

# Tikkun

POLITICS+SPIRITUALITY+CULTURE

A Jewish and Interfaith Prophetic Voice to Heal and Transform the World

2021  
HIGHLIGHTS



## 2021 EDITORIALS

- 3 A Nation Shocked at the Near Loss of a Democracy that was Always Part Illusory  
Rabbi Michael Lerner
- 7 The Book of Esther: A Fresh Look at Trauma and Accommodation  
Cat Zavis
- 11 The Movement and the State  
Peter Gabel
- 21 Dear Legislators  
Frances Payne Adler

## SPECIAL HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2021

- 23 It's Time to Honor the "Righteous Among Whites"  
Gary Ferdman and Myriam Miedzian
- 28 Green Shirt  
Naomi Shihab Nye
- 29 Abraham Joshua Heschel a Major Jewish Prophet  
Peter Eisenstadt
- 35 For Montale at the Palio, 1938  
Alan Williamson
- 36 Cri de Coeur: Lachrymose Reflections on Israeli-Palestinian Relations  
Paul Mendes-Flohr
- 42 Why Jews Should Embrace Critical Race Theory  
Jonathan Judaken
- 47 The Bible Does Not Validate Endless Exploitation and Domination of the Environment  
Rabbi Ellen Bernstein

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Trump rallying community in Youngstown, Ohio. Image courtesy of the White House/Wikimedia Commons

# A Nation Shocked at the Near Loss of a Democracy that was Always Part Illusory

**RABBI MICHAEL LERNER**

MANY OF US ARE REJOICING THAT TRUMP'S attempted coup didn't work. And we are rightly outraged at those who stormed the Capitol.

Yet the upsurge of feeling about protecting democracy is a good time to suggest that we seek fundamental changes in our sys-

tem to make it a real democracy that could work for everyone.

Trump is a perfect embodiment of the values of selfishness and "looking out for number one" that is the bottom line of the capitalist marketplace. It was that marketplace and its media that made him a pop hero

to millions long before he became a politician. Anyone who has worked inside a large corporation has been conditioned day after day, year after year, to seek to maximize profits without regard to the consequences for others. After years of being in those institutions, and watching the media that it shapes, most people come away believing that this is “reality” and that it would be unrealistic to try to challenge it.

The Democratic Party is dominated at the top by people who share this assumption, but who also believe that the government should alleviate the worst suffering that the inequalities of wealth and power have engendered, as long as doing so does not significantly weaken the capitalist marketplace. Meanwhile, the Left of that party correctly pushed for considering and repairing the suffering of previously exploited groups including people of color, women, LGBTQI, immigrants, etc. But it is rare to hear an open critique of the ethos of selfishness which underlies and reinforces all the inequalities and all the oppressive practices, and thus makes it almost impossible to get the changes needed to make our country truly a democracy.

The most important thing we can do is to recast progressive forces to place at the center of our public discourse (and eventually into our educational system) a campaign to recognize every other human being on this planet as fundamentally valuable and to care about them as though they were part of our extended family. We must replace the old bottom line of money. We must judge efficiency, productivity, and rationality in our corporations, political system, education system, health care

system, media and cultural system by a new bottom line: the extent to which they maximizes our capacities to be loving and kind, generous and forgiving, committed to environmental and social justice, seeing other human beings as embodiments of the sacred rather than seeing them thru the perspective of how they can “be of use”

to us, and responding to the earth and the larger universe with awe, wonder, and radical amazement at the mystery and grandeur of this life. Using this New Bottom Line will appeal to many who would love to live in such a

world but have never heard a political force explicitly and systematically putting that vision at the center of their discourse. These same people then fall back into “being realistic” and settling for the world of selfishness, and the Right begins to look most realistic when it promotes selfishness and the Left most unrealistic when it calls for reform within the contours of the capitalist worldview.

Articulating that New Bottom Line will help us build the public support we need to actually win the specific transformations needed to democracy a reality in America.

### **Abolish the Electoral College**

The president should be chosen by popular vote, and should take office immediately upon receiving the votes of a majority of voters.

### **Significant Changes to Our Voting System**

We need to pass legislation to ensure automatic voting registration when a person

“**New Bottom Line will help us build the public support we need to actually win the specific transformations needed to democracy a reality in America.**”



turns 18, online voting registration, restoring voting rights to felons, protecting voting rights throughout our country, and more.

### **Limit Presidential Pardons**

The President must not have the power to grant pardons to any member of her/his/their family, presidential staff, cabinet members, and top assistants to their cabinet members, or highest 20% of donors to their corporations, campaigns, or any other project to which they are identified.

### **Abolish the Senate**

The Senate was created to protect the slave-owners and the rich from democratic measures that would promote democratic redistribution of wealth or income, and it now serves the elites of wealth and power more than the interests of the bottom 50% of wealth holders or income earners. The House of Representatives would have the power to confirm or reject presidential nominees to the Supreme Court and other federal courts, and to impeach the president and call for a new general election every two years. There must be a 12-year time limit on serving in the Supreme Court of the U.S. and state supreme courts, in Congress, and in all state legislatures.

### **Publicly Funded Elections**

All federal and state elections must be publicly funded, with all other money banned from any source. Public money used to fund elections would be distributed equally to the 2-4 largest political parties. All major media must provide the largest 2-4 political parties free access to at least 5 hours of prime time that the parties and their



candidates may shape in any way that they choose. This shall apply to all federal and state elections.

### **Initiative Process**

Empower the people of the U.S. to generate policies thru an initiative process that would require the support of 5% of the population supporting it before it could be put on the next ballot in national elections or local elections, and with a ban on spending money to collect signatures except as granted equally to those who support and those who oppose the proposed measures.

### **Abolish Wealth Inequality**

Ban major inequalities in wealth by mandating a tax on wealth and income so its actual outcome is to ensure that no individual or family shall receive income more than seven (7) times the income of the median

income of our society, and ensure that no individual or family can retain ownership of wealth that is more than ten (10) times the wealth of the median wealth of families in this society, excluding ownership of a person's primary residence.

### Corporate Responsibility

Every corporation with incomes of \$50 million or more per year shall be required to prove to a jury of ordinary citizens once every five years that they have a satisfactory history of environmental and social responsibility. They will be prevented from moving their jobs and investments out of the U.S. until they pay local communities reparations for the anticipated damage to the well being of the communities where they employed people.

These are important first steps toward democratization. If pursued in association with campaigns for the New Bottom Line and with an explicit connection to programs to repair the damage already done

to the earth and to the animals who live on it, democracy would come alive, become unbeatable, and many who currently are too timid to actually implement it would be empowered to win many other aspects of "the Caring Society: Caring for Each Other and Caring for the Earth.

