years been essential to make this connection between social activism and spiritual meaning because we no longer believe it possible to transform the world in a positive direction without speaking to people’s immanent longings as spiritual-emotional beings rather than speaking only to their anger and frustration at being excluded or mistreated by those in power in the world as it is. The politics of “healing and repairing” the world is grounded in a perception that the inner and interhuman collective reality we currently inhabit together is a distortion of who we really are, and that the forms of activism that make manifest who we really are must themselves be “spiritualized” so that people experience themselves as

recognized, elevated, and affirmed in a new way through social and political activism itself.

Yet for secular readers and listeners who have come to believe that nothing is real except what is perceived by the five senses, that words like “love” apply only to the personal, private realm and have nothing to do with politics or activism, and that any notion of G-d or a transcendent reality is a silly hallucination from a bygone worldview that has no place in the modern, rational world, the idea that there is a necessary link between progressive politics and a distinctively spiritual activism is difficult to comprehend. As critical as the liberal, scientific, modernist revolutions have been in liberating all of us as individuals from the coercive, persecutory, and often religiously based ideologies of prior historical periods, they have also contributed decisively to the despiritualization of the social and natural worlds altogether, leaving us floating in our liberal separation and unanchored to any essential knowable, nameable social bond that could be the foundation of our politics.



Jewish Artists and the Bible in Twentieth-Century America

Samantha Baskind

“A fascinating and beautifully written examination of the role of biblical art in twentieth-century America.”

—Gary Shteyngart

“In our secular age, the idea that the Bible could shape a modern artist, never mind a modern Jewish and American artist, seems odd. Yet in her brilliant new book, Samantha Baskind shows how the Bible—not necessarily only a Jewish Bible (Tanach) but also the American Bible of the Puritans—echoes in Jewish American art. Looking at Jack Levine, George Segal, Audrey Flack, Larry Rivers, and R. B. Kitaj, Baskind provides a sophisticated and critical reading of how religious imagery survives and flourishes in our secular world.”

—Sander L. Gilman,
Emory University

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Challenging Spiritual People to Engage Politically

Seeking to build his progressive church, Berndt confronted the other side of this same liberal puzzle. Those who identify with the spiritual dimension of existence *rather than* the political dimension—whether they are religious and attend church, synagogue, or mosque, or are nonreligious and engage in yoga, meditation, and other nonreligious spiritual practices—also often experience the world as a series of “private” individualities, with each person seeking spiritual wholeness or fulfillment or connection to G-d as an expression of his or her private, liberal belief. From within this privatized spiritual center, the spiritual individual often sees the political dimension of reality as a despiritualized, flat reality of external concerns of no

inherent spiritual importance so long as the liberal right of every person to practice his or her religious or non-religious spirituality is protected. Here again, the inherited liberal worldview tends to make unnameable and therefore invisible the spiritual aspect of our collective, interhuman, social reality and the distortions within that interhuman reality in need of spiritual redemption through collective political action.

The churchgoers attending Berndt's services, like most others attending church or synagogue or mosques across the country, were therefore initially understandably more concerned with healing and repairing themselves (and perhaps protecting the rights of others to do so) rather than with healing and repairing the world, not out of selfishness, but out of a worldview in which the spiritual quest was understood to be a private, personal quest and in which the church was understood to be the place where people gather each to pursue that quest with the instructive guidance of sermons, readings from sacred texts, and voices lifted in song.

Integrating the Spiritual and the Political

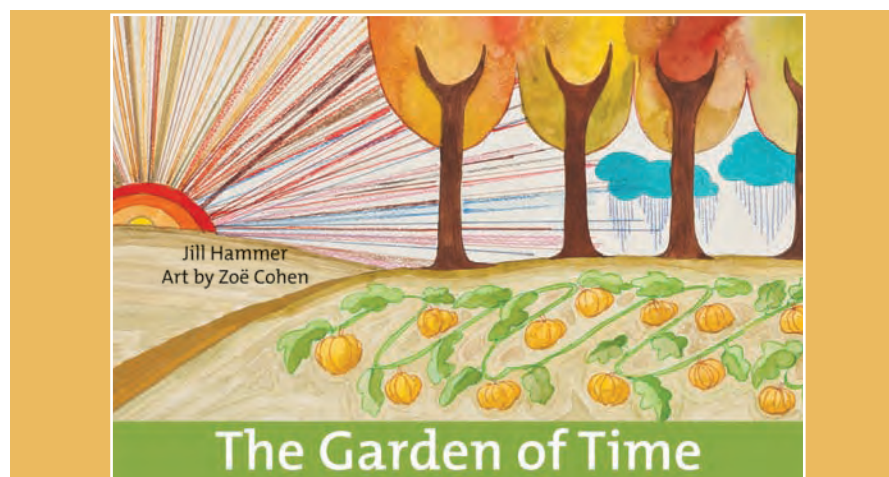
Using Berndt's letters to Smith, *Sounding the Trumpet* details Berndt's brilliant and apparently successful efforts to gradually link the spiritual to the political through evocative sermons highlighting the spiritual urgency of social justice concerns; through imaginative uses of weekly biblical readings that served as spiritually compelling analogies for the social justice concerns highlighted in the sermons; through the use of plays, diary entries, character imitations, and other creative methods of bringing spiritual life to injustices occurring in what the congregation might otherwise have experienced as the "external world"; and by organizing church members—both adult and child—to

engage in direct social protest and positive legislative action.

Often linked to contemporaneous events occurring in the state of Washington or to naturally occurring holidays and other forms of focused public awareness during the course of the year, Berndt's weekly church services addressed such topics as the earthquake in Haiti and caring for Haitian refugees, the environmental harm caused by a local coal plant alongside the need to simultaneously address the boilermaker union's concerns about economic dislocation that would be caused by the plant's closure, the spirituality of nursing, the relationship between NAFTA's undermining of Mexican corn farmers and the influx of Mexican immigrants (and our responsibility to care for the immigrant as a manifestation of the Biblical injunction to love the stranger), and, in response to the Gabby Giffords shooting in Arizona during the year of the book's exchange of letters, the

way that gun violence is reflective of collective social insecurity and Fear of the Other rather than isolated acts of mentally ill individuals.

But listing the topics addressed by Berndt during the course of the year does not do justice to the way he enriched these topics with spiritual life and morally compelling meaning. Consider the way he sought to enliven the moral meaning of Mother's Day: Since Mother's Day occurred simultaneously with the initiation of the Moses Project—the church's yearlong social action project directed toward improving the lives of children in the state of Washington—Berndt decided to highlight in his sermon the story of Lois Gibbs, the mother who felt impelled to challenge the toxic waste dump in Buffalo known as Love Canal after her child was stricken with multiple illnesses linked to the waste underneath his school. Berndt pointed out that at first Gibbs was afraid of taking action or speaking publicly:



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In this multigenerational story based on ancient Jewish legend, Adam and Eve walk through the Garden of Eden, noticing what is happening around them and deciding what holidays they will celebrate based on what they see, smell, hear, and taste.



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JOIN OUR MOVEMENT

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

like Moses she would stammer and stutter in her first attempts to go door-to-door to speak with her neighbors. But propelled by her love for her child and her fears that he might die after coming down with a 105-degree fever, she overcame her fear to become the leader of what became a world-famous grassroots campaign.

Rather than simply tell this story to the congregation, Berndt recruited two lay actors from the community to play the roles of Gibbs and well-known CNN interviewer Larry King, with Gibbs being interviewed by King about her fears and her commitment to transcend those fears through social action. Berndt participated as a third party, playing the part of a Love Canal pastor addressing “where God can be found in all of this,” how this drama can be understood as a sacred drama involving maternal love, popular courage, and the communal moral correction of a profound social injustice. Explaining this sermon and enactment, Berndt wrote to Smith: “I am striving

to create a consciousness in which church members can feel inspired to live out their own sacred drama of deliverance as they reenact the liberating courage found in Exodus.”

What is so striking about this example is the way Berndt took a secular holiday shared by the congregation, Mother’s Day, and deepened its spiritual meaning to include the power of maternal love and love generally, the overcoming of our personal fears and feelings of inadequacy, and the correction of social and environmental wrongs through collective action — all in a way that modeled what the congregation is itself trying to do: gain the courage to carry out a church social action project that would improve conditions for children in the state of Washington. In other words, Berndt thought through the process of preaching about an idea in a way that would also organize the church members by transforming his sermon into a drama of Moses reincarnated in a modern-day mother, in a manner that could foster an identification of church members with an ordinary person like them and inspire them to discover the spiritual and ethical potential in their own lives.

Berndt’s letters recount spiritual organizing efforts like this throughout the book. For example, he had the church members themselves vote on which social action project would be the focus of the Moses Project (Washington’s Children’s Alliance was selected), but only after first preaching about Moses’s self-doubt and limitations as a leader and his need to overcome his “learned helplessness” before he could lead his people out of Egypt. Berndt then placed a full-length mirror behind the ballot box on the altar when each person came up to cast his or her ballot, so that each person could see him or herself taking action. With Berndt’s leadership, the congregation then organized itself into subgroups, with one group preparing a dramatic performance related to the Children’s

Alliance, another producing a video, another organizing an art exhibition, another showing a relevant movie, and another conducting a book group. By the time the congregation engaged in the Moses Project’s culminating activity of a day of lobbying at the state capital on behalf of the state’s children, Berndt’s intention was to prepare the entire congregation to take ownership of the project’s goals in a way that embodied its spiritual meaning and purpose. Thus Berndt’s aim was not only to address a social injustice, but to do so in a way that would elevate and transform the church community itself so that the congregation would internalize the sense that “prophetic social action had become a permanent and thoroughly interwoven part of the fabric of church life.”

Mentorship and Faith Formation

Yet for all of Berndt’s passion and creativity, *Sounding the Trumpet* would not be nearly as effective as it is without Pastor Smith’s responses to each of his letters. Smith’s letters play a role in relation to Berndt similar to the one Berndt plays in relation to his own congregation. Berndt himself opens the book by acknowledging his own insecurity about how to proceed in his new position as pastor, and all of his ideas are first presented in the book not as *faits accomplis* but as ideas which he is reaching for the confidence to try. The point of the letter-writing framework is to show the younger pastor aspiring to carry out a visionary transformation of his church by seeking wisdom and guidance from his spiritual mentor and guide. Taken together, Smith’s replies to Berndt constitute a kind of mirror with wisdom that seems to enable Berndt to take the next risk.

Smith calls this process “faith formation”—the way in which others strengthen us to align our inner intuition of God’s call to justice with

practical action that manifests moral presence and spiritual power (as Berndt points out, it is this “maturing of faith formation” that gives Moses courage to grasp the snake that becomes the staff that opens the Red Sea). Throughout the letters, Berndt holds out his thoughts, intuitions, and plans, and Smith replies in a thoughtful, affirming way, utilizing his own interpretation of scripture or of past social justice struggles in his own life and church community to help Berndt move forward with confidence. This isn’t really a matter of giving advice but rather of transmitting spiritual depth and intensity to Berndt so that he in turn can bring out what Smith calls the “prophetic potential” of his church congregation.

I was struck throughout my reading of the book by how rarely this kind of affirming, spiritually strengthening exchange takes place on the Left or has taken place in my own (mostly nonreligious) life. Unfortunately,

the heritage of the Left is largely the heritage of the Enlightenment: a heritage of materialism, skepticism, mind separated from soul, and reason separated from the spiritual longing to live in a morally elevated and loving world. The political environment of our radical heritage has been one of conflict, anger, challenge, and rational debate—often thrilling and full of hope for a better world, but also full of denunciation and criticism, a battleground of argument.

After thirty years of social activism, political meetings, and intellectual debate on the Left following the upheavals of the 1960s, I found myself not very surprised that we had not won over the millions of people who were originally drawn to us, that they had drifted away from our vision of a transformed world because it felt less safe to join us in trying to change the world than to remain in their inherited communities (of family, work, and other familiar forms of social

connection) and the known patterns of intimacy that those communities provide.

In the exchange of letters between its two authors, *Sounding the Trumpet* models a different path for movements for social change—one that presumes that we who long to create a more loving and just world can embrace one another’s instinct toward openheartedness and lift each other up through an affirming, confidence-building discourse. Whether we identify as religious or not, we all need “faith formation,” and that can happen only if we grab onto each other’s goodness and help each other to make it manifest in the world. ■

PETER GABEL is editor-at-large of *Tikkun* and the author of *The Bank Teller and Other Essays on the Politics of Meaning* and *Another Way of Seeing: Essays on Transforming Law, Politics, and Culture* (available at quidprobooks.com and tikkun.org/store).

DOI 10.1215/08879982-2810158

On Violence, Joy, and Justice: The Poetry of C.K. Williams

All at Once

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014
by C.K. Williams

Writers Writing Dying

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012
by C.K. Williams

On Whitman

Princeton University Press, 2010
by C.K. Williams

REVIEW BY PAUL BRESLIN

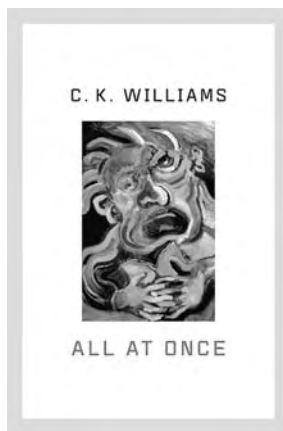
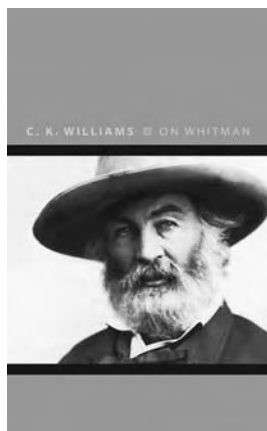
IN HIS PREFACE TO *On Whitman*, C. K. Williams says only Shakespeare compares with Walt Whitman in providing him an “inexhaustible” source of inspiration. Yet “with both, but particularly with

Whitman, I need a respite, surcease, so as not to be overwhelmed, obliterated. This is more raw than Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence,’ more primitive.”