And when these steps have been instituted, we will have a working democracy rather than the thin elements of democracy that people are seeking to protect from those who do not value democracy at all. ●



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In his latest book *Revolutionary Love*, Rabbi Lerner develops a strategy for progressives for the next two decades.

"Michael Lerner is one of the most significant prophetic public intellectuals and spiritual leaders of our generation. Secular intellectuals and those who yearn for a major change in the direction of American society can learn a lot from reading his book."

—Cornel West, Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy, Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

"In *Revolutionary Love*, Rabbi Michael Lerner has provided a great theoretical and political service. No one that I am aware of does a better job of using love as a theoretical tool to address these issues and suggest what a politics based on a love of the other might look like. This book is not merely innovative—it is ground breaking in its scope, depth of scholarship, insight, and originality."

—Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire Distinguished Scholar in Critical Pedagogy, McMaster University





"Esther Before King Ahasuerus LACMA 61.24.4" byFae is licensed under CC BY 2.0

# The Book of Esther – A Fresh Look at Trauma and Accommodation

CAT ZAVIS

**I**S THE BOOK OF ESTHER A STORY OF INSPIRATION and intrigue, one where powerful women buck the patriarchal norms? Or is it a book of accommodation and violence? I'm interested in exploring some of the troubling aspects of this book to find meaning in our present time that surpasses traditional understandings.

In most shuls, the story of Esther is understood as a story of Jewish redemption and, arguably, creativity in narrowly escaping

genocide. It is seen as a story of two powerful women, Vashti, who refuses the king's demands, and Esther, who uses her position of power to save her people. Vashti is the feminist archetype standing up to the patriarchy. And Esther's actions are an example of women's wiliness that saved the Jews. This is, for many, a powerful antidote to the Holocaust and provides hope in challenging times such as these with the rise of anti-Semitism.



Rachel Adelman<sup>1</sup> argues that “the art of discretion is a feminine virtue” that is utilized in our Torah by both genders to gain power. She argues that Esther, like other warrior women, use discretion and feminine wile (“the unconventional weaponry of women”) to undermine pernicious sources of power and achieve her goals. But Timothy Beal<sup>2</sup> argues that Vasti and Esther’s “success” was based instead on their ability to be ogled, to be sexual, to be objects. Both of these are tropes about how women behave in society – either being wile and cunning, or using their sexuality to gain influence.

There are a myriad of ways that disempowered people disrupt power imbalances and exert power, including discretion, wile, and sexuality. Such behaviors are typically labeled “feminine” and thus judged to be sneaky and negative. Those with power create and use stereotypes about the disempowered as an intentional act to sustain and further entrench power imbalances, oppression, and disenfranchisement. Furthermore, the characterizations often have little or no relationship to reality. Those in power often have such little interaction with the powerless, other than through means of exerting power over them, that they really don’t even “know” the stranger who lives amongst them.

These behaviors can be better understood as strategies disempowered people employ to exert their agency and power and get their needs met. Disempowered people often work for the powerful in intimate settings, such as their homes. They are constantly watching the ruling elite, discerning how to read them and manage their needs and energy so as to keep themselves safe and ‘under the radar’. The stereotypes they create can often be ways of snatching

back agency and subverting power, thus becoming means of opposition and empowerment.

Vashti’s unconventional refusal to participate in her own exploitation shatters stereotypes of women as weak and disempowered. She is called to show up to a party in which there are only men. The king and other men are dependent on her as a fixed object for their pleasure – she has no agency or power. Yet, when summoned, she refuses to go. She is enacting her agency by choosing to *absent herself* – in a place in which she was already absent! Her choice exposes the fragile foundation on which the entire patriarchal structure stands and the anxiety and vulnerability among men with regard to their own subjective status vis-à-vis women. Her defiance threatens all male power in the society, and hence the society’s sexual and political order. Vashti’s “transgression” instills fear in the king’s court that all women will then disobey their “men”. (Chap.1:16-20)

Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen’s behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen’s behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty’s officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation! If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she. Then will the judgment executed by Your Majesty resound throughout your realm, vast though it is;



and all wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike.

Vashti's assertion of power and refusal to be 'used' for the king's pleasure ends up being 'used' to entrench male dominance and keep women "in their place"

by issuing a decree that all wives must treat their husbands with respect. While Vashti is written out of the text, her 'writing out' is used by the subjects/creators of the law to write back in proper sexual identity and power relations for women vis-à-vis "their lords". Yet in the end, Vashti remains a heroine who refused the male gaze.

Both Vashti's refusal, and Mordecai's later, led to massive overreaction, condemnation, and danger. Which begs the question, is refusal to bow down to power dangerous? What is the role of nonviolent action and refusal to participate in exploitation when it leads to greater oppression? Is the author trying to tell us that non-violence is not an effective strategy? As the story ends, it seems the author suggests that the only way out of a dangerous and violent situation is more violence. How do we make sense of this? And why does the author talk about Jews as killers? What is the author's message?

First, I think the author is reminding us how truly fallible we all are as human beings. We too can enact extreme violence if we are not careful. Second, this is a powerful reminder that even those who start powerless can still be corrupted by power.

And third, I look at this ending through the lens of trauma. Esther is a traumatized person. She is taken as a young girl and basically sold into sex slavery to a man much older than her and forced to serve in his harem. This is not a glorious story.



We tend to forget the incredible violence enacted upon Esther because she comes to the rescue of the Jews so her sacrifice seems worth it (unlike Isaac who ultimately was not sacrificed, albeit traumatized). From a very young age, she resides in the king's castle – an echo chamber filled with people that respond to their problems with violence. Esther re-enacts her own trauma and limited visions of possible solutions through that lens.

The Book of Esther should be a warning against the glorification of the powerless. David Clines<sup>3</sup> argues that Esther can be understood as a "reactionary rather than progressive" narrative. The story celebrates and uplifts co-operation and complicity not resistance. Rather than challenge, resist, or transform the power structure, Mordecai and Esther become part of it. This is a very pragmatic, realistic response—accept what you can get, coddle up to the powerful, don't challenge systems and structures of power, protect yourself because nothing can ever be fundamentally transformed. A subtitle for the Book of Esther could be: *Be Realistic!* Rather than a book of redemption,

the Book of Esther is an anti-liberation theology text that undermines the liberatory voice of our Torah found so powerfully in Exodus.