On the dust jacket for the Whitman monograph, Michael Robertson calls Williams “one of our most Whitmanesque poets.” The idea of Williams as a Whitman for our time is not wrong, but it is incomplete and potentially misleading. Yes, Williams arrived in his third collection of poems at a long, sinuous free-verse line that reminds one, at first glance, of Whitman. Yes, one finds in Williams great sympathy for the suffering of others and a willingness to open poetry to a wide range of human experience, including

parts of it many of us would rather not see. And like Whitman’s, his poetry is informed with a political awareness, though it lacks Whitman’s pre-Civil War faith in an ideal America.

Though critics who accuse Whitman of lacking a sense of evil read him shallowly, it is true that Whitman is not much inclined to reflect analytically on evil, anxiety, and despair. There are moments when his insouciance wavers (for example, the passage in “Song of Myself” that begins “Somehow I have been stunned. Stand back!”). He does not so much resolve his doubts as dismiss them by sheer force of will and resume his affirmative stance. For the most part, his response to violence or injustice is to



bear witness and move on, not brood on its causality or accuse the violent or unjust. In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he says, “The poet judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing.” As for the rest, “faith is the antiseptic of the soul.” Williams’s temperament, in contrast, is skeptical. Perhaps not all the way down, but Whitman’s disinfectant is not in his first-aid kit. And sometimes he judges as fiercely as William Blake. There is remarkably little anger in Whitman but plenty of it in Williams, directed at political injustice and, sometimes, at the very terms of human existence. “Be not curious about God,” says Whitman, but Williams is, and it’s often a horrified fascination. Williams’s question is Job’s: “Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?” (Job 21.7)

The way Williams’s poems encounter the world also demarcates him from Whitman. Whitman is typically “afoot with [his] vision,” walking abroad in search of every kind of person, animal, plant, or landscape the expanding American nation has to offer and pausing to name and praise it in a line or two before pressing on. In Williams, the world comes to the poet without his seeking it, and sometimes against his will. Typically, he is indoors when something outside insinuates itself into his awareness. “From My Window,” the first poem

in *Tar* (1983), makes as good an illustration as any: two street people, whom the speaker has noticed before, appear beneath his study window; as he watches, a search to infer the history informing what he observes opens outward from that noticing. Whitman strides through the landscape seeking encounter; Williams is pulled, often reluctantly, into engagement with something he has not sought. Like the wedding guest confronted by Coleridge’s ancient mariner, “he cannot choose but hear.”

If Williams is our Whitman, he is a Whitman with post-Freudian psychology, prone to lacerating analysis of his own motives and a passion for moral inquiry and clarification. This desire for justice and moral self-knowledge drives an obsessively recursive syntax that sidewinds through hypotactic qualifiers and self-interruptions, so much unlike the paratactic sweep of Whitman’s lines that gather all things equally into anaphoric plenitude. He’s a Whitman with *tsuris* (problems), whose Jewishness contributes much to his way of attending to suffering and injustice.

Writers Writing Dying

Williams’s new book, *Writers Writing Dying*, is probably his angriest and most bitter yet—and this from a poet who called one of his collections *I Am the Bitter Name*. In part, as the title

suggests, the bitterness arises from the poet’s confrontation with his own mortality: he too is a writer writing dying. In “Cancer,” he acknowledges his bout with the illness that took the lives of both of his parents; “fuck you,” he tells the “cancer-fiend,” for all of the poets and friends it has extinguished—the poem is a sort of contemporary counterpart of William Dunbar’s “Lament for the Makers,” with its refrain of “*timor mortis con-turbat me*” (the fear of death disquiets me). It also amasses a roll-call of favorite poets who have written about death before him—it confronts not just the brute fact of death, but also the problem of finding a way to write about it at all and accepting the inevitable ending of our own lives and the lives of those we love.

The other source of anger and bitterness in *Writers Writing Dying* is the national debasement of ethics and language—two of Williams’s central concerns—in post-9/11 America, which Tom Engelhardt has aptly called “The United States of Fear.” It is not just his own death the poet confronts, but also the deaths inflicted in the name of “the homeland” on uncounted Iraqis and Afghans, as well as victims of drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and who can be sure where else, not to mention the deaths of our own troops. And he mourns the loss of a widely shared public discourse that names, acknowledges, and mourns those deaths. Reading these poems reminds me that the next loss, unless we come to our senses quickly, will be the earth itself.

The book’s first poem, “Whacked,” sets up its central concerns. The speaker begins by describing himself as “whacked” by the power of great poets, invoking ten of them by name. Reading them is exhilarating but also intimidating—it makes him question his own gift. So far, the violence is metaphorical, not literal. But then, he remembers that in organized crime, “whacked” also means murdered. The

connection suggests that poetry is itself a form of violence (though, unlike getting whacked by the mob, getting whacked by a poem is a desirable—and survivable—experience). But it also suggests that poetry does not inhabit a separate space immune to literal violence. One thinks of Wallace Stevens's conception of poetry as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. But in Williams's version, protection is impossible. The poet must submit his own voice to the language of the violence from without. This practice of letting one's voice be refracted through circumambient discourse becomes more difficult when that discourse is a smog of mendacity.

One can glimpse the difficulty in "Rat Wheel, Dementia, St. Michel," which begins, "My last god's a theodicy glutton": i.e., an excessive justifier of his own tolerance of evil. Unwilling to apologize for the cruelty he has permitted—and, since he has power to stop it, inflicted—the god himself is reduced to iterating "blah . . . blah," as if there were no language but dismissive nonsense in which to speak of it. The poem describes the fate of prisoners who, underneath the cathedral of Mont Saint-Michel, were locked inside a huge treadwheel, which they had to turn, like rats or squirrels, to convey food and supplies to those above. The wheel, though the poem doesn't mention it, was installed at the time of the French Revolution and in use until 1863; during that period the cathedral was used as a prison. For Williams, as it would have been for Blake, the conversion of cathedral to prison is not a shocking desecration; rather, it follows as the inevitable consequence of an authoritarian conception of religion.

Williams takes on our home-grown, fundamentalist style of religious authoritarianism in "Vile Jelly," alluding to the blinding of Gloucester by the Duke of Cornwall in *King Lear*. He complains that "they're tidying up the

Texas textbooks again. / Chopping them down to make little minds stay / the right size for the preachers not to be vexed." This metaphorical blinding of young minds suggests to him an ancient relief carving of "an ancient king" blinding his captives by inserting a fishhook (ironically suggested by the metaphor of Christ as fisher of men) into their lips to prevent them from averting their eyes from the king's spear. Then he compares himself to the prince in a fairy tale, imprisoned in an iron stove by a witch's curse. In Williams's interpretation, the prince has "locked himself in, welded the lid, / because of all he could no longer bear to behold." Williams protests versions of religious faith that suppress critical intelligence:

Who said: *With my eyes closed, I see more?* Not me.

Who said: *I study not to learn but hoping what I've learned might not be true?*
Not me again.

And yet, to the extent that, like the fairytale prince, he locks himself in because he cannot bear to see what he knows is happening outside, the poet is not entirely immune to such self-imposed blindness. The best he can do is to "peek warily out the door of [his] stove." He is "writing dying"—and resisting dying—not only of the body, but of the mind and the spirit, and not only in others, but in himself.

Not all the poems are so explicitly engaged with harsh political realities, but even in a reminiscent love poem, "Bianca Burning," the poet's long-ago affair involves him in crossing barriers of class and observing the damage that class difference inflicts on Bianca's family. Her parents live in a "caravan" of circus performers. Her father is a clown—and probably a very sad clown, for her mother leaves him each night to sleep with the circus owner. Whether she desires this liaison or, more probably, has no choice but to acquiesce, we are not told.

Newark Noir

The longest poem in the book, "Newark Noir," is at once a highly personal memoir and a reflection on history, race, and ethnicity. At first, the "noir" is literal and connected to the sensuous experience of the poet's childhood: black coal for the furnace, blackboards and ink at school, the black veils women often wore in those days, and the black of dirty snow and bicycle grease. At the end of the fifth stanza, "black" pivots toward the symbolic ("*Black Book of Europe*, proof of the war on the Jews"), setting up the sixth to turn to the social change that began in the poet's boyhood with the arrival of African Americans in Newark during the second Great Migration from the South, beginning in the early 1940s. The blacks take over from the Jews as scapegoats, which the Jewish boy experiences as a relief even though he knows that scapegoating blacks is also wrong. He writes:

The first black kids in our school, fine with me, because Clarence Murphy, fifteen in fourth grade, stopped beating me up because I'd killed Christ and raged instead with even more venom at them.

I was afraid of Clarence but not of black people, except that day on the bus: the sweat-stench of men Who'd worked hard and not had time yet to change. Though I already knew it was shameful, I fled.

Years pass, and when the poet returns to present-day Newark, he finds it utterly changed. There's industrial pollution ("Rivers with rainbows of oil on their lids") and much else besides:

Shopping malls, suburbs, urban flight, urban decay; downtown the department stores shuttered, gutted, then small businesses, theaters, the rest. Everywhere desolation, did no one see it approaching?
The finally hardly recognizable city; storms of dereliction, of evasion, had all but swept it away.

The worst derelicts, he suggests, are the holders of political office and executives of corporations who feel no responsibility to the city's inhabitants.

Writing to Beat Death

Taking a step back to look at the arc of the collection as a whole, one might consider the first and last poems and the journey traveled between them. "Whacked," though it touches on violence, ends on an affirmative note, as the aging poet imagines himself as a mare giving birth to "one more, only one more, poor, damp little poem." The poet affirms his desire, after "fifty years of it," to continue writing, and the valediction of writing as the source and sufficient ground for happiness.

The book ends with its title poem, which opens with a meditation on death, touching especially on the fear of dying while unconscious and thus not experiencing the ending of one's own story. As for death itself, it's "crashingly boring as long as you're able to think and write it." Writing becomes an attempt to outrun, if not death, than the awareness of death:

Think, write, write, think: just keep
galloping faster and you won't even
notice you're dead.

The hard thing's when you're not
thinking or writing and as far as
you know you *are* dead

Or might as well be, with no word for
yourself

And yet, death is also a source of poetic inspiration: "Where the hell are you that chunk of dying we used to call Muse?" (One thinks again of Stevens, who twice declares in "Sunday Morning" that "death is the mother of beauty.")

Thinking and writing, at least in the poet's "dream, of some scribbler, some think-and-write person," can finally go beyond itself into pure music, having "escaped even from language, from having to gab, from writing down the idiot gab." Death and life, speech and silence, converge, and it is in this state

that one would wish to die, when die one must. The poem ends with an exhortation, addressed perhaps to the poet himself but also to the reader: "Keep dying! Keep writing it down." This imperative connects the tension between fatal and pleasurable implications of the word "whacked" in the first poem not by resolving it, but by accepting such tension as an unavoidable condition of thinking and writing. The long trajectory of the book is neither purely linear (with a problem at the beginning solved at the end) nor circular (as in Eliot's "In my end is my beginning"), but a return to the beginning with a difference—a spiral perhaps, rather than a circle.

Much as I admire Williams, I don't want to imply that his work has no faults. He can be long-winded and heavy-handed in his relentless chewing on moral questions—that is the negative obverse of one of his strengths. He has been astonishingly prolific, especially in recent years. One might wish he would write fewer poems and bring more compression to each. But as with Whitman, who can also run on and belabor a point, one forgives these faults for the sake of the best work. If you like Whitman, you'll probably like Williams, and if you detest one you'll detest both. Yes, there are many second-drawer poems, but how much does this matter? Should a poet who writes 1,000 pages to get 300 pages of terrific poetry be valued less than a fastidious one who writes 350 pages, 300 of which are first-rate? Don't we come out in the same place, with 300 pages of cherishable poems?

Writers Writing Dying is an extraordinary book, but I would not recommend it as the starting-point for readers unfamiliar with Williams's poetry. For that, go back to *Tar*, in which he fully arrived at his mature style, or the relatively terse *Flesh and Blood*, in which he reined in his expansive lines by allowing only eight of them per poem. If those "whack" you the way they whacked me, you'll want to

explore the others, including *Writers Writing Dying* and his forthcoming collection *All at Once*.

All at Once

Very unlike the rage-filled and sorrowful poems I've discussed thus far, the central section of *All at Once* is "Catherine's Laughter," a celebration of his marriage (published separately as a chapbook by Sarabande Books, 2013). At first it portrays both partners as susceptible to depression and anger, and the husband as susceptible to jealousy. But just when they are most out of sorts, Catherine's generous response is to seize on the ridiculous within the gloomy, and her restorative laughter brings the couple back into harmony. The tone is affectionate, intimate, and at times joyful, but Williams does not idealize marriage. "Catherine's Laughter" is sandwiched between two other book-length sections: "All at Once" and "All at Once Again." These portions, though not unremittingly dark, shift, for the most part, toward the blue-indigo end of the spectrum. At 182 pages, *All at Once* is about three times as long as *Writers Writing Dying*.

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux's publicity notice describes these pieces as "musings," situated "somewhere between prose poems, short stories, and personal essays." All of them are unlineated. Some of them tell stories, but many do not; they brood on an idea, an isolated memory, or people and things seen in passing. Some of them could be thought of as very short essays, something like Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (but with more metaphor and less abstraction). A few of the shortest read almost as koans—e.g., "Anniversary":

"It's not so bad all the time being
married to you," Catherine tells me.
"You mean it's not bad being married to
you all the time."
"No, I mean it's not bad all the time
being married to you."

Occasional pieces, such as “The Sign Painter,” work as condensed short stories. The longest piece, “A Bedroom in Africa,” is the one that feels most like an essay. Reading each of the pieces requires taking one’s bearings in relation to its genre—what kind of writing is this an instance of, and how do I know? That challenge can be bracing: it wakes the reader (and perhaps the writer) from the complacencies of a genre’s settled conventions, its recipes for closure. But for a writer who likes to digress, exfoliate, and explore, it has its dangers as well.