In Exodus, Moses used his prior insider status to challenge and ultimately overthrow Pharaoh. Perhaps this is why YHVH is absent in Esther and so prevalent in Exodus. YHVH represents that energy in the universe that says to Moses – go tell Pharaoh to let my people go. YHVH does not tell Moses to go coddle up to Pharaoh and ask for better working conditions or minimum wage for the Hebrews, nor does he return to the castle and become part of the power structure. Moses challenged power from outside and inspired the mass multitudes then and many in more modern times to refuse to participate in their own oppression and launch into the unknown wilderness in the hopes of building a more just world. YHVH is that force in the universe that makes fundamental transformation possible, including overthrowing systems and structures of oppression. YHVH is the voice of liberation. The subtitle to the Book of Exodus could be: *Be Idealistic: Dream Big!*

Rather than confront the Book of Esther's proclivity to accommodate to the powerful, some contemporary Jews argue that Purim is an opportunity to transcend dualities or joyously celebrate our continuity as a people. The slaughter of the Persians at the end of the book has been used by some extremist West Bank settlers to justify the killing of Palestinians. The danger of failing to condemn this part of the book cannot be transcended by how high we get on alcohol or drugs or how insistently we ignore the way that Purim has become, for some linked, to a glorification of Jewish violence.

The Book of Esther demonstrates that when people become part of the power structure, they themselves end up being more transformed from the systems than they succeed in changing those systems. This story calls us to recognize that to create fundamental change in our society, we need to push against systems of oppression and work together to build a loving and just world that would be truly liberating for all. As Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, YHVH seeks partnership with human beings to bring forth liberation. The work is upon us today. ●

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Adelman, "Passing Stranger – Reading Transgender Across Genre: Rabbinic Midrash and Feminist Hermeneutics on Esther", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30:2.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Beal, *Writing Out* (1997)

<sup>3</sup> David Clines, *Reading Esther from Left to Right Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text* (Originally published in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (ed. David J.A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter; JSOTSup, 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 22-42.)



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# The Movement and the State: Bridging Two Forms of “We”

PETER GABEL

I

**W**HEN THE WATERGATE scandal began to sweep over our culture beginning in 1971 and lasting until Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974, an eerie phenomenon took place within American consciousness, a displacement of energy from the *movement* as an upsurge of liberatory and communitarian desire that had been “rising” for many years through a multiplicity of contexts (civil rights, women, LGBT, anti-war, the transfigurations of the counterculture) into what can fairly be described as a fixation on the State as the locus of political identity and political life. This displacement can be understood as a movement from here, in which a new sense of we was being born right within the collective consciousness and had been, growingly, for many years, into a *there* in which we returned to existing in an imaginary land, the State, ruled over by a president and a Congress and in which we each were designated as citizens outside of time, scattered across an externalized political landscape like so many leaves. One uncanny way that I experienced this displacement was that while I had for many years been feeling myself joyously uplifted by the rising force of the movement and the new and vital community this force was ushering me into, suddenly everywhere



Sam Gabel

I turned people were watching television, watching the Watergate hearings, as if our political reality were *out there*—something to be watched—rather than *within* us as an internal and social-spiritual transfiguration of public space emulsifying the artificial and alienated culture that had produced the Vietnam War, the absurd hierarchies of race and sex, the hollowness of life as a performative script uncentered from our true Being and laid out for us as a kind of cultural prison that we had been sentenced to by virtue of our birth. Through the medium of the television set, I could feel those hearings vampirize the authentic community that we were becoming and return us to the separated, bloodless watchers of a political community outside of us that each of us was supposedly one of. “We” brought down “the President”. Or as everyone said at the time when Nixon finally stepped down, “the system worked.” And while Watergate did not succeed in itself in completely undermining the transformative energy of the social movements of the 60s, it did begin to

mute that energy somewhat, to weaken its truly transformative power by returning a portion of that power to the State.

If we go more deeply into why this displacement occurred, we can see—and those of us who lived through it can actually recall—that our vulnerability to what we might call the Watergate trick resulted then and still results today from the movement’s lack of confidence in itself. At the time coming out of the 1960s, what I am calling the *movement* was creating a parallel universe, co-existing with the official inherited version of the culture, that was an emergent political community based on the joy of a new mutual recognition, a feeling of suddenly becoming present to each other in a new way that was more grounded and real than anything we of our generation had experienced up to that time. But we did not know how to name this new social reality and grasp it confidently in our reflection—we only *experienced* it, and even then in a somewhat tentative way, as in “Can this really be happening?” And against that tentativeness of this new experience of what I am calling a parallel universe, a new political community, we also had inside of us our conditioning of our entire lifetimes, in which what was real was the President, and the Congress, and our dutiful roles as citizens of the State, all of which constituted “America”. That conditioned set of internalized images was, so to speak, laid down inside us as the truth of the world, taught to us implicitly in every interaction, summed up cognitively and reflectively in Civics Class in 7th or 8th grade, the official version of social reality in which “everybody” believed. So when the Watergate hearings came along, we were vulnerable to transferring our dawning authentic awareness that was tentatively being born, onto a

familiar tableau that still existed inside us as more probably real and more probably solid than the possibly ephemeral experience of joy and oneness and communion that we in any case had yet been able to name and identify as an alternative pathway for us and for humanity as a whole to follow toward our greater realization as social beings. Seen through this lens of our understandable lack of confidence, as yet, in our own nascent movements, it was natural to be vulnerable to thinking that bringing down Nixon was itself a manifestation of our movement rather than a way of surrendering that movement and returning to the safety of our prior artificial conditioning. There were hints that we might have attended to—for example, the actual offense of breaking into the Democratic Party headquarters and then the secondary offense of covering it up was hardly worthy of the national celebration that broke out in response to the ultimate conviction of the burglars and Haldeman and Ehrlichman and even Nixon himself. Looked at dispassionately, the entire Watergate uproar was really much ado about nothing except for the excitement of solving the mystery so as to bring down the King himself, which showed how willing we were to be distracted to shift our focus to the King instead of treating the whole affair as a minor comedy compared to the immense significance of the transformation of the entire society that we were actually, deeply, beginning to try to bring about. But we could not be alert to those hints because we were not yet confident enough in the more profound change to which we aspired, what its true nature was, or how to confidently further its own development rather than being subject to being lured back into the conventional political community—the community of “the State,” that we were in a deep sense trying



to leave behind.

We can see this same confusion-of-being occur when social movements arise, rise “up,” burst forth to assert their empowered presence into an inert pre-existing situation characterized by injustice and oppression, and then seek to institutionalize that rising presence in the form of legal victories within our present legal system. Consider, for example, the civil rights movement, a great, embodied movement of Being itself, a moral uprising originating in the black churches of the South, discovering and then affirming itself through the spiritual uplift of prayer and song, and then marching out into the streets and other public spaces, calling for an end not simply to “discrimination” based on race, but for an end to dehumanization in all forms, to recognition of one another’s essential humanity, to a bringing into being of an egalitarian mutuality that would realize the moral bond that ought to exist among all human beings and that would fully realize our desire to fully see each other and be seen by each other as inherently loving social beings. This is the “Call” that the civil rights movement as an upsurge of moral being made upon the whole of humanity and that carried forth the vibrant moral energy that had the capacity to reach me, a white 10 year-old playing in my upper-middle class apartment in New York City in 1957 and happening to catch sight of the marchers and voice of Dr. King on my television set, as a something-higher that I should somehow be aspiring to and that would be the basis of my own fulfillment.

But when that movement subdued itself so as to enter the heavily choreographed “legal arena” to assert that its call for the bringing into being of this kind of loving community should be binding upon the whole of

society, the movement found itself arguing for a legal equality that drew its meaning not from the movement but from the State. And the distinctive thing about the State was that it manifested a consciousness without movement, whose participants were converted from full-blooded moral-beings-in-action here into separated and disconnected monads out there in a mental picture called “society”. Just as the Water-gate hearings absorbed the living energy of the 60s into an official tableau watched on television, so the legal processes leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 absorbed the moral and communal uprising of the civil rights movement’s loving call to authentic and loving community into a decree of mere nondiscrimination based on race in public accommodations. Without meaning to minimize its immense historical importance in the long-term struggle against racism (as well as its very important impact on daily life for African-Americans), the Civil Rights Act nevertheless also defined equality in a way indifferent to its loving foundation. This is to say that the victory in the realm of collective consciousness that we call the State, made possible only by the moral force of the movement making its call upon the whole of humanity including the Nation, was also to some extent a defeat to the degree that it linked this victory to the restoration of the mutually separated, mutually distanced, mutually-protected-against-each-other world. Under the new law, social justice means that you can remain disconnected monads shielded against the threat of each other’s vibrant presence, but you must do so without discriminating on the basis of race.

There is a tricky paradox here. For when your own moral effort is “recognized” as just, and is then returned to you as a legal

victory, but the consciousness embedded in the legal victory links the victory to the erasure of the moral and loving mutuality that brought the victory into being, the effect of the legal decree is like the effect of a funny mirror in an amusement park. The victory that you yourself sought and morally demanded and brought about is reflected back to you in its collective binding aspect as something that resembles what you were calling for but lacking the soul that was the very basis of the call. If fully ensouled, the State would be transfigured by the movement, and non-discrimination based upon race would embody the actual transcendence of racism itself: paranoid dehumanization and inwardly-humiliated racist grandiosity bathed clean in a sea of mutuality and love. But the State that we have inherited from prior generations and that we today reproduce in our own lives can do no more than reconcile the moral pressure felt by all of us from the force of true movements for social justice with the social alienation, separation, and fear of the other that caused the injustice in the first place.

And even more, because those of us in these movements have not yet become fully aware of and confident of the loving truth that our movements are giving rise to, we can be tricked by our own legal victories into adopting the State's meaning of those victories as our own. When the movement sees itself in the legal mirror that it itself has partially brought into being and won its victories within, the movement can actually partially lose itself in that mirror, defining its objectives as, for example, "eliminating all forms of discrimination" in a competitive, self-interested and mutually fearful world rather than bringing into being a world that would realize equality

as a manifestation of love across our racial and all other differences. Thus the labor movement partly lost itself in defining its aims not as creating egalitarian workplaces reflecting cooperation and collective self-determination (but rather as often seeking merely higher wages and safer working conditions); the women's movement partly lost its way in defining its aims not as fostering empathy and care and transcending the violence of patriarchy (but as assuring women could "break the glass ceiling" and be present in political offices and corporate boardrooms); and the environmental movement has partly lost its way in defining its aims not as restoring a sacred relationship to the natural world (but rather as reducing carbon and methane emissions while leaving unchanged the objectification and exploitation of the animal and plant kingdoms). These legal victories were of course "good," and we should celebrate them as markers of objective progress in the long effort to truly humanize our world, but we must also recognize the way that they to some extent have coopted the essence of our great and loving aspirations and returned them to us in a manner quite consistent with the very social alienation, separation, and fear that at the deepest level they were intended to overcome.

## II

If we now go more deeply into the experience of deflection from the movement to the State, we can recognize that there are really two quite different consciousnesses involved in the process of what we might call becoming-deflected. When I am drawn into the movement consciousness, I somehow cross a spiritual bridge from self to other that had been both blocked and invisible, and discover a new sense of



being-here-with-one-another that relocates the ground of my very socialness in a radiant bond of mutual presence with others. The African-American community that had been scattered into being a collection of isolated and oppressed “individuals” emerges from the church as a single garment of mutuality, to paraphrase Dr. King—the very Being of the separated has through song and moral uplift crossed the bridge into an elevated mutual recognition

that they themselves had been subservient to as the very “who” that they were, or seemed to be, for generations. In all of these cases a new consciousness is born by rising up through a surprising mutual recognition to a new ground on which the whole of human consciousness itself could realize a new level of connection and transformation. Each of these particular “bridge-crossings” from self to other incarnate a new and tentative universality realized

through each particular, pointing humanity toward a possible new and loving world.

But because the near-magical incantation of this new consciousness is new, came out of “nowhere,” and did so by a making of the invisible bond between us and among us visible, we human beings have not yet got what we might call a grip on it. The vast legacy of humankind has been evolving



suddenly empowered to make a great moral claim upon the scattered population outside the church and across the world. The wage-workers that had experienced themselves as reciprocally disconnected monads “under the boss’s thumb” come out of the union meeting deciding to “button up,” and when they do all wear their union buttons at work the next day, arise together to claim a new collective presence, a union of collective spirit announcing that a new “we” had been born. Women emerge from the spark of all-women consciousness-raising groups held in small apartments to discover a new strength, through each other, to dissolve the weight of pontificating male authority

toward this elevated awareness through episodic and often unpredictable cultural spirals (or “revolutions”), but if we think of our own time, for example, the cultural weight of the reification of materialism as the motivation of all life (Darwin’s emphasis on mere survival, Marx’s on struggle over the means of production, Clinton’s “it’s the economy stupid”) and the reification of science as the means of knowing the world (if you can’t taste, touch, smell, see or feel it, it’s just a matter of opinion), makes spiritual knowledge of the rising longings of the soul made manifest in our great social movements something very difficult

to hold onto. To take a non-movement example that I often refer to of the seemingly ephemeral nature of this elevated awareness, during the massive Loma Priete earthquake in San Francisco in 1989, people everywhere emerged from their reciprocal isolation to help each other, direct traffic at street corners, gather for dinner by candlelight (the power was out for days), watch the news of the effects of the Bay Bridge's collapse on battery-powered tv's on street corners. Everywhere, the invisible bridge from self to other was suddenly appearing and being crossed. But because this sudden love of all humanity for each other was so magical-seeming and could really not be named, the community gradually succumbed, after about two weeks, to the fictional hope that we could "return to normal". Return to normalcy, the very death knell of the magical oneness that had arisen out of the sea like Atlantis, was announced by the Mayor and welcomed by all, supposedly, as we all secretly, resignedly, returned to reciprocal isolation. As the Bay Bridge was repaired, the spiritual bridges gradually disappeared.