Williams’s best poems usually draw their power from slow, patient accumulation of implied meanings. But their power is cumulative—I can’t think of a Williams poem for which I feel that only these exact words in this exact order will do, and that to change any part would spoil the whole. They are wonderful poems, but they are imperfect, disproportioned, and perhaps the better for being so. They participate in a broad trend, from the 1960s down to the present day, toward suspicion of strong formal closure as untrue to the opacity and tangledness of experience.

Williams’s most concise poems are the eight-liners of *Flesh and Blood*, in which lineation reins in the temptation to sprawl, while the length of the lines makes room for the fullness of texture and complex syntax he has developed in his longer poems.

I’m all for crossing boundaries of preconceived genres, but I’m not sure that “somewhere between prose poems, short stories, and essays” is a good place for this particular writer to be. The miniatures in *All at Once* don’t have the scope required for the accretion of contexts and minute particulars that animate his best prose and poems. In his powerful memoir, *Misgivings*, the boyhood world of the poet and the elaborate approach-avoidance dance of his parents rise slowly out of inchoate memory as we read. There are no intentional line breaks, so there can be no interplay between syntax and the line, parsing and pacing the poem as it unfolds. If brevity, of itself, made for concision, the shortest of these new writings would be his most concise. But one can be brief without being concise. The shorter the poem (and I’d risk extending this

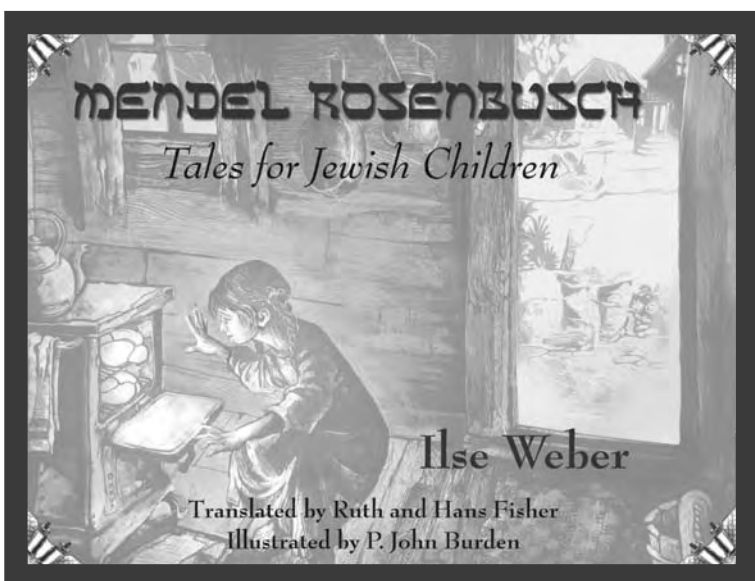
idea to essays and fictions as well), the more the reader asks why X has been included and Y left out. What is the principle of exclusion that allows only these few words and banishes all others? Williams is not a maker of epigrams, nor would I wish him to be. But his familiar expansive voice often seems a bit cramped in these close prose quarters. Much of *All at Once* feels like entries from a writer’s journal—a very gifted writer’s journal, to be sure, but more like preliminary sketches than fully realized poems, essays, or short stories.

All at Once may be longer and more diffuse than I would wish, yet within it are a number of first-rate writings, whatever genre we may assign to them—enough to make a shorter, more consistent book. The best of the poems to Catherine and, still more, the lovely final piece in the book, “Again,” are balm to any reader still smarting from the harsh truth-telling of *Writers Writing Dying*.

The Work of the Artist

Rather than call the roll of the best items, as poet and critic Randall

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Jarrell used to do, I'll close by looking at a few that touch, directly or indirectly, on the vocation of the artist, which in this collection also stand out for their moments of self-forgetting, their reception of another's experience, another's being. One might take them as sketches toward an implicit poetics.

"The Last Circus," the opening piece, is in a sense about artistic performance. This is a rather seedy circus, with a "scrawny horse" whose trainer "also plays the clown" but is "not very funny." The tightrope-walker's costume is "blotchy." Behind the tent lie "crumpled pizza boxes, plastic bags, beer bottles, cans, other indecipherable junk." In the "sparse audience," only a "disconsolate infant, who's just woken crying," is pleased by the clown and "like Shiva, foliates another pair of hands and heartily applauds." One thinks of Stevens's "The Man on the Dump," and Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion." In both, the poet can only continue by throwing away the already said ("The dump is full / Of images," says Stevens. "One rejects / The trash"; Yeats climbs down from his "ladders" of myth and mysticism to reenter the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.") Both of those poems conceive of poetic creation as requiring an act of destruction to make room for it, so it is appropriate that, although other Hindu deities also have multiple arms, Williams chooses Shiva, whose "role is to destroy the universe in order to re-create it."

"The Sign Painter" describes what the poet calls "the first real artist I ever met." The setting is a summer camp "that hired men off the Bowery in New York," with the result that most of them couldn't stay sober and left before summer's end. The sign painter was hired as a dishwasher, but when word got out that "he had once been a sign painter, they commissioned him to paint the camp logo on their station wagon in his spare time." He fascinates the young poet-to-be and confides in him, sensing perhaps a

kindred spirit. He works "carefully, slowly, I suspected too slowly"; his young confidant suspects that this perfectionism and slow pace of production explain why he had stopped being a sign-painter. With the logo half-finished, the sign painter leaves abruptly, arousing the anger and contempt of his employers—and leaving them with a problem, since no one else in the camp has the skill to finish the work. "I had a post-card from him a few weeks later," the poet recalls,

from the racetrack at Saratoga: there were only a few words on it, but they were written in a calligraphy as striking as the one he'd been using on the station wagon. I kept it for a long time; it may have been the first thing in my life I treasured just for its own sake, without having to authenticate its worth by sharing it with someone else. I wish I still had it.

L'art pour l'art in a compulsive gambler's postcard? Yet this obscure sign painter turns out to resemble Louis Kahn, the famous architect whose "meticulous patience brought him magnificent buildings, but much worldly frustration." As Williams points out in his poem "Kahn," the architect "died bankrupt" because his endless revisions "lost many commissions"; many of his best projects were never built, and therefore never paid for. In both poems the artist's uncompromising dedication to his work is a refusal—perhaps involuntary—of worldliness and the comforts that worldliness can bring.

Worldliness and the driven compulsion of the artist appear juxtaposed in "Codes," which begins with an account of how the famously rich Rothschild family "wrote their confidential business letters to other members of the family in code." The poem then turns its attention to "Robert Walser, the great Swiss author," who "after he had gone insane" wrote, according to his translator, on "narrow strips of paper covered with tiny, antlike markings

ranging in height from one to two millimeters." They were deciphered only after his death. In his schizophrenia, he turned against the iconic tool of the writer, the pen; he used only pencils, "painstakingly sharpened." Williams concludes with a comparison:

I've always been struck by the raging commercial single-mindedness of the Rothschilds—but Walser, what passion, what devotion, and with writing tools that for all he knew were secret spies, secret foes.

Single-mindedness devoted to commerce makes one rich; single-mindedness devoted to art, however, is dangerous: it can lead to poverty, perhaps even to madness.

The most brutal collision of artistic vocation and commodification comes in "Schulz," which concerns Bruno Schulz, "the great writer and artist," a Polish Jew who was shot in Drohobych by a Gestapo officer in 1942. Legend (which, Williams points out, is disputed) has it that Schulz had been "under the protection" of a Gestapo officer, Felix Landau. When Landau shot a Jewish dentist under the protection of another officer, Karl Günther, Günther took revenge by killing Schulz. Meditating on this story Williams says:

"You shoot my Jew, I shoot yours."
One vermin for another, and how horrible, more than that, how insane to contemplate that Schultz, as Jew, had become a kind of *currency*, a medium of exchange, and that the other, nameless, vanished Jew, the one who's lost to us in every way, no image, no story, one of that unthinkable infinitude, becomes in history something like a slug, a false coin, a chunk of worthless lead to slide in a slot.

What especially impresses me is that, for Williams, the greatest cruelty is not the obvious, easily sentimentalized one: "How horrible that this great Jewish artist was arbitrarily killed by a Nazi." There are two things worse: first, the commodification of both

victims, as if Jews were fungible like money, and second, the idea that, because of his accomplishments, Schulz's life is intrinsically more valuable than that of an anonymous victim. Both of the murdered men were equally—and infinitely—valuable as human beings, but for the Nazis, they were equally valuable as, say, two nickels are equally—and negligibly—valuable, to be saved or spent at whim.

Looking at all these pieces together, one finds the familiar notion of the artist as an outsider—the opposite of the worldly, acquisitive person—destined to suffering by the very choice to be an artist. But one finds that notion complexly qualified and stripped of its sentimentality and self-pity. Schulz dies not because he is an artist but because he is a Jew in Nazi-occupied Poland. The single-minded concentration of the writer Walser is akin to the single-minded concentration that for the Rothschilds produced great wealth rather than great art. The great architect Louis Kahn is not altogether different from the obscure sign painter too fond of booze and the ponies. (And it may be through their cautionary examples that Williams decided that it is better to write too much than too little.)

Williams sees artistic vocation as part of a spectrum of human possibilities, not as something separate from other aspirations. Which brings us full circle to Whitman, who also saw the poet not as a special creature, but as one human being among others, writing, “And what I assume, you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Both Williams and Whitman, at their best, point out for the reader something that, at some level, one has already experienced and known, but not yet made fully conscious. They teach us to know our own minds. ■

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DOI 10.1215/08879982-2810170

LEVINE (continued from page 10)

itself does not shy from pushing powerful Jewish critics of Israel to the forefront. The willingness of even mainline Christian churches to criticize Israel is at least in part due to the activism of progressive American Jews.

From my experience, perhaps the most important, if little discussed, impact of Jewish support for Palestinian struggle lies in the creation of shared identities toward the future, not just between solidarity activists but also inside Palestine/Israel. Over the last twenty years, during the Oslo generation, increasing numbers of American Jews have become directly engaged in pro-Palestinian activism not merely through groups like Americans for Peace Now, which remain firmly in the Zionist camp, but also through more critical Palestinian-led movements. Through organizations like Global Exchange or Palestinian groups like the Freedom Theatre, the frequent presence of American Jews at the front lines of the Occupation, witnessing ongoing Israeli violence and oppression, has made it more difficult for the mainstream, organized Jewish pro-Israel narrative to hold up inside the community. As a result, these activist Jews have faced increasingly strident attacks by more conservative establishment Jews.

At the same time, the greater frequency of solidarity travels has encouraged the emergence of a globalized and open identity among thousands of Palestinians, from activists to ordinary citizens in the occupied territories—one in which Jews, Israelis, and international supporters become part of a larger collective based on issues of fundamental human rights and fighting oppression and the Occupation. While this collective identity is certainly not challenging the hegemonic, nationalist Palestinian identities, it is broadening the space for collaboration and for imagining and building a shared future.

During the three Freedom Bus rides that have occurred thus far, Jews have

comprised upward of one-third of the participants each year. This is not the only solidarity tour available to activists; indeed, Rabbis for Human Rights and the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions also run tours with even higher rates of Jewish participation. But the Freedom Theatre's tour is unique in that it is the only tour that is focused on the prism of culture, and specifically cultural production, as a primary way to experience, learn about, and ultimately help resist and transcend the Occupation.

Discussions with the Jewish members of this year's ride provide important insights into the motivations and importance of such experiences. Three of the Jewish participants were college age, two of them were veterans of the Taglit Birthright tours, and one was a founder of the Open Hillel movement. Two more were retirees with a history of activism, one was a Ph.D. student, and the last was one of the main organizers of the bus ride.

Witnessing the Occupation

All the Jewish participants in the Freedom Bus ride—and indeed all the participants, regardless of their heritage—said their main reason for joining the ride was to witness the realities of the Occupation firsthand in direct solidarity with Palestinians and to be able to share their stories with as wide a public as possible. This includes both the broader public and, not surprisingly, the Jewish community. As one participant explained, “For me, the most important purpose of the trip was to move from a researcher to an eyewitness. It bolsters internal confidence in discussions, and with so few people having visited the West Bank, it's a great way to intimidate a resistant listener.”

Eyewitness experiences are particularly powerful in relation to discussions about the reality of Israeli rule, which tend to occasion intense debates filled with anger and denial. As another participant explained after listing all the Israeli crimes he'd witnessed during the

Freedom Bus ride, “All of these things stand in stark contrast to the general notion propagated in the U.S. media . . . that Palestinians (and Arabs in general) are terrorists and are out to destroy the Jews and Israel.” Another rider added:

I think that there are so many aspects that get challenged in the ride, simply because witnessing the reality of Israel’s oppression challenges the propaganda. . . . The trip challenges the myth that the Israeli state is somehow a victim or even that there are two equal sides in this conflict. There are not. When a nonviolent peace march gets teargassed week after week after week, there is no parity between those doing the teargassing and those being gassed.

Put simply, by going to the occupied territories and experiencing life as Palestinians do on a daily basis, most people shed whatever neutrality—never mind partisan feelings toward Israel—they might have harbored. As a result, they join the conflict fully engaged against the Occupation. This is something Palestinian activists know well, which is why they are willing to put up with a constant flow of foreigners taking over their homes (an occupation of sorts to be sure, but a more collaborative one that they are willing to suffer if it means helping to spread their experiences to a wider audience).

But it’s not just witnessing the Occupation that is important—it’s witnessing it as and for Jews. As another rider explained:

During my visit, I considered myself to be representing Jews and tried to convince all whom I met that not all Jews are bastards. One of the memorable conversations we had during our trip was when I asked a Palestinian living side by side with a settlement, whether the settlers were “religious Jews,” and he replied by telling me that they could not be since anyone with religious beliefs could never act the way these people behave.

Another participant, who was a recent participant in Birthright, went even further, explaining: “I signed up for the trip because I had been living in Jerusalem, studying at the egalitarian Yeshiva. By being in Jerusalem without doing anything to directly oppose the Occupation, I was by definition complicit in it.” Not surprisingly, given this view, when she returned to the Yeshiva after the ride, she delivered a lecture to her students with photos and videos from her trip. While some in the entirely Jewish and Israeli audience reacted with extreme anger, most were appreciative and at least willing to consider the implication of her experiences.