What takes place internally in the collective consciousness when this kind of return to normalcy occurs may properly be called a slippage, in the sense that the bioenergetic, psychospiritual "substance" that had been holding us together gives way to the gravitational pull of the legacy of fear of each other, congealed in the weight of our bond with and loyalty to prior generations, pulling us back toward separation. In just the way that a fabric can first begin to fray and then begin to unravel and then give way altogether, so the confidence holding together the new movement-generated political garment can begin to weaken at its weakest points and inwardly we can all start to slip

away from each other until "we" finally let go altogether and don't exist anymore as a real "we," except for sharing the memory that has been laid down in each of us that will provide some strength to support the risks of future climbs. When I say that this slippage takes place internally in the collective consciousness, what I mean is not that each of us individually comes to doubt that, for example, the earthquake community transfigured and transcended the normal community of "being San Franciscans," but rather that the doubt that we can sustain our community spreads through us socially or "inter-subjectively" from one to the other like an unraveling fabric. And when the media actually announces that "the Mayor says we have returned to normal," all at once we each get the impression that everyone else has, so to speak, deserted us, to use a dramatic but emotionally accurate term. Or to shift back from the earthquake example to the civil rights movement, when "the law" announces on behalf of the community as a whole that the movement has succeeded *because* discrimination in public accommodations has been prohibited, it seems necessary to put the aspiration to love across our racial differences on the back burner. The we that had affirmed the necessity of a loving and caring world has apparently, according to the law, given way to a we that defines our own victory as a return to separation, but without discrimination. "Hurray, the system worked"—meaning a) there is a "system" that is a fixed thing that "we" are each a part of and together constitute, and b) "it" worked in a way that purports to be exactly what we were calling for with all of our moral voice (but isn't).

Grasping this slippage as a weakening of Being itself, we can describe what takes



place in precise terms as follows: in the movement's rising, you and I and others extending outward as a vast and forming interhuman latticework come into a mutuality of presence, thrilling but tentative in its newness, that because of its newness has not yet come to know itself in reflection. The power of this presence temporarily emulsifies the images of self and other that had previously encapsulated us and allows us to suddenly stand in true relation to each other in a mutually centered experience of true mutual recognition—suddenly the bridges between us become visible and we spontaneously cross them and we are here. But co-existing within each of us and both and all of us is the density of the selves we have always been—thick, learned, seemingly eternal and designated in reflection as real because they always had been communicated to us as real, like a thing. In other words, the way we have been conditioned-in-separation initially through the family and then the schools and life on the street and in the workplace and then in the new families we were creating have been installed within our sense-memories as images to which the word “I” has been attached, declaring that image-self to not only be what has been cast onto me, but also to be who I really am. The movement has revealed this conviction to be false—that that other self is not who I really am but only a collection of images cast over my outside—but because this spiritual awakening anchored in true and sudden interhuman recognition of one another has been so new and fragile and not yet able to be understood and named in reflection and intentionally reproduced as a way forward for life, because of that ontological fragility, we cannot yet resist the pull of the legacy of our conditioning, that lifetime of accreted absence internalized as images of self and

other, to which we are loyal and which also declares itself to be real.

This world of the inherited images of self and other collectively internalized not as images but as apparent realities to which we have pledged unconscious allegiance are what I mean by “the State.” As a collective political identity, being in the State means apprehending oneself as “an other for the other” among a collection of others that calls itself “We”, as in “We the People.” In this state of otherness, we are not actually ourselves, but rather are observers in a hologram, in which each of us is also one of the observed, one of the people “in” an abstraction, “American society”. Withdrawn into ourselves, we think we are “out there in the group,” one of the citizens of the State in the United States of America. But actually we are merely watching this as a spectacle because our true being is locked within, sealed in its separation from others because those others are also manifesting themselves as withdrawn others-for-the-other. And within that internalized mentally-pictured tableau, I “am” this or that role within the accretion of absence (since we are actually collectively withdrawn from each other until some circumstantial spark, the earthquake or a rising social movement, lifts us from our absence into each other's presence). Within this other-directed world of the State, we do of course experience actual emotional connection to others to the extent that the fear of prior generations is partly counterbalanced by the residue of true human contact that forms the erotic subtext of the community. But we nevertheless—in this condition I'm calling the State—inter-exist predominantly in the realm of images of self and other in which we are substantially derealized while pretending to be real: derealized in the sense

that, for example, we have no difficulty killing each other in massive numbers such as the 80,000,000 people “we” killed in World War II.

### III

The dilemma posed by the mutually withdrawn nature of existing in the State as our political community was revealed to us on a daily basis during the presidency of Donald Trump. During those four years, “President Trump” as he was called within the State consciousness would engage in daily acts of lunacy, the most extreme of which might have been recommending injecting bleach to treat the coronavirus, but also using his twitter account to rave about, say, all Democrats hating the Jews, or insulting his political opponents with demeaning nicknames, or threatening to start a nuclear war with a foreign leader one day and then scheduling a “majestic” media-fetishized lunch with him full of pomp and circumstance and deemed to be “wonderful” the next, or indifferently caging children at the border, or on a regular basis seemingly firing staff while entrusting important matters to seemingly random family members. During this four-year period, quite a long time, “we” were in a state of continual upset—enraged, impotent, depressed, hopeless, wringing our hands. But what these emotions really reflected was our double-experience of being on the one hand withdrawn from one another and unable to act in concert, paralyzed by our separation engendered by our mutually withdrawn condition, and yet also cemented together inside the false “We” of being one of the citizens of “the country” of which Trump was the president. While “we” were existing wholly within the State as our

political community, each of us suffered our existence in perpetual otherness not emanating from our center, the center of our actual collective being, but rather unified from the outside through our other-identity in the State. We were condemned by our separation to be included within an imaginary collective being run by an off-the-rails person whom no one could do anything about. One of the most extraordinary facts accompanying this collective situation was that for four years “President Trump” was the sole person in possession of the nuclear codes with which he could have theoretically killed every person on the planet. While it may be that the Joint Chiefs of Staff or some other military group had a secret plan to prevent this from occurring, even if this were true it only points up how much “mad” behavior was permitted short of such a catastrophe on a daily basis because “we” all existed together, as a “we” committed to the president’s legitimacy through his election by “the others” via the Electoral College, and yet utterly isolated from each other and so unable to change our situation. The bridges connecting self to other, here, there, and everywhere, as loving moral beings, were all drawn up, and in their drawn-up state left each of us to be surrounded by a moat of separation, the separation of universal otherness masquerading as a We. Thus condemned to our separation, we could do little but bemoan “our” situation on a daily basis with a kind of resigned depression suffusing our moral environment. To the extent that we identified our communal existence with being-in-the-State, we were all “trapped in the same We” as Trump and his supporters, and could seemingly do nothing about it. If you were from New Zealand, you might have been appalled, but you wouldn’t have been



depressed because you wouldn't have been American, wouldn't have been trapped in the same We.

There is a way out of this debilitating situation, however, and that is to realize that our collective existence as a political community is not defined by our position "in" the State, that this position as "the citizen of the country" in which our we-ness is defined by the collective act of annual voting is merely an artifact of our historical conditioning-in-separation. If we instead grasp our collective existence as an expression of the great international movement upward of our collective Being itself, that great moral force within humanity and perhaps the universe itself that is evolving toward loving mutuality and affirmation and presence to one another, then we recover ourselves from being lost out there in the State and experience ourselves as perpetually here together on the side of the movement, exerting ourselves toward elevating each other into being...exerting ourselves into elevating each other, through mutual recognition, out of our withdrawn space that is the legacy of our alienation, and into each other's presence that is the grace of our redemption. The foundation of this kind of movement-identification is the historical force of all the movements that have preceded the present moment whose moral integrity supports us from underneath our collective Being itself and is manifested *in the present moment* in millions of particular incarnations across the world. And our own neighbors across the hall, wherever we are, or next door if we live in a separate house, are secretly longing for us to help lift them into this reciprocity of presence that will rescue them from their own isolation.

If we can enter this rising psychospiritual

field, which supports us as a rising historical force whose legacy includes in just the last two hundred years the abolitionist movement, the labor movement, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the LGBTQ movement, the anti-war movement, the environmental movement, and so many other incarnations of the great upward force of love for one another manifested in an infinite number of particular forms, then we can refrain from losing ourselves in the internally contradictory and paralytic "we" of the State, and make ourselves present to each other as the transcendent We that we long to be in our hearts. From this, two things follow:

First, we should understand electoral, legislative and other efforts within the (for the time being) false-we of "the State" to always be both an effort to accomplish practical goals, such as universal health care, and transcendent movement goals such as manifesting truly *caring about each other's health*. We should resist the mistake of allowing the condition of mutual separation in the State as a scattered collection of citizens to define the meaning of our own aspirations within the movement—a mistake which in the case of universal health care would mean setting up a mere "system" of insuring the repair of each other's physical bodies. As one incarnation of the movement toward a loving world of which we are each a rising expression, universal health care is an aspect of the realization of love for one another and our parents and grandparents and friends and truthfully all of humanity. While the actual carrying out of this care for one another may take the form of an insurance program mediated by money, its meaning need not be defined by the flat concept of health insurance, but rather can and should be evoked and carried out

as something that brings us together as a loving community. Or to put this slightly differently, the electoral and legislative effort can and should embody the evocation of the transcendent meaning that animates it, rather than allowing the meaning to be defined by the reproduction of separation and reciprocal otherness that is the image reflected back in existing State-consciousness. Like the civil rights victory that doesn't address our separation but only banishes racial discrimination from it, the achievement of universal health care, if it is not reflected back to us as the realization of our interhuman bond, may simply return us—in the legal mirror that is like the funny mirror at the amusement park—to the very condition of mutual otherness that we are trying to overcome through achieving it. It would still be a good thing in the sense that it would institute a program that objectively manifests our obligation to repair each other's physical bodies, but it would also place us in the paradox of converting the bond of true social caring for one another into a mere externalized "government program" as if that's what we intended and wanted.

Second, we should understand that over the longer term our aim can and should be to transform the State itself so that the public manifestation of our political community in day-to-day life, embodied in our understanding of the government, is also a manifestation of the sense of community being born in the movement. This is to say that over the long term we can and should aspire to transforming the State itself so that we no longer conceive of ourselves as discrete citizen-individuals "watching" the collective as a hologram outside of us from our reciprocally withdrawn spaces, but rather experience and understand our-

selves as interconnected beings working to realize our love for one another through the ongoing practice of our political community. We may then come to see ourselves as gradually, across generations, building a bridge from the "we" of the movement that is being born to the "we" of the State that is itself being transformed by that birth. This second larger objective can only be accomplished through the work of the first—through the collective building up of a new collective consciousness of who "we" are that enters our reflective awareness through the meaning we publicly give to each electoral and legislative victory. An example of this effort is the work of the Project for Integrating Spirituality, Law, and Politics, which on the one hand advocates for transformative approaches to law, like restorative justice and transformative mediation, incorporating the goal of mutual recognition of one another's authentic humanity through law; and on the other supports the expansion of liberal rights-victories in the existing socially-separated State paradigm while giving these victories of labor, women, communities of color, and sexual minorities a loving and communitarian meaning. The Project's longer-term goal is the transcendence of the liberal model of the socially-separated We altogether, but this longer-term objective requires holding this double-consciousness infused by the loving energy of the movement as a way of doing the actual work over time of crossing the bridge from one "we" to another. In this way, eventually, we may succeed in evolving the State itself into a manifestation of the interior bond with one another that is discovered through the movement's rising, which will represent the movement finally becoming confident of itself with sufficient moral certainty to make its interior loving bond *non-coercively*