This perception was shared by the rider from the Open Hillel movement, who agreed that direct experiences such as this are crucial to providing the context for the ongoing struggle to make space for progressive, anti-Occupation, and even anti-Zionist voices within the Jewish community to be considered a legitimate part of mainstream, organized Jewish community discussions about Israeli policies and the relationship between American Jews and the Jewish state.

A recent Birthright participant had the most detailed analysis of how joining the Freedom Bus changed her perspectives, and through her, those of so many others:

I signed up for this trip because I had gone on Birthright in February of 2012 and really wanted to go back and see the other side. . . . The experience I had, it was very humanizing. On my trip to Jenin and with the Freedom Bus, I got to be immersed in a beautiful, rich culture with loving and proud people. I think the trip gave me the ability to meet with many different Palestinians with different ideals and aspirations. Taking this trip after Birthright was incredible. I mean you really can’t compare the two at all, but the trip on the Freedom Bus is the most amazing thing I’ve ever done in my life. I’m still processing everything. The most

important thing that I learned during this trip is that Israel is indeed a terrorist state and government and what they do to the Palestinian people is horrific.

Especially what the settlers do and how much they get away with.

My Own Experience

In many ways, my recent trip with the Freedom Bus was a bookend to the first time I reported from Palestine/Israel for *Tikkun* in April 1996. Then the focus was on the first Palestinian legislative elections, which were a landmark for likely being the freest in the region’s history. As I wrote then, it truly seemed that it was the “birth of a nation” in Palestine, while the Zionist dream was, in many respects, coming to an end.

At that time, at the height of the Oslo peace negotiations, it was apparent that the hyperconsumerist “post-Zionist” ethos dominating Israel was not sustainable in the long term—on the ground, it was already clear that Oslo’s promises were not being made into a viable reality. At the same time, however, the kind of ethos that would later produce the Freedom Bus ride was already present in the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams, which puts well-trained peace activists in frontline Palestinian communities.

Those Christian activists stood as witness to the realities of the Occupation and, when possible, intervened to stop violence and oppression, inspiring *Tikkun* to call for the creation of a Jewish counterpart. “Jewish Peacemaker Teams” never emerged as such, but in the ensuing years groups like the International Solidarity Movement, the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions, B’Tselem, and other groups brought significant numbers of Jews to participate in similar acts of witnessing-as-solidarity and resistance.

No Fear in Palestine

Throughout the Freedom Bus ride, not a single Jewish participant expressed any fear of being in the occupied territories—and particularly on the

front lines—as an openly Jewish person. Indeed, very often their Jewish identity made the immediate bond with Palestinians with whom they interacted that much stronger—much as white South Africans who joined the anti-Apartheid struggle were at the forefront of creating a new, post-Apartheid community with blacks. The fact that the Freedom Theatre itself was cofounded by Juliano Mer-Khamis (an Israeli with a Jewish mother and Palestinian father) and Zakaria Zubeidi (a Palestinian who grew up in the Jenin Refugee Camp), and that several senior personnel and collaborators are or have been Jewish and Israeli, puts the lie to any belief in an inherent ethnic or religious conflict between Jews and Palestinians. On the front lines, one is simply for or against the Occupation, behind or in front of the tear gas, rubber bullets, and metal bullets. “They target everyone the same—Palestinian, Israeli, or international,” the leader of the Nabi Saleh solidarity committee explained to me as we wound down the weekly Friday protests.

If the Freedom Bus ride confirms anything, it's that the mythologies and propaganda of the Israeli government and the leadership of the organized Jewish community cannot withstand exposure to the light of day. The more Jews and others take such trips—and their numbers, like the number of such solidarity tours, are rising quickly—the more Israel will lose the support of its most important constituencies. The fact that almost every member of the bus ride—regardless of religion, nationality, or previous position—endorsed the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement by the time the ride ended shows the potential of such experiences to delegitimize the Israeli state and, ultimately, Zionism as an exclusivist and inherently “militant nationalist movement” (as the Israeli sociologist Gershon Shafir described the movement's character as early as 1909). When combined with the added intensity of traveling with a group of talented

actors and artists associated with the Jenin Freedom Theatre and other arts communities, this eyewitness experience seems to open a new front in the war for Palestine/Israel—one on which Israel increasingly holds the weaker and ultimately losing position. ■

BARGLOW (continued from page 12)

‘positive’ in self-image,” Ehrenreich asks, “without being the world's happiest and best off people?” In the United States, “a land of opportunity,” neither mainstream nor New Age religion solves life's problems for most people.

The flip side of proverbial American optimism is this country's repudiation of those who do not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Success and health are thought to result from sincere effort and the right mindset. So being ill, like being poor, gets blamed on a failure of individual initiative.

Jimmie Holland, a psychiatrist at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York quotes a patient expressing precisely this mindset: “I know I have to be positive all the time and that is the only way to cope with cancer—but it's so hard to do. I know that if I get sad, or scared or upset, I am making my tumor grow faster and I will have shortened my life.”

Dr. Holland comments: “How did this phenomenon of blaming the patient for the disease come about? It undoubtedly is related to the fact that cancer has been a mystery for so long, as to both cause and cure. When we know little about something, we become even more frightened by it and develop myths to try to explain it.”

Medical Science and Us

Over the past several centuries, we have brought many illnesses within the scope of medical science and have come up with effective remedies. So why would anyone today attempt to account for illness in terms of destiny or retribution? One reason is that so



In New Age contexts, a valuable insight—that transformation is possible and we need not resign ourselves to the status quo—can get twisted into a mirage of counterfeit expectations.

many chronic physical conditions still baffle the medical profession and leave patients feeling helpless. Viewing illness as a kind of punishment is one way of bringing it within the scope of explanation and possible control. We human beings are infinitely resourceful meaning-making machines, and if necessary we're willing to reach beyond the boundaries of medical science in pursuit of answers.

Moreover, the accounts of illness that medical science gives are, in a way, ultimately unsatisfying, because they don't adequately explain why a *particular* person falls ill. Suppose for example that my doctor tells me that I have an incurable cancer caused by a tumor whose growth is ravaging my body. That news just raises the next question: why have *I* been cursed with a body that falls prey to such ravaging? Even if my cancer was environmentally caused, I still don't understand why *my* body in particular has turned out to be so vulnerable to an environmental toxin. No matter how elaborate any explanation may be, it halts at the doorstep of the question, “Why me?” Wrestling with this question, the mind sometimes comes up with a facile answer such as “This was meant to be” or “Somehow, I deserve this.”

The connections we make between illness, responsibility, and self-esteem are often conflicting, even tortured,

ones. Understanding our own contributions to illness can, of course, help us find a way to get well. Sometimes these contributions are collective ones. For example, humans are poisoning the environment to the point that it increasingly endangers us—hence we “reap what we sow.” Karma, understood as an account of *social* consequences, expresses the same insight. But when we regard ourselves individually as tainted or cast into a spiritual shadow, then our search for meaning is stretching beyond its plausible reach.

Mindfulness and Illness

When we fall seriously ill, we may yet retain (or discover!) a sense of gratitude for the body’s healing power, for the health care we receive, for the company

of those dear to us, and for the wider world that sustains us all. On the other hand, illness can lead us to feel terribly alone, bereft of any sense of community, of protection from harm, and even of a sense of continuity between today and tomorrow. Humbled, we take the hand of a beloved, walk along a beach, meditate in a cathedral, or play with a child. In choices like these (along with good health care) may lie our best support.

Going forward with our lives in this way does not signify resignation to a medical condition—or, for that matter, to any unacceptable situation in the world around us. Many *Tikkun* readers will be familiar with the famous first verse of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer,” written during World War II:

Vast and life giving universe, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Less well-known is the prayer’s second verse, adapted as follows:

Living one day at a time, taking, as have wise sages of old, this fallen world as it is, while acknowledging the distance between this and our true potential, may I be reasonably happy in this life, within this mysterious cosmos, abiding in this understanding as long as consciousness allows. Amen. ■

LEVY-LYONS (continued from page 14)

tremendous social pressure to conform to a mainstream, secular understanding of what’s “reasonable.”

But this is precisely the problem. We spiritual progressives feel negative social pressure if we speak out in favor of justice, but the Expediter feels no negative social pressure against his shady career. It’s precisely in these places of discomfort—*because* they are places of discomfort—that we need to speak up. We need to keep holding up our spiritual and moral vision so that we can slowly turn the tide on the discourse of expediency.

The religious Right has one thing right: there is a breakdown of morality in our culture. Our society is oriented around the financial bottom line, often at the expense of moral values. It was good luck that in the case of the Arizona bill, the financial bottom line and the just outcome were one and the same. But that is often not the case—especially in cases concerning environmental stewardship, gun rights, and health care. There are often hard choices to be made, and that needs to

be publicly acknowledged. If companies and politicians continue to do the right thing for the wrong reason, as they did in Arizona, the kind of sweeping systemic change we need will never happen.

The world needs an entire shift of consciousness. We need a religious counterculture speaking out for justice in the language of spirituality and morality on the *grounds* of spirituality and morality—voices that say expediency is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is a healthy planet earth and peace and justice for everyone. This will *not* always be in the immediate best interest of business. It will *not* always be in the best interest of Americans. It’s not politically expedient and it’s not financially expedient. It involves protecting people who have no political influence. It involves protecting our environment, even though businesses will lose money in the short run. It involves love as the foundational principle of our society.

This is why progressive and spiritually oriented organizations like the Network of Spiritual Progressives promote a “new bottom line” in which decisions are made not just in the interest of economic expediency, but also in

the interest of ethics and compassion, prioritizing the overall health of humans, other animals, and the planet as a whole. Abolitionist Theodore Parker famously said, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Those who prevail in the end will not be those who look out only for their own, but those who look out for all the creatures of the earth, large and small. This is the great hope of liberal and liberationist theology—that some day the cynicism of the Expeditors among us will be confounded, and goodness and love will prevail right here on this earth. It is our sacred work as humans to expedite that day. ■

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JACOBS (continued from page 16)

The prison administration wasn't going to let me sit Shiva in the prescribed manner. They said it wasn't a basic tenet of the religion. I told the rabbi and he called the warden and told her that a Jewish person had to be given the opportunity to carry out the obligation to sit Shiva for her parents. It was an absolute necessity. She understood after that. Rabbi Richter, along with my attorneys, was instrumental in my being able to go to my parents' funeral and sit Shiva for them in the traditional way—a "first" in the new women's prison.

My husband, Jesse Tafero, was also on death row at Florida State Prison in Starke. He was executed before both our names were cleared. I still struggle with his death. Our original relationship was flawed, but underneath it all there was an enduring love that sustained itself and us despite the years of separation. Jesse and I had kept our relationship going through our letters, writing back and forth every day for fourteen years, until his death. Jesse was executed in a horrific manner, with flames leaping from his head as a result of a malfunction in the electric chair. It was decried as an example of torture in the international press.

Jesse's execution was another "first" that Rabbi Richter and I went through together. There had never been a time when an inmate had to be consoled over the execution of her mate.

Shabbat in the Prison Chapel

Rabbi Richter visited with me on death row in the hospital confinement area until, after about six months, he was able to get permission for me to come to services. That was a real blessing! For me, it was like walking into another dimension where I could interact with people in the flesh, not just in the ether. I thought I might be jealous of having to share my time with the rabbi with others. As it turned out, I found that our time together was enhanced and

not diminished by the sense of community that developed among our little group.

Four years later, in 1981, when my sentence was changed to life imprisonment, I was able to join the regular monthly services in the chapel along with the other women without a security escort.

When we gathered together, we clapped and sang, and laughed and cried. We would read the Torah portion together and discuss how it might apply to our daily lives and problems. Rabbi Richter tried to make it as nice and as *hamishe* (homey) as possible. After all, it was only once or twice a month, and the feeling had to last as long as possible. We would go back to our cells and have Bible studies with our non-Jewish friends after his visits, comparing perspectives and feeling far more knowledgeable as a result of his insights and stories. He served as our link to the larger Jewish community at a time when we were particularly open to receiving the teachings and in need of the connection to our heritage.

In 1992, after seventeen years, the federal court overturned my sentence and conviction by granting my habeas corpus petition, and Rabbi Richter was there to help me celebrate. We had a big party at my attorney's house, and the rabbi was there. He was one of the only close links I had left that had been continuous in my life; he had been visiting me in prison for fifteen years. He made sure I knew that he would be there for me whenever I needed. Since my release, I have called on him many times for counsel and consolation, for guidance and grounding.

Although Rabbi Richter has retired, he is still counseling and comforting those in need. We see each other on Skype these days. I have become an author, yoga teacher, and human rights activist, sharing the spiritual knowledge that was honed by Rabbi Richter's teachings and guidance. I call myself "Sunny" now—a nickname from childhood—because it suits me in my bright and shining new life! ■

LADIN (continued from page 20)

The Drawbacks of Normativity

Wherever we travel in the Jewish world, we can see the positive effects of efforts to bring human laws, lives, and communities into line with divine standards of justice and loving-kindness. But those who don't fit communal norms know the downside of this ideal: its tendency to cast an aura of sanctity over flawed and even oppressive social structures and to frame efforts to make communal norms more inclusive as threats to the essence and existence of the community. It's easy to see this in the Orthodox world, where rabbis frequently declare that the sacred nature of Jewish communities obligates them to, for example, treat gay people as "abominations." But we also find this kind of thinking in non-Orthodox Jewish venues such as Jewish Federations that fret about siphoning off scarce resources to serve the "special needs" of LGBTQ Jews, synagogues loathe to risk losing members who are uncomfortable with queer-inclusive rituals like same-sex marriage, and Reform or Reconstructionist synagogues that see no need to talk about how to serve the needs of LGBTQ Jews because their movement policies—their sacred norms—have officially resolved such issues.

The emphasis on sacred normativity in Judaism and the Jewish community harms those, like LGBTQ Jews, who don't fit established norms. It also harms the Torah by obscuring the queerness on which its moral and spiritual vitality depend. In the human realm, normativity and queerness are mutually exclusive: what's queer, by definition, isn't normative, and what's normative isn't queer.