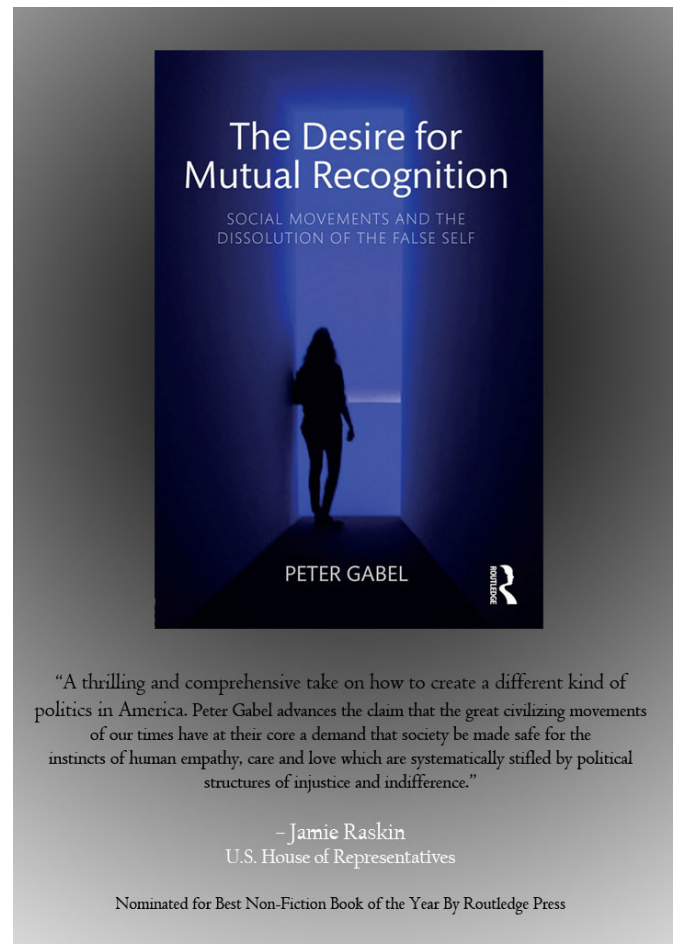
*binding upon itself* through the political self-reflection of the State.

At the same time that we pursue these two interrelated idealistic goals, we must be aware of the inevitable tension between the transcendental aspirations of the movement as a rising force of human connection and the State as a legacy tending to reproduce our separation. While we must constantly evoke and advocate for the universal transcendent meaning of our particular social change and social justice efforts, we should not expect our elected representatives to instantly bring about the realization of that transcendent meaning so long as success within the State arena—which is the arena of partially alienated consciousness—requires the support of those who have not yet embraced that transcendent meaning (including many of the representatives' own constituents). To the extent that we succeed in building a movement that publicly manifests our love for one another as a political force and as at the heart of the meaning of our political actions, to that extent we can call upon our own candidates and representatives to evoke and stand for those higher aims. But to the extent that those candidates and representatives can only win victories by straddling the transcendent and the practical, we should continue to support them and their efforts while always working to help them elevate their discourse and transformative intentions. The bridge from the we of the movement to the we of the State won't be built at all if we don't understand the necessity of fundamentally transforming the way we are reflected back to ourselves in the way we evoke and represent our political community and the meaning of our own political activism, but it won't

be built in a day in any case and so our long-term strategy must make room for the indirection that a mountain climber practices in climbing to a summit that she cannot proceed to directly. One always places one's anchoring pick that is the source of one's leverage at the summit, but force of circumstances including the force of resistance to the climb requires intuitively grasped sidesteps and pauses to assure success in getting to the top. ●



**PETER GABEL** is editor-at-large of Tikkun. His most recent book, *The Desire for Mutual Recognition: Social Movements and the Dissolution of the False Self* (Routledge Press, 2018), was nominated for the Kirkus Prize as Best Non-Fiction Book of the Year.



# Dear Legislators

FRANCES PAYNE ADLER



“There are approximately 750 U.S. military base sites abroad in 80 foreign countries and colonies.”

- *Drawdown: Improving US and Global Security Through Military Base Closures Abroad*  
by David Vine, Patterson Deppen, Leah Bolger. *Foreign Policy in Focus*. Sept. 20, 2021.

Dear legislators in Capitol City, sweating in stone buildings this Session, searching for cash and coins for clinics and coronary bypass machines, for bandages and bedpans, searching inside books and briefs and file cabinets. Surely you’ve looked everywhere, but what do I know? I’m just a poet with my papers and pens, just a professor with my satchel and silly books, just a former nurse from Canada with my starched cap and soft-soled shoes. Have you checked the bills coming in for aircraft carriers and chemicals for our bases in Colombia and Cuba, for gas masks and guns for our soldiers in Greece, Kyrgyzstan, and Paraguay, for tanks and tracer bullets in Thailand, and São Tomé e Príncipe? Have you asked why we’re still buying barbed wire and bayonets for our battalions in Bahrain and Britain? Or claymore mines and missiles for our military in the Marianas and the United Arab Emirates? What about the cost of nuclear intelligence for our navy in Norway and the Netherlands? Or artillery for our armed forces in Egypt, Ecuador and Ethiopia, in Japan, Djibouti, and Jordan, in Panama and in Puerto Rico, Spain and Saudi Arabia, in Poland, Liberia and Italy? Can we talk about foreclosing the bases? Funding defibrillators instead for families in Florida and Delaware. Buying syringes and scalpels and stethoscopes for clinic staff in South Dakota and Colorado. Pacemakers for elders with arrhythmia in Alabama and Alaska. Bicycles



and jogging institutes for Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa. Treadmill machines and touring nutritionists for Utah, Texas, and Kentucky. But what do I know, I'm just a poet with my papers and pens, just a person wondering why we're buying bullets with our billions instead of seeking care for our millions. ●

This poem was published in an earlier version on [Foreign Policy in Focus, Washington, DC](#).



**FRANCES PAYNE ADLER** is the author of five poetry books and exhibitions, most recently, *Dare I Call You Cousin*, about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She is the poetry editor of Tikkun and Professor Emerita and founder of the Creative Writing & Social Action Program at California State University Monterey Bay. In her earlier life, Adler was an emergency room nurse in Montreal.

## It's Time to Honor the "Righteous Among Whites"

**GARY FERDMAN AND MYRIAM MIEDZIAN**

**I**N A RECENT PUBLIC RADIO INTERVIEW DR. Yolanda Pierce, Dean of the Howard University School of Divinity, expressed enthusiasm about the historical coalition which brought to the Senate Georgia Black candidate Raphael Warnock and Jewish White candidate Jon Ossoff. It is "a reminder. . . that African Americans and Jewish Americans worked together



Rev. King displays a picture of then missing civil rights workers, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman  
Photo Credit: Getty Images

during the Civil Rights movement," she explained. But she went on to lament that this history "is not as known as it should be. Even those who know something about it don't realize how extensive it was."