But the Torah doesn't traffic in binary thinking: God is One, simultaneously the ordainer of sacred norms and absolutely queer (beyond human conception). Exodus begins with a radical break from normativity: slaves aren't supposed to march out of slavery, and the laws of nature aren't normally suspended in

support of liberation. Moses expounds his Deuteronomic vision of a perfect society to a rebellious horde wandering in the wilderness. As many LGBTQ Jews have noticed, queerness keeps cropping up in post-Mosaic biblical characters, from Jonathan, whose love for David trumps his loyalty to his father and his own aspirations to kingship, to Ruth, whose devotion to Naomi leads her to join the Jewish people. Even David, the king who comes to symbolize messianic hopes for a world governed by sacred norms, is a norm-defying shape-shifter who morphs from shepherd, to celebrated warrior, to court musician, to rebel leader, to divinely inspired psalmist, to righteous king, to adulterous murderer, and, finally, to impotent figurehead. The prophet Jeremiah, agonized by Israel's failure to adhere to sacred norms, presents God as waxing nostalgic for the days when queer wanderings rather than normativity defined God's relationship with the Jewish people: "I remember the devotion of your youth, when you followed me through a land unsown."

Time and again, the Torah zeroes in on a character at a moment of norm-defying transition—and time and again, it turns away in boredom when that character has settled into a stable identity, even when that character is as central as Abraham. What did Abraham do for the first seventy-five years of his life? Other than noting his relocation with his father to Haran and his marriage to Sarah (then Sarai), the Torah has nothing to say. Nor is it very interested in the largely passive Isaac. Religious communities tend to ignore, excoriate, or exile those who don't fit social norms, but as Isaac's wife Rebecca's story demonstrates, the Torah lavishes attention on characters when they are the least normative. Despite its patriarchal bias, the Torah records her decision to leave her people to marry a cousin she'd never met in a land she'd never seen. It also chronicles her difficult pregnancy, the pains of which portended the rivalry between her twins, Jacob and Esau. The Torah

details Rebecca's subversion of her blind and aged husband's efforts to pass on his blessing—and the relationship with God that went with it—to the first-born Esau, rather than Rebecca's favorite, Jacob, telling us how she dressed and coached the smooth-skinned Jacob so that he could pass as his hairy, hyper-masculine brother, thereby violating the patriarchal norms of obedience, primogeniture (the right of the first-born Esau to inherit Isaac's blessing), and, of course, honesty.

As the Torah makes clear, this shocking deviation from human norms is essential to the establishment of the Jewish people and the human-divine relationship that God attempts to model through Israel: Jacob would never have married Leah and Rachel, fathered the children who founded the twelve tribes, or won the name "Israel," without these acts of radical queerness and the estrangement and wanderings they precipitated. By lavishing attention on these figures at their moments of change, transition, risk, wandering, and norm-violating, and ignoring the presumably normative majority of their lives, the Torah presents our biblical mothers and fathers as a sort of queer spiritual heroes. Whatever their sexual orientations or gender identities may have been, they are models of the spiritual vitality that requires us to be true to ourselves in ways that defy social norms.

We are queer children of a queer God—and by "we," I mean the Jewish people. When queer Jews read Torah as our own, we help all Jews recognize and reclaim our heritage of radical queerness, rekindling the flame of desire that led our ancestors to abandon known norms and follow God through a wilderness unsown toward a future founded on the principle that being true to God requires being true to ourselves.

Taking Torah Personally

I don't want to suggest that all the Torah needs from us is a general nod toward its queer elements. For the Torah's queerness to be recognized as a vital part of Judaism and Jewish identity—as a crucial

complement and counterweight to the Torah's emphasis on sacred norms—the Torah needs us, each queer Jew, with our innumerable differences and disagreements, to take Torah personally, to read our lives in light of the Torah and read the Torah in light of our lives.

Let me offer an example from one of the least queer sections of the Torah, the laws of vowing enumerated in Numbers 30:2–17. For much of my life, I didn't pay much attention to the passage concerning the laws governing vows, which defines men's vows as binding but makes women's vows subject to veto by husbands and fathers. I was angered by this patriarchal subordination of women to men, but it seemed typical to me—and irrelevant to my non-Orthodox existence. As I followed the weekly Torah reading cycle over the years, however, I noticed that these laws are more complicated than I had thought: they also limit the power of father and husband, restricting the time during which they can annul a woman's vow to "the day he finds out" about the vow. The Torah simultaneously supports patriarchy by defining women's subordination as a sacred norm and restricts patriarchy by giving women freedom to reshape their lives through vows and requiring fathers and husbands who don't void those vows immediately to respect them thereafter.

I found this intellectually interesting, but the laws of vowing didn't seem to have much to do with me. However, when I realized that after forty-plus years of hiding my female gender identity, the day was approaching when I could no longer live as a man, the conflict between self-determination and the family obligations codified by these laws became agonizingly urgent.

I had come out to my wife as trans when we were sophomores in college, and we had based our relationship on the understanding that she would only stay with me as long as I stuck to male norms of self-presentation. I didn't vow to keep living as a man, but I accepted that our relationship would end if I didn't. We married after college, bought a house, had children, and built lives that were

based on my male identity—and tried to endure and ignore my periodic gender crises. When I told my wife that I could no longer repress my gender identity, we entered into weeks of gut-wrenching discussions about what vows, if any, bound us together. My wife argued that my agreement to start having children constituted a vow to live as a man for the rest of my life for our children's sake. I argued that even if that were true, I shouldn't be bound by a vow that was driving me to suicide—and shouldn't be held to it by someone who swore she cared about me. Were we bound by implicit vows to each other? And what about new vows? Should my wife be able to veto vows that would unmake her heteronormative life, such as my vow to stop lying about my gender identity? Was I free to commit myself to live in ways that would shatter my children's home and shake their sense of the very order of existence? How could we resolve the conflict between my right to self-determination and the sacred norms of marriage, parenthood, family, and community?

The Torah's laws of vowing crystallize this conflict, clarifying facts that my wife and I, in the throes of gender transition and divorce, found hard to face: the fact that though bound by love and family, I, like the women governed by Iron Age patriarchy, had the right to change my life; and the fact that in changing my life I also changed my spouse's, which gave her the right to speak out about what I thought of as purely personal decisions about how to live my gender identity.

As our struggles were illuminated by the Torah, the Torah was illuminated by our struggles. Our craving for clarity regarding our vows to each other enabled me to recognize the profound human need that underlies this passage's dry legal language: the need to reconcile the morality of individuality, which defines what's right in terms of personal necessity, with the morality of relationship, in which individual need is subordinated to the need to maintain social structures on which many lives depend.

It's hard to assert queer identity

without negotiating such conflicts, as Abraham must have discovered when he tried to explain to his father why he was abandoning him in extreme old age at the behest of an unknown God. Genesis, the queerest book of the Torah, is full of such conflicts. But even the sacred-norm-establishing laws of vowing implicitly acknowledge that clashes between the morality of individuality and the morality of relationship are inevitable. The Torah may not resolve these clashes, but it clarifies them and makes space for them within sacred communal norms, assuring us that whatever moral wildernesses our queer identities lead us through, we wander as the Matriarchs and Patriarchs wandered, with and toward our queer, queer God, who is simultaneously wilderness and Promised Land. ■

SHAKESPEARE (continued from page 23)

Developing an Ethic of Care

To address the limitations of the equality-based model and ensure a good quality of life for all, we must move away from liberal individualism—which links its notions of equality to ideas of work—and develop an alternative ethic.

This alternative ethic can be found in a number of traditions. Feminist philosophers such as Eva Feder Kittay, Joan Tronto, and Selma Sevenhuijsen have explored the notion of an ethic of care that focuses on values such as interdependence and mutuality rather than simply independence and rights. Kittay applies this idea to disability politics in her book *Love's Labor*, writing, "Grasping the moral nature of the relation between unequals in a dependency relation will bring us closer to a new assessment of equality itself."

Meanwhile, Kenyan theologian John Mbiti and other theorists in southern Africa have been exploring the ethic of *ubuntu*, which talks about how people depend on others for their identity. Rejecting René Descartes's postulation,

"I think therefore I am," Mbiti explains the philosophy of *ubuntu* as asserting that "I am with others, therefore I am." Both feminist theorists and *ubuntu* philosophers are highlighting the importance of the relational.

In a different vein, economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum have talked about enhancing capabilities. Rather than understanding development in terms of Gross Domestic Product, these thinkers stress that we should give people opportunities to develop capabilities they value. Welfare is multidimensional, they argue, and we should be increasing true freedom to lead better lives. Both Sen and Nussbaum have been described as Aristotelian because instead of offering utilitarian calculations, they emphasize what it takes to achieve human flourishing.

Within the Christian tradition, thinkers like Hans Reinders have been challenging us to consider how we reach out to and include people with intellectual disabilities. For example, in his book *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, Reinders argues that we must regard people as equals, regardless of their impaired functioning: humanity is not about what we achieve but about being chosen to be God's friend, and this applies to everyone. And in practical terms, philosopher Jean Vanier offers models for how we can live alongside vulnerable people and promote inclusion. Vanier has set up communities in France and worldwide where people with intellectual disabilities live alongside nondisabled people in fellowship. Vanier's L'Arche communities prevent people with disabilities from being segregated in institutions or isolated within a wider community, instead offering connection and support. In his book *Becoming Human*, Vanier argues, "The weak teach the strong to accept and integrate the weakness and brokenness of their own lives."

The "Spiritual Covenant with America" developed by *Tikkun* and its Network of Spiritual Progressives offers another alternative ethic that places

values of love and care over values of profit and domination. But I'd like to see it explicitly address issues of disability, assistance and support, and caring solidarity.

Alternative ethics such as these share a religious quality in their emphasis on the valuation of individuals not for their ability to work but for the sacred spark of being within them. As such, they may provide the framework for developing a deeper and richer approach to disability, thereby offering a necessary rejoinder to the "level playing field" emphasis in the disability rights movement. We need to change social systems and social values, not simply try to integrate people with disabilities into existing structures. For example, instead of only stressing barrier removal, we need to start emphasizing mutuality. We need to create more social firms (companies aimed at employing people disadvantaged in the labor market) and other forms of employment. We need to develop better strategies to enable people with disabilities to become part of the community, rather than being isolated. We need to revision the traditional value of charity and think about what solidarity demands of us. As Reinders argues, if we approach the problem of disability with a theological emphasis, or from the perspective of eternity, the differences between human beings are not so significant—we are all vulnerable and frail, or soon will be, and our time in the world is brief, which puts both our achievements and our dependencies into context. ■

SCHUMM (continued from page 26)

One cannot ascertain what a tradition really teaches about disability based on one or two verses or glean the intended meaning of individual passages removed from their larger contexts. Nevertheless, since these passages exist in various religious traditions, it is easier for well-meaning practitioners of a given religion to make blithe

assumptions and assertions about disability based on limited understandings and misinformed interpretations of these sacred texts and stories.

Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability

What should religious communities do with religious metaphors, texts, and stories that may be interpreted in ways that impede true accessibility and inclusion? It is not feasible to eliminate these problematic texts and stories from our religious lexicons entirely, so we must find ways to engage with them.

Black liberation theology, womanist theology, queer theology, feminist theology, and Latin American liberation theologies all provide models for grappling with problematic texts and stories. For example, African American theologian James Evans observes how slaves countered American slaveholders' use of the Bible to defend slavery by finding for themselves passages of Scripture that proclaimed "liberation in which the outsiders became insiders." The Exodus account, in particular, "furnished an acceptable expressive vehicle for the slaves' yearning for political emancipation," he writes. Evans observes that, through this process of interpretation and reclamation, African Americans have come to see the Bible as carrying a "special significance for those who are outside the corridors of power in society."

In a similar vein, feminist scholars such as Phyllis Trible have pioneered new ways for coping with sexist and oppressive biblical passages. Describing her methods for dealing with what she calls "texts of terror," Trible writes:

One approach documents a case against women. It cites and evaluates long neglected data that show the inferiority, subordination, and the abuse of the female in ancient Israel and the early church. By contrast, the second approach discerns within the Bible critiques of patriarchy. It upholds

forgotten texts and reinterprets familiar ones to shape a remnant theology that challenges the sexism of scripture.

In this way, liberation theologians from various traditions read and interpret religious texts and stories through the dual lenses of a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of liberation: they engage their respective sacred texts and stories with suspicion, asking where and how they function as tools of oppression and exclusion, while simultaneously mining those same texts for messages and models of liberation.

Reading the gospel of John through a hermeneutic of liberation, Christian communities concerned with disability justice would note that there are times when the narrative disrupts metaphors that equate spiritual wholeness with physical wholeness. Jesus's resurrection appearance to Thomas in John 20 is one such example. When Thomas doubts that Jesus is resurrected, Jesus invites Thomas to touch the wounds and marks on his body so that Thomas can experience the brokenness of his body and believe. In this moment, the text opens up the possibility that broken or disabled bodies can be sources of spiritual insight and, dare we say, spiritual wholeness and liberation.

As religious communities struggle with oppressive and exclusive texts and metaphors, utilizing both a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of liberation can generate more awareness of the power and effects of metaphors and challenge the attitudes and language that create affective barriers to religious participation for people with disabilities. With accessibility as the rallying cry, religious communities can move even closer to justice for and inclusion of all—disabled and non-disabled alike. ■



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WATTS BELSER (continued from page 28)

While those ancient mystics fascinate my scholarly sensibility, I never found Ezekiel's vision particularly revelatory for my own spirit. But one recent Shavuot, Ezekiel's vision split open my own imagination. Hearing those words chanted, I felt a jolt of recognition, an intimate familiarity. I thought: *God has wheels!*

When I think of God on wheels, I think of the delight I take in my own chair. I sense the holy possibility that my own body knows, the way wheels set me free and open up my spirit. I like to think that God inhabits the particular fusions that mark a body in wheels: the way flesh flows into frame, into tire, into air. This is how the Holy moves through me, in the intricate interplay of muscle and spin, the exhilarating physicality of body and wheel, the rare promise of a wide-open space, the unabashed exhilaration of a dance floor, where wing can finally unfurl.

On wheels, I feel the tenor of the path deep in my sinews and sit bones. I come to know the intimate geography of a place: not just broad brushstrokes of terrain, but the minute fluctuations of topography, the way the wheel flows. When I roll, I pay particular attention to the interstices and intersections: the place where concrete seams together uneasily, the buckle of tree roots pushing up against asphalt, the bristle of crumbling brick. I have come to believe this awareness reflects a quality of divine attention. Perhaps the divine presence moves through this world with a bone-deep knowledge of every crack and fissure. Perhaps God is particularly present at junctions and unexpected meetings, alert to points of encounter where two things come together.

Disability and Divine Power

The suggestion that God may be glimpsed in part through a disabled life flies in the face of the way many of us imagine the divine. Classical theology has often emphasized God's omnipotence

and radical independence. To many, a disabled life highlights the weakness, vulnerability, and dependence that characterize the frailty and fragility of human flesh. But vulnerability is a shared human experience, not something particular to disability. Disability culture is marked by a lively spirit of adaptability, creativity, and resilience—not to mention a vibrant sense of delight.

Disability invites us to rethink the nature of divine power, to jettison the classical image of God as the one who can upend mountains on a whim. An activist friend with significant muscular atrophy describes the way disability has sharpened her skills in the art of delegating and directing a staff of personal attendants, friends, and occasional passersby to facilitate her way in the world. This too, it seems, is the nature of God's power. I feel the divine presence like a live, wild current running through this world, tuned to and intimately intertwined with flesh and blood and stone. But when God wants something done, brute force simply will not do the job. God cannot pick up a single stone without a human hand to lift it. When God desires direct action in the world of matter, She must inspire and cajole, adapt and orchestrate, trust and yearn. God too, I suspect, finds it occasionally frustrating.

Imagining God in and through my wheels puts a different spin on a critical religious issue. If God wheels through the world, then I suspect She often has an access problem. In this world built for striders, armored against flow and spin, how can we let God in? How do we make space for the wild, freewheeling movement of the chariot? Read through the lens of disability, this question becomes central to the political and spiritual task of fashioning liberatory communities. Let us strive to open the inaccessible spaces of our hearts. Let us strive together to break down barriers within ourselves and our communities. Let us refashion the crusted architecture of our minds that keeps the Holy at bay. ■

KUPPERS (continued from page 30)

themselves up, when we speak of our foremothers and forefathers, creating lineages and cross-currents.

Some of us speak about being helpers. One woman talks about having lived the life of a Filipina housemaid and cleaner. Others talk about the racialized politics that they are facing as disabled and non-disabled brown people in the Bay Area.

Some of us speak about being only able to live with daily helpers coming into the house, being privileged enough to gain In-Home Supportive Services' approval, something only really open to people who have the linguistic means to fight for themselves in our fraying social security system.

All of us acknowledge living interdependent lives, intersected and enabled by many, carried on the backs of infrastructural laborers of all kinds and touched by the kindnesses of strangers.

And in every one of these circles, voices have lifted up to give thanks to something neither human nor animal, giving thanks to life forces, entities, and powers beyond the nameable. In one Helping Dance in Hawai'i, one participant sang for us, a gospel song that enveloped all of us as we rocked and held each other.

How often are you touched by rhythm and melody in public, out in the open, your blood beating and heart compressing until tears flow, without being able to name what it is that touches you? Those moments in Helping Dances expand in time, shift into soft slow time, not hard fast time. They shift into *crip* time—the time of the *and*, rather than the *or* time of choosing and ordering.

In my art life, I reach for these moments: come and sit with us, and we will attempt to find a time and space together in improvisation, without knowing each other, with some discomfort, with the giggles of uncertainty, with distances and their bridging. Without the fixed structure of known ritual, we attempt to touch the comfort

that ritual has offered to so many for tens of thousands of years.

In our Helping Dance, no matter what happens, we shift ourselves from our own certainties. We shift from our boundaries, our little selves, and our own heartbeats, into wider rhythm. ■

BROWN (continued from page 32)

Dehumanizing Rhetoric

When clinicians administer electric shocks to disabled people as punishment, it's not considered torture, but treatment. When parents murder their disabled children, it's not considered an act of violence, but an act of love. When disabled people are imprisoned in institutions, it's not considered a deprivation of freedom, but necessary and humane. When teachers smear hot sauce into disabled students' eyes, or force disabled students to climb inside bags, or tell disabled students that they are retarded and don't belong in class, it's written off as an isolated incident, despite the innumerable accounts of similar behavior. Damning reports from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, Mental Disability Rights International, the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, TASH, and the Autism National Committee document repeated cases of disabled people subjected to inhumane treatment.

Violence against disabled people is so rarely recognized as part of an insidious system of socio-cultural values that systematically values certain types of people while dehumanizing the rest of us. We live in a society profoundly steeped in ableism. The belief that it is better to be dead than to be disabled rests on the presumption that disability itself is loss, burden, and tragedy. Our lives are routinely devalued and deemed unworthy of even the most basic human dignity by policymakers, celebrities, and scientists alike.

Disabled people are disproportionately more likely to become victims of

rape, domestic violence, and murder than those in the general population. And the particularly terrifying underside of these statistics is that disabled people are also disproportionately more likely to be trapped in situations of dependency—on social services, on housing assistance, in vocational rehabilitation, on mental health services, or under the restrictions of guardianships—that empower abusers at the expense of their victims.

For all the deeply ableist rhetoric surrounding psychiatric disabilities and autism in the wake of tragedies like the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, or the 2014 shooting in Isla Vista, California, the reality is that we exist in a strange limbo between commodification, spectacle, and erasure. Disabled people become props useful for political expediency in demanding gun control and cuts to empowering mental health support networks—take, for example, Congressman Tim Murphy's campaign to eliminate protections for people with mental illness as a means of supposedly protecting the public from dangerous and unstable people. Disabled people become caricatures of disability stereotypes that are used as arguments for the necessity of access to abortion, for fear that our conditions will be reproduced. Yet we are systematically excluded from history and policymaking, on top of the erasure we face within our own communities.

Rejecting Pathologization

The pathology paradigm of disability demands adherence to a single template for human existence defined as normative and therefore ideal. Any deviation is evidence of deficiency, defect, or disorder, and must be ameliorated, hidden, or eliminated altogether. The pathology paradigm thrives on capitalist society's insistence on quantifying human worth, and assigning value based on productivity.

Disabled bodies/minds exist under constant surveillance both by systems

that require compliance with ablenormativity—the ableist notion that being abled is not merely default but ideal—and by our own selves in an attempt to hold ourselves to the standards of ablenormativity. And we are forced to make sacrifices. Sacrifice our identity, survive another day. Sacrificing our way of communicating and our way of moving becomes necessary for survival. Even in otherwise progressive and radical spaces, ableism is allowed not merely to proliferate, but to prosper. In queer spaces, for example, the disavowal of responsibility to disability justice has become almost an art—as though one set of marginalized identities is worthy of empowerment and validation and another can simply be discarded as undesirable.

Only in the intimate conversations among we who are disabled is it possible to imagine a future in which our lives are not marked by constant violence. In our own spaces, we have begun to recognize our individual and collective traumas. We have begun the process of unlearning the repetitive litany of *I am unworthy, I am damaged, I am broken, I do not deserve anything good*, and we have begun to learn to love ourselves and our ways of existing in the world. We have begun to reject the disability hierarchy that replicates disability disavowals across disabled identities—for example, eschewing mental disability while affirming pride in physical disability, or rejecting psychiatric disability while celebrating autistic pride. Legal, political, and social systems enable institutions such as the medical-industrial complex and practices such as compliance-based behavioral interventions to dominate our lives, but bit by bit, we are building new ways of doing community. With the rise of Disability Cultural Centers like the one pioneered at Syracuse, the introduction of laws and policies with strong enforcement mechanisms to protect our rights, and the continual development of disabled communities united across our struggles, we have

laid the groundwork for the future. We have not yet achieved disability justice, but we are working to end the structural violence of ableism. ■

MARX (continued from page 34)

can be assessed is by examining how rights and obligations with respect to religious precepts are spelled out for them. A person who is more obligated is more highly valued. Disqualifications and even exemptions from obligation (taken out of consideration for individuals' disabilities) carry stigma because they call into question the status of people with disabilities as capable bearers of mitzvah.

In this context, one can understand why the blind sage of the Talmud, Rabbi Joseph, wrestles with the question of whether it is to his advantage to be blind in the halachic culture. If exempt, he has the option to follow Judaism's religious commandments on a voluntary basis, which intuitively should earn him special virtue points. But upon becoming aware of the talmudic teaching of Rabbi Hanina—the rabbi who argued that the one who is commanded is greater than the one who is not commanded—he concludes that it is disadvantageous for people with disabilities to be exempt.

Rabbi Joseph was concerned specifically with obligations imposed upon persons with disabilities, but we must also be aware of the obligations imposed upon able persons in relation to people with disabilities, e.g., how able people speak to or about them. It is with respect to both kinds of obligations that one can ask, "In what sense are people with disabilities bona fide members of traditional Jewish society?" How a society treats a person with a disability can after all be a measure of its moral and ethical character.

Compassion vs. Achievement

To what degree is the dignity of a *ba'al moom* (a person with an impairment)

of concern in traditional Jewish religious culture? Two values within Judaism clash with regard to their impact on disability: compassion and achievement.

"Ethical imperatives"—*tzedakah* (charity) and *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving-kindness)—form the compassionate groundwork of the halachic culture. The implementation of *tzedakah* is tricky with respect to the question of human dignity. Charity and compassion can easily slide into paternalism, leading people without disabilities to imagine that they know what people with disabilities need better than they do themselves. Some people even act on these ableist and paternalistic presumptions without consulting the people most affected.

In his article in this Fall 2014 issue of *Tikkun*, Tom Shakespeare adduces the need for religion's contribution to this discourse:

If we approach the problem of disability with a religious or spiritual emphasis, or from the perspective of eternity, the differences between human beings are not so significant—we are all vulnerable and frail, or soon will be, and our time in the world is brief, which puts both our achievements and our dependencies into context.

But the obligation of mitzvah observance, as noted, implies capacity for autonomy, activism, and responsibility. This then serves as a criterion for assessing negatively the role of people with disabilities within Jewish culture. Judaism's appreciation for the human being as specially endowed—a creature of G-d on the one hand, but also as an achiever and G-d's partner in creation, on the other hand—creates a tension within halachic culture that has significant consequences for people with disabilities.

The mitzvah of *kavod habriyot* (human dignity) argues at the same time for a conditional affirmation dependent upon intellectual and moral achievement, thus generating a dissonance with respect to impairment. This tension

comes to the fore in the midrash, which contrasts the requirements for exodus from Egypt with those of revelation at Sinai (Numbers Rabba 7:1):

When Israel came out to Egypt, the vast majority of them were afflicted with some blemish. Why? Because they had been working in clay and bricks and climbing to the tops of buildings. Those who were engaged in building became maimed through climbing to the top of the layers of stone. Either a stone fell and cut off the worker's hand, or a beam or some clay got into his eyes and he was blinded. When they came to the wilderness of Sinai, God said, "Is it consonant with the dignity of the Torah that I should give it to a generation of disfigured persons? If, on the other hand, I wait until others take their place, I shall be delaying the Revelation." What, then, did God do? He bade the angels come down to Israel and heal them.

Why did God need to heal those with disabilities before he could offer them the Torah? Apparently partnering with Israel over the Torah required competent partners capable of implementing the precepts and even interpreting them—thus the need for physical and intellectual capabilities.

Opposing Tendencies of Exclusion and Integration

Within talmudic Judaic discourse, two opposing tendencies seem to underlie the halachic prescriptions relating to persons with disabilities. The first is an excluding tendency that defines the person by his or her disabilities and thereby recategorizes that person as functioning outside of ordinary norms. The second is an integrative and inclusive tendency that emphasizes the ways in which someone is an "ordinary" person who also has a disability. Here, the disability entitles one to a certain measure of consideration (for example, one might be deemed exempt from needing to perform certain mitzvot or even

prohibited from doing so), but one is not defined by the disability. One is simply a person *with* an impairment but not an impaired person. That is what lies behind the talmudic dispute between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Meir over whether people who are blind should be considered exempt from mitzvot.

In assessing Jewish tradition in relation to disability, we must consider the weight given to these opposing tendencies in relation to disabled individuals' participation in the imperatives of Jewish practice. The outcomes of the struggles between these tendencies determine whether Jewish communities will divert their limited financial resources to people with disabilities—a matter naturally affected by competing priorities.

The balance of power between these tendencies also affects Jewish precepts of all sorts, mandating, exempting, and even disqualifying various forms of religious observance for people with disabilities. Some of these precepts have to do with ritual, but others have to do with personal status, civil law, and ecclesiastical priestly responsibilities. Additionally, there are *hekhsher mitzvah* (adjunct religious observances) that are affected by the outcome of the struggle between these two tendencies. These include the many preparations one must make before performing a mitzvah—for example, preparing leather for the preparation of tefillin.

In a very positive vein, it is also instructive to note the many impaired heroes of the Jewish narrative. Moses has a serious speech impediment, which as Shelly Christensen notes in her web-only contribution to this special issue of *Tikkun*, “did not disqualify him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt” (see tikkun.org/disability). Isaac is blind, but he nevertheless enjoys the status of being one of the three prime patriarchs of Israel.

King David of the messianic line surprisingly has a revulsion for disabled people that he needs to overcome: we

learn that “the blind and the lame are repulsive to David deep into his soul” (II Samuel 5: 6–9). The nineteenth-century halachic expert Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger, argues that Scripture is directed toward showing how David overcame this revulsion (see Responsa Binyan Tziyon 75).

Halachic Adaptation

The Halachah—the collective body of Jewish religious laws that comprise the practical manual for implementing prescribed ideals in the daily regimens of the community—reflects compromises between its highest ideals and the limitations impeding society's ability to realize those moral or religious aspirations at any given time. The intricate balances affecting the halachic orientation toward those with impairments (in halachic hermeneutics, argumentations, controversies, and underlying intuitions) can best be brought into contemporary relief by confronting the classical sources of halachic culture with modern ethics.

Modern ethics are characterized by a commitment to individual autonomy and are offended by the exclusion of anyone from equal access to community life on the basis of individual difference or idiosyncrasy. For this reason, modern ethics may offer a springboard for constructive criticism of the Halachah in those cases where its exclusions seem to defy reasonable explanation. After all, *sevara* (rational thinking and critique) is also considered to be of scriptural authority (see Sanhedrin 74a).

Of special interest, therefore, is the capacity of the Halachah to integrate new insights and make new decisions in light of unprecedented developments. The capacity for such change can be illustrated in the example of the “deaf-mute” person described in the Talmud, who is fully exempted from responsibility for fulfilling Jewish commandments. Due to his inability to speak or hear, he was incorrectly deemed in the Talmud as having an intellectual disability and

thus being incapable of fulfilling religious commandments. His halachic status was, however, reassessed by scholars like Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer, a nineteenth-century head of the rabbinical seminary in Berlin, in view of a new technique that was developed to enable people who were deaf and unable to speak to speak by using unconventional educational means. The halachic culture was able to justify the re-empowerment in obligation of such persons without compromising its traditional integrity. In doing so, it restored greater status to people who are deaf and unable to speak because being beholden to commandments is highly valued in the halachic culture of mitzvah-bearing.

In every legal system, responsibility and accountability can only be fully imposed upon individuals with a minimum of intellectual ability. The Halachah is sensitive to this and only with great reluctance disqualifies someone of very minimal intellectual capabilities from the status of a legal persona. For able people, the ethical question is: when would imposing equality upon such persons actually be a form of discrimination? There is, after all, a point at which exempting someone from mitzvot and even disqualifying him or her is actually more ethical and compassionate.

While openness is not uniform in the vast literature of the Halachah (including both the Talmud and the responsa literature debating halachic practice), halachic culture has a strong tendency toward maximizing human autonomy and independence. This tendency is compatible even with a religious culture that strongly and explicitly stresses heteronomy (subjection to a divine force, rather than self-determination). While secular people consider the source of values to emerge from their own decisions (autonomy), religious people feel that the source of values comes from a higher reality (divine reality) outside of themselves (heteronomy). For them it is this very confidence

that gives them the strength and motivation to implement these values, even under very challenging circumstances.

Our society as a whole has much to learn from Judaic attempts, successes, and failures at including people with disabilities within the Jewish religious community over the years as we have become more aware of our need to transcend resistance within Judaism's halachic dynamics. Keeping in mind that Christian teachings, even in their secularized versions, are deeply indebted to their Judaic roots, the way in which halachic Judaic culture, as a traditional culture, treats one of its most vulnerable subpopulations should be of deep interest to broader Western society.

Seen from this vantage point, Jewish halachic culture can be viewed as paradigmatic of achievement-oriented cultures, in which the dignity of people with disabilities, who are inevitably devalued by value systems that only see certain acts as valid achievements, can nevertheless be bolstered by a renewed consciousness that conventional achievement is not the only measure of entitlement to dignity. ■

CLARE (continued from page 36)

individual bodies but rather a world in which disabled children aren't vulnerable to abuse, neglect, rampant sexual violence, sexualization, and institutionalization. Listen to black scholar and activist Cornel West as he says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." I mean, really listen.

What would the work of parenting Ashley look like in a world where access was guaranteed and you could tap into a plentiful network of social, material, medical, and educational support? What choices would you have made if the possibility of needing to institutionalize Ashley didn't loom over all your decisions and if you knew she wasn't at risk of ableist and sexist violence? I imagine a world in which Ashley is

loved and valued exactly as she could have been: a disabled girl growing into her woman's body and self.

In asking you about love, I'm remembering all the people studied, observed, and written about: People injected and cut open without consent. Men castrated. Women sterilized. People shocked, numbed, locked in isolation rooms, and locked away for good. Babies studied and graves robbed. Even with your love, Ashley joins this legacy.

Love does not erase history. Love is not unassailable. The question remains: how is a father to love, nurture, and protect his disabled daughter? ■

LOVERN (continued from page 38)

people with disabilities to die. In our book *Native American Communities on Health and Disability: Borderland Dialogues*, Dr. Carol Locust and I examined these abandonment myths that continue to surface in Western literature. We found that there is no evidence or corroboration for the allegations made in these stories.

Native American scholars largely dismiss these stories as colonization attempts stemming from "ignoble savage" literature. These stories tend to reflect misinterpretations of medical and spiritual practices. At a recent conference in Florida, a white scholar discussed ancient Indigenous remains recovered from a dig. The individual whose remains she studied seemed to suffer from severe bone cancer. The contents of her stomach contained specific berries and herbs. The scholar stated that the Indigenous woman had been euthanized by her community without providing any evidence to support her assumption. Had she spoken to the local Indigenous communities, she would have learned that the combination of those herbs and berries is still used to treat severe pain and bone illnesses. For those experiencing severe pain and illness, it is not uncommon even now for dosages

of medicines to be high. To jump to the unsubstantiated conclusion of euthanasia reflects a prejudice in the scholar that is also held more generally in academia.

In other cases, what has been interpreted as abandonment is no more than a difference between where Western and Indigenous people commune with the Creator. Western cultures tend to choose to meet their Creator in buildings, while many Native American communities choose to go to the Creator in nature. An Indigenous individual who is in the process of moving on will often move, or be brought, outdoors so that his or her spirit can meet the Creator without being inhibited by buildings. This act of crossing over is a deeply personal event. The individual is often attended by only a few from this world because he or she is also understood to be attended by those who have crossed before. These times are often spent quietly or in soft song. The focus is on the peaceful passing to the next place, and interference from this world is kept to a minimum. The choice to stay or to leave the body is considered to be a spiritual choice of letting go when a pathway has been prepared.

It is impossible to claim that throughout history abuse never occurred in Native American communities. However, there is no evidence that any Native American community approved of or practiced abandonment or harm to those with differences. To the contrary, evidence from traditional Native American ethics and practices supports the claim that those with differences were supported in their survival to the best of their community's ability.

Unwelcome Interventions

Historically, Native American families and communities have been faced with well-intentioned health workers, social workers, and teachers who believe it is important to label children of difference as "disabled" and, in some cases, to remove them from their community. For example, one young man, who was

deemed by Western social workers to be in need of a group home, was removed. The young man had been an active and beloved member of the community and had taken care of many older people by chopping wood and doing chores they could not do. He was known in the community to be quiet and loving and had never shown any sign of violence. However, when the social worker forced his removal, he became distraught in the van on the way to the group home. The social worker, and later the Western medical staff, diagnosed him as violent and placed him in a secured facility. The young man's decline worsened until he was no longer responsive. He was never returned to the loving community that mourned his loss.

Underlying these interventions is the same cultural arrogance that has repeatedly led to the cultural and physical genocide of Native American communities. When a Native American family or community does not understand a child to be "disabled," but the authorities impose that label, the negative connotations become instilled in the child and can create physical, psychological,

and emotional damage. Removal practices "for the benefit of the child" bring damage or unwellness upon the entire community, which mourns the loss of the child and his or her gifts. The child is then faced with devastating effects from this loss of heritage and community support. Individuals who are institutionalized are often given little or no voice in their own treatment, placement, or future prospects, whereas in traditional Native American communities these individuals can make decisions and determine their own futures.

To ensure that they do not perpetuate further violence against Native American communities, U.S. health workers, government workers, and teachers must become educated in Native American theories of the self and spirit and the interdependency of communities. Social service groups must assist Native American communities in supporting the talents of people with differences from the majority. Dr. Locust and I continue to work with many caring Western social workers and medical personnel who have educated themselves in Native American traditions

and cultures. It is our hope that well-educated and properly trained personnel will replace those who either do not care about Native American cultures or see no need to become educated in the traditions. We believe that individuals working within Native American communities should be required to go through trainings designed and implemented by the Elders of the communities in which they find themselves. So long as Western societies continue to define individuals of difference as inferior, the treatment of people with differences will remain negative.

We need to move beyond framing "disability" as a burden upon the American medical and educational budgets. By dismissing the talents of a vast number of individuals simply because other parts of them are different, our society becomes diminished. The United States as a whole would do well to reconsider its approach to "disability" in light of Native American insights in this arena—by embracing the talents of all people, our society will grow stronger and more vibrant. ■

GOMEZ (continued from page 42)

community, or am I read solely as disabled or different, separate from the rest of humanity? What would it be like if there were other parts of my identity that were equally marginalizing but not as visible as my limp?

Entering Religious Space

The first of these experiences—these moments in which strangers read into my body and respond to my disability—occurred when I was a child accompanying my mother to church. The church was theoretically open to all, but I sensed others' discomfort with my presence. I often pondered whether individual churchgoers were nice to me because that was the script they were

expected to follow or because they saw me as a reminder of human frailty.

There are two standard interactions that people with visible disabilities tend to have with religious strangers: the able-bodied believer assumes either that the disabled person is doing the work of God or that the disabled person is in need of God's intervention. In either case, the able-bodied individual is positioned as human, sensitive, and attentive to the needs of others, while the disabled body is delegitimized, lost, and seen as functioning outside of what is normal and human. The first response establishes an alternatively able body—one that takes on superhuman qualities. The disabled body is held up as something to be marveled at and that is free from complication

or wrongdoing. The second response positions the healthy disabled body as sick or abnormal. That being said, the disabled person is approached because his or her body happens to be disabled. The interaction predicated upon divine intervention constructs a narrative around the disabled body that makes sense to those who are able bodied. There is a narrative projected onto disabled bodies that allows them to move forward with life through the help of something greater than their own will.

My identification as atheist or agnostic is inconceivable to the able-bodied man who already assumes to know the extent of my relationship to God. My disabled body is fixed by the always and ever present higher power whose decisions shape the realities and outcomes of my existence. Then and only then does

my disabled body become legible and partially normal to the able-bodied observer. I can only approximate *pseudo-personhood*.

Dismembering Interactions

How am I supposed to react to those whom I've never seen and may never interact with ever again? The religious salutations I receive seem intended to convey a shared, intimate bond to something greater than ourselves, but when I hear them I feel less connection to the greater human family. All of this further complicates my understanding of self vis-à-vis the interactions and legislation (like the Americans with Disabilities Act) that others use to make meaning of my body as a disabled person.

To be clear, I am not against being approached by individuals who are intrigued by my disability. I have had positive interactions and think it is a good thing that others notice when one may be in need of support, help, or a connection. The positive interactions I have had have been more inclusive and democratic in nature: they have involved individuals being mindful of the language they use, being mindful of their body language, and being receptive to dialogue. In these exchanges, I

have been afforded the opportunity to share my story, to ask questions, and ultimately, to better understand why I was approached.

The odd and frequent interactions I have with strangers leave me reflecting on how disabled bodies are often dismembered by others, however unintentionally. They leave me wondering what, if any, religious or spiritual base do my interlocutors subscribe to? Do they perceive me as lacking a spiritual or religious base? Do they assume that I have a religious or spiritual base? Are they engaging others, able-bodied and disabled, in a similar manner? I do have a spiritual base; however, I value the space to explore and discuss my spirituality in my own time, rather than in response to strangers' responses to me. I have half-jokingly, half-seriously considered the possibility of two tattoos: one, the words "Heaven's Underdog" tattooed on my stomach, and the other, an image of me being crucified with words stating, "death is certain, but life is never given."

Each and every one of these interactions—from the one I had with the man who asked if I was selling Bibles to the spontaneous blessings in Wal-Mart—offers grounds for new conversations between myself and others.

In her book *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, scholar Deborah Beth Creamer offers a vision for how these personal experiences and interactions tie into struggles for collective and structural change. Arguing that "disability identity, as both a label and a form of self-understanding, depends a great deal on the interpretations of others," she writes:

The object of disability . . . is most accurately not the person using the wheelchair but rather the sets of social, historical, economic, and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and through the body. . . . Disability is not just an individual experience—it is, at least in part, socially and theologically constructed, and thus any reflection on disability should similarly be understood necessarily as more than any single individual's perspective.

For this reason, the interruptions and interventions that I experience on the street blur boundaries between personal, private, and public. Perhaps they make way for something spiritual. ■

MALHOTRA (continued from page 44)

Sadly, triumph in areas like transportation access has not translated into success in employment. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which focuses on employment discrimination, has done little to date to improve the employment rate of disabled people. Many disabled Americans remain outside the labor market, and Samuel Bagenstos has documented how the employment rate of people with disabilities declined throughout the 1990s. For example, in his book *Law and the Contradictions of the Disability Rights*

Movement, Bagenstos shows that the employment rate for working-age men with disabilities (defined narrowly) fell from 42.1 percent in 1990 to 33.1 percent in 2000. While the causes of this decline are complex and there are undoubtedly statistical measurement issues to be addressed, it is undeniable that the rise of neoliberal flexible labor markets has contributed to this failure. The Keynesian era of "a job for life" has been replaced with an hour-glass economy in which many workers scramble at multiple jobs to make ends meet because they are underpaid. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that

the private sector union density rate in the United States has fallen to less than 7 percent, which is extremely low by both international and historic standards. Management decisions about job accommodations are rushed because job tenure is shorter and workers are expected to complete tasks at an increasingly hectic pace. Companies are reluctant to provide accommodations for temporary workers who may simply be gone next week.

Remaking the Labor Market

In order to fully include disabled people as citizens, we need to value people

based on their contributions to society, not as assessed by the profit system. Many disabled people will never be efficient workers in capitalist terms. In a pioneering piece in *Monthly Review* a decade ago, disability activist Sunny Taylor questioned the practice of valuing people by their labor market value and championed the right not to work. As Taylor put it, “The right not to work is the right not to have your value determined by your productivity as a worker, by your employability or salary.” Refusing commodification would strengthen the disability rights movement, build solidarity between those who are inside and outside the labor market, and assist those who are challenging capitalist exploitation more broadly.

As an interim measure, we could implement a wide range of measures to empower disabled people in the existing labor market. One idea, derived from the work of French scholar Alain Supiot, is to create a system of Social Drawing Rights. Each worker would be issued credits that could be used over the course of a lifetime for skills training or a sabbatical, should an employee become disabled. Disability supports, such as assistive devices that enable a disabled worker to do specific tasks, would no longer be linked to a particular job. Rather, disability supports would be tied to the individual as a matter of right, allowing employees greater freedom and mobility. This system would shift the emphasis from job security to employment security, recognizing that in the new economy, the vast majority of employees will have many different jobs over the course of their careers. Such an approach would also tremendously assist others who have gaps in their labor market participation, such as single parents who take time off work to raise their children.

Even as progressive groups push for national or transnational economic measures such as Social Drawing Rights, they must also make a concerted effort to incorporate disability

justice into their political frameworks and make their organizing spaces accessible. Perhaps it would be helpful for groups involved in this effort to read *Truth and Revolution*, Michael Staudenmaier’s recent book on how the Sojourner Truth Organization (STO), a left organization founded in Chicago in 1969 and influenced by Trinidadian socialist C.L.R. James, took concrete steps to ensure that its union work was sensitive to issues of race at a time when racism was rampant in unions. Although it was a tiny and sometimes idiosyncratic organization, STO nevertheless had the merit of being one of the few organizations in the United States to think deeply and systematically about how to address issues of white skin privilege in its political praxis in ways that magnified working class consciousness.

A similar process of consciousness-raising and change needs to happen to incorporate a disability rights commitment into contemporary progressive organizing. This means systematically conducting accessibility audits before one selects a meeting space. It means ensuring that accessibility information is provided in publicizing meetings and other organizing events. And it means substantively incorporating disability politics and accessibility into other struggles, whether one is focused on ending sexual violence or fighting homelessness.

Refusing Commodification

A strategy that refuses commodification would lessen the perennial tensions that have always existed within the fragmented disability rights movement. The fault lines are many (acquired disabilities vs. born disabled, injured in the workplace vs. injured in sports, and more), and too often disabled people are pitted against each other. A focus on decommodification would lessen the distinctions between those who are active labor market participants and those who rely on disability support as

their primary source of income. Instead of fueling division and competitiveness, we can cultivate solidarity and thereby develop a greater capacity to challenge the state to provide access.

If we succeed in making social supports no longer contingent on employment status, we will also pave the way for stronger civil disobedience campaigns in the future. While ADAPT has been very successful in its strategy of civil disobedience, some disabled people have not felt able to participate in its actions because they cannot risk the consequences of arrest when supports and health insurance are linked to employment status. A strategy of decommodification liberates people to work as they choose and truly achieve Marx’s famous vision of a society where one can “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, [and] criticize after dinner.”

A materialist theory of abled privilege rooted in explaining the political economy of disablement could shed real light on the oppression faced by disabled people and how people can work together to fight it, inside and outside the workplace. Ultimately, however, a rank and file disability rights movement should have the courage to refuse commodification and build a world of social justice for people of all abilities. How could this be achieved? Campaigns for a single payer universal health care program are an important first step. As the economic pie continues to generate few jobs and to concentrate wealth among a tiny minority, a medium-term objective ought to be a national minimum income for all, decoupled from the highly stigmatizing and punitive patchwork of welfare programs remaining in the United States. In the longer term, the introduction of a system of Social Drawing Rights would level the playing field for people of all abilities to contribute as best they can to making a better, accessible world that allows each individual to flourish. ■

LERNER (continued from page 7)

2. Write to me at rabbilerner.tikkun@gmail.com and share with me your vision for what a utopian visionary approach would look like.
3. Visit tikkun.org/join to become part of our movement, the Network of Spiritual Progressives, and help us make this alternative scenario a reality! Why join? Because we need your backing to sustain this effort to build a spiritually progressive, popular, political movement to bring the new bottom line into all facets of our society.
4. After you join, write to Cat Zavis, the executive director of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, at cat@spiritualprogressives.org to tell her what specific project you would enjoy working on with the NSP or with any other movement that is refusing to be narrowly realistic and explicitly fighting for the transformation of the big picture.
5. Start a study group around the ideas of the new bottom line. We can help you find people in your area who might be interested, but you will need to do some initial organizing work by reaching out face-to-face to friends, colleagues, and organizations with which you've worked, and by announcing the meet-ups online, in newspapers or magazines, and on social media. Your study group could start by discussing the Spiritual Covenant with America, the ESRA, and the Global Marshall Plan and then move on to read articles from *Tikkun* magazine and books such as Peter Gabel's *Another Way of Seeing* or Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*.
6. Build a local NSP action chapter. One easy way to do this is by creating a study group first and then developing it gradually into a full-fledged NSP chapter. We are

promoting two concrete strategies to implement a new bottom line in our society: the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the Global Marshall Plan. Cat Zavis is hosting monthly calls for those thinking of starting a chapter and for those who are leading a chapter. Email Cat at cat@spiritualprogressives.org and let her know of your interest and she will get you signed up.

7. Help us build a professional task force in your profession. To learn more, email Cat Zavis at cat@spiritualprogressives.org. We are building task forces in law, education (including every level from elementary schools to graduate or professional schools), medicine, psychology, social work, government, the tech sector, science, engineering, and labor organizing to re-envision what their work would entail if its bottom line were to maximize love, caring, kindness, empathy, and an attitude of wonder and radical amazement toward the universe in which we live. These task forces are also designing concrete programs to change their particular industries.
8. Let us know of other ways you are interested in supporting us—we have many needs and want to support you to get involved in a way that is nourishing and inspiring for you.

We seek to spread this vision of a new bottom line to every plausible institution, including civic groups, religious institutions, professional organizations, unions, social change organizations, and political parties. The goal is to use the process of seeking endorsement for our proposals as a means to generate a public conversation about the society we really want to live in and how to create it.

Please join our movement as a dues-paying member of the Network of

Spiritual Progressives—we need you! The best way to support us is through a monthly contribution: anywhere from \$5 a month to \$300 a month or more. Being able to count on a monthly income will enable us to plan and build accordingly. Please spread this invitation to everyone you can by word of mouth and online, and also consider buying gift subscriptions to *Tikkun* (or better yet, gift memberships in the NSP, which come with a free magazine subscription) for your friends, family members, colleagues, and others. These are perfect gifts for Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanza, and Eid, and also just a way to show how much you care about a family member, friend, or someone whom you know and respect from a distance. Go to tikkun.org/gift to order a gift subscription or spiritualprogressives.org to order a membership, or call 510-644-1200 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Pacific Time. ■

EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

Average number of copies of each issue published during the preceding twelve months; (A) total number of copies printed, 4981; (B.1) paid/requested mail subscriptions, 2520; (B.3) sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales, 704; (C) total paid/requested circulation, 3224; (D.1) samples, complimentary, and other non-requested copies, 75; (D.4) nonrequested copies distributed outside the mail, 11; (E) total nonrequested distribution (sum of D.1 & D.4), 86; (F) total distribution (sum of C & E), 3310; (G) copies not distributed (office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing, returns from news agents), 1671; (H) total (sum of F & G), 4981.

Actual number of copies of a single issue published nearest to filing date: (A) total number of copies printed, 5304; (B.1) paid/requested mail subscriptions, 2408; (B.3) sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales, 1555; (C) total paid/requested circulation, 3963; (D.1) samples, complimentary, and other nonrequested copies, 80; (D.3) nonrequested copies distributed through the USPS by other classes of mail, 12; (E) total nonrequested distribution (sum of D.1 & D.4), 92; (F) total distribution (sum of C & E), 4055; (G) copies not distributed (office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing, returns from news agents), 1249; (H) total (sum of F & G), 5304.

A Promised Land

How to keep the promise of a promised land?

Not only a name, a place, a flag.

It's an end to wandering in the wilderness,
the wilderness inside ourselves.

It's singing sweeter than scorpions.

It's touching everywhere softer than snakes.

It's not letting hyenas teach babies to howl.

It's families trusting without cactus spines
coming from inside our skins.

No more sand blowing between kisses.

In a promised land we are not made in the desert's image.

We do not think with rocks in our heads
or take counsel with storms.

A promised land is promised to us.

But we are also promised

and to keep that promise we must learn

not to become hungry prowling lions

but to look at each other with gathering awe

as if we had never seen another human

so close, so real.

—Julia Vinograd

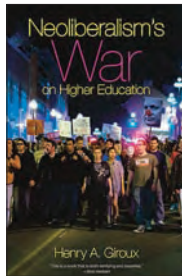
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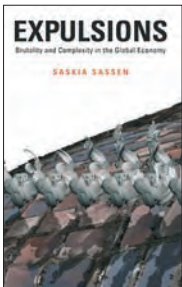
Empires of Vision
 Edited by Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy
 Duke University Press, 2014



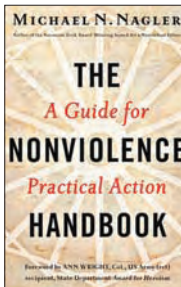
The Soul of the World
 Roger Scruton
 Princeton University Press, 2014



Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education
 Henry A. Giroux
 Haymarket Books, 2014



Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy
 Saskia Sassen
 Harvard University Press, 2014



The Nonviolence Handbook
 Michael N. Nagler
 Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2014

It is not only new action that the world needs, but also new thinking. These five books yield a deep understanding of the multi-dimensional crisis that ties humanity to an inhumane, unjust, and environmentally calamitous social order while keeping us passive in a variety of ways.

Duke University Press has done social visionaries a real service by printing Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy's massive collection of insightful articles unveiling how the very way we see the world is daily shaped by "pictorial

practices, image-making technologies, and vision-oriented subjectivities" that have been "entangled in empire-building, nationalist reactions, postcolonial contestations, and transnational globalization." It is not just economic or military power that shapes the way we see the world, but also photographs, paintings, maps, and the whole range of visual arts and media that are scrutinized in this collection.

Roger Scruton gets at the depravity of the current world from a very different angle, capturing the way that most humans cannot be at home in market-based societies because we experience transcendent obligations and sacred attachments that cannot be subject to the logic of the marketplace or to the ultra-individualism fostered by the notion that "choice" is the ultimate value.

Henry Giroux focuses much more than Scruton on what has made the alienation and depravity of the current situation plausible. In particular, he examines the war that neoliberalism must fight against any form of education that does not reduce human values and experience to that which can be measured and monetized in the capitalist marketplace. Neoliberalism's assault, Giroux tells us, undermines higher education's ability to foster values like caring for the other, produces cultural illiteracy, and makes it hard for students to believe in the possibility of fundamental change.

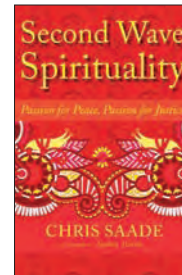
Ultimately, the values underlying academia's transformation into a "service station" to society (as former University of California president Clark Kerr put it fifty years ago, thereby inspiring the Free Speech Movement's revolt in 1964) are the values of the global economy—values detailed in Saskia Sassen's engaging and upsetting book. Sassen unveils the brutality that continues to accompany transnational struggles for land, raw materials, and markets. She also exposes companies' ruthless inattention to the destruction of the earth and the expulsion of human beings from their homelands. We in

the advanced industrial societies benefit most from the corporations that are in the vanguard of these expulsions, and yet we greet the dispossessed with arrests, humiliation, and deportation.

Striking a more optimistic note, Michael Nagler expresses hope in the growth of a global nonviolent movement that can fight back more effectively when we mobilize people around their highest values, so that anger and violence are replaced by militant and disruptive nonviolence. His useful handbook should be in the toolkit of every social change activist.



Meister Eckhart: A Mystic-Warrior for Our Times
 Matthew Fox
 New World Library, 2014

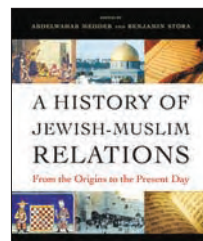


Second Wave Spirituality
 Chris Saade
 North Atlantic Books, 2014

Like Rumi, the great Christian mystic Meister Eckhart was—according to Matthew Fox's brilliant and inspiring account—deeply ecumenical, encompassing wisdom that one can find in Jewish, Sufi, Buddhist, and Hindu mystical traditions. Eckhart advocated for social, economic, and gender justice. He also championed an earth-based spirituality and taught that we are artists whose vocation is to birth the Cosmic Christ (or Buddha Nature). All these elements have inspired Fox and influenced his Creation

Spirituality. In this book, Fox imagines dialogues between Eckhart and Carl Jung, Thich Nhat Hanh, Rabbi Heschel, and many others. This book on Eckhart stands as testament to Fox's own creative spiritual genius.

Chris Saade, meanwhile, explores how "the dream of a world of peace, justice, and solidarity is at the core of our spiritual beliefs." He acknowledges that many of us who have served religious or spiritual communities have been distraught at the ease with which these universal values are often interpreted in the most narrow way, providing emotional and spiritual comfort to those "inside" while confining their care for those "outside" to acts of charity rather than acts of transformation. In this beautiful and hope-affirming book, Saade describes how the first wave of spirituality, which has spanned the past few thousand years and has been suffused by these more narrow interpretations, is now being transformed by "a seismic shift of consciousness" into a second wave of spiritually engaged social action for peace, social justice, and environmental sanity. Saade is a prophet of spiritual progressive consciousness, helping readers see that we are beginning to see "the adventure of love-in-action being enacted daily all over the world." Get your friends to read this inspiring book!



A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations
 Edited by Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora
 Princeton University Press, 2014

This collection of scholarly yet accessible articles by dozens of Jewish and Muslim experts is the definitive source for understanding a complex relationship between Muslims and Jews from the seventh century to the present day. Its 1,146 pages cover pressing political issues like whether Jews are demeaned in Islam and whether Jews faced real (as opposed to just remembered) anti-Semitism in Islamic societies. It also explores the ways in which contemporary Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are both products and causes of the political struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. Yet the richness of this fantastic and exciting book lies also in its descriptions of how Jews and Muslims have learned from each other in the arenas of philosophy, science, art, literature, and mysticism.



Tikkun (Jack Lefcourt and Lisa Bigelsen)

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