In keeping with Dr. Pierce, Clarence Jones, speechwriter and counsel to Martin Luther King, Jr. from 1960 to 1968 recalls Rev

King telling him, “There isn’t anyone in this country more likely to understand our struggle than Jews---Whatever progress we’ve made so far as a people, their support has been essential.”

Warnock and Ossoff’s joint efforts which led to a historic first, raise the question whether the time is ripe for a renewed commitment to coalition-building between Blacks and not only Jews but all Whites committed to social justice and equality.

It has been more than 50 years since some leaders of the Black Power movement began to downplay or eliminate the role of White people in general and Jews in particular in the civil rights movement. In light of this, it is not surprising that in Ava DuVernay’s 2014 film SELMA, Jews are virtually eliminated, and the role of other Whites is underplayed. This may be politically correct--the idea that Blacks have made and will continue to make progress with very little outside help prevails--but it is not historically correct.

Acknowledging and welcoming the help of others is a sign of strength not weakness.

With African Americans representing only 13.4% of the population broad-based ongoing support is crucial in order for Black people to achieve their goals. The Congressional Black Caucus, a Black Vice-President, and a few dozen Black mayors and state legislators can’t do it alone. And as Reverend King clearly understood, the interests of working-class Black and White Americans overlap--he was in Memphis to support a sanitation workers’ strike when he was murdered-- and require them to work together to achieve most of their goals.

While the tradition of White activists sup-

porting Black freedom struggles goes back to abolition, it reached its modern peak in the 1960’s.

Mario Savio was one of numerous White college students who went South in the Freedom Summer of 1964 to support Blacks in their fight for civil rights. When he returned to U.C. Berkeley, he was outraged by the university’s ban on anti-racist student activities; he became one of the founders and leaders of the Free Speech Movement (FSM). Their demands included the right to support and help students in CORE and SNCC in demonstrations against Bay Area stores, restaurants, and corporations that discriminated against African Americans in employment practices. One protest led to 800 arrests; 10,000 students participated in another. FSM’s success was a major influence on students at universities across the country who demanded the right to organize and support anti-racist demonstrations and actions at the risk of being arrested.

Student Freedom Riders and Freedom Summer Volunteers were joined by people of all ages who kept coming south for years to help register Black voters, and integrate public accommodations even though they risked being assaulted, imprisoned or murdered.

Freedom riders James Zwerg and non-violent resistance champion James Peck were beaten senseless by angry mobs. Bob Filner, future Congressman and Mayor of San Diego spent two months in Mississippi prisons including the notorious Parchman Farm. College student Judith Frieze was arrested with her fellow Freedom Riders and held in jail for six weeks for refusing to leave the waiting room they were integrating. Singer Theodore Bikel did time in a



Birmingham jail.

Viola Gregg Liuzzo, and Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, along with their Black compatriot James Chaney, were murdered by the KKK for registering African American voters.

Christian Clergy of all denominations including many nuns were over-represented in lending their moral support to Blacks, and as activists and freedom riders. They included school integration champion Father James Groppi, Jesuit priest John LaFarge who organized the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice, and Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb murdered while on the Selma to Montgomery march.



Rev. King marching in Selma, Alabama with Rabbis Maurice Davis (behind Rev. King and to his left) and Abraham Joshua Heschel.  
Photo Credit: Professor Susannah Heschel, Dartmouth College

Jews who make up less than 3% of the population were significantly overrepresented in all groups.



Jewish religious leaders included Rabbi Jacob Rothschild whose Atlanta synagogue was bombed in retaliation for his support of the Civil Rights Movement. Rabbi Philip Posner was arrested during an integrated sit-in in Jackson and spent 39 days in the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. Israel Dresner who went on numerous Freedom rides became the most arrested Rabbi in the U.S.; he was imprisoned four times. Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld was beaten and bloodied for helping to register African American voters in Mississippi. Rev. King chose Indianapolis Rabbi Maurice Davis who had long worked

Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld beaten and bloodied in Mississippi for trying to register Black voters.  
Photo Credit: Herbert Randall/University of Southern Mississippi Archive



for civil rights, to join him in the front of the March 21, 1965 march across the Pettus Bridge; Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel walked with King. Heschel and King had met at a Chicago conference in 1963 where Heschel gave a speech entitled “Religion and Race,” and they became close friends.

In 1962, at the urging of Clarence Jones, New York attorney Harvey Wachtel agreed to meet Rev. King and get involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Shortly thereafter he established the Gandhi Society, to provide legal and financial support for Rev. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He was joined by fellow Jewish New York Civil Rights attorneys Theodore W. Kheel, William Kunstler and Stanley Levison. Levison became Rev. King’s close friend and advisor.

Many in the entertainment industry stood up for integration sometimes at great risk to their own careers. Among them, Frank Sinatra insisted that orchestras backing him on his albums and live concerts be integrated. Benny Goodman was the first major White orchestra leader to feature Black musicians. Al Jolson recognizing writing talent in a San Francisco bellhop, Garland Anderson, paid his way to New York and put him in touch with producers. Anderson became the first African American to have a major play on Broadway.

Theodore Bikel, along with Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and Peter Yarrow often ignored death threats to use the power of song to promote civil rights and inspire young White activists.

While White abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, the Grimke Sisters, and Susan B. Anthony have enjoyed some recognition, others like Elijah Lovejoy, who

was lynched by a pro-slavery mob in 1837 for publishing an abolitionist newspaper, and John Stevens lynched by the Klan in 1870 are among the many forgotten Whites lynched for their support of abolition or their opposition to lynching of African Americans.



Caswell County, NC courthouse where John W. Stevens was murdered in 1870 by the KKK for his loyalty to the African American community.

Photo Credit: Cynthia Wolfe, Timeless Cottage Photography

NAACP’s White founders included Jane Addams, William Walling, Rabbi Steven Wise, and Suffragists Inez Milholland and Lillian Wald. Sears Roebuck co-founder Julius Rosenwald contributed financially, and enabled African American communities in the segregated south to build thousands of schools.

The Los Angeles chapter of White People for Black Lives sees “shaming and blaming” as antithetical to movement-building. But rather than using positive reinforcement, too many activists are alienating potential White working class allies whose votes will be crucial in upcoming elections. Trying to convince people struggling to pay the rent that they bask in the benefits of “white privilege” is beyond counterproductive. Highlighting and celebrating Whites who stood up for their Black brothers and sis-



Woman Suffrage icon and NAACP activist Inez Milholland leading the 1913 Suffrage march in Washington, DC. Her father recruited W. E. B. DuBois to edit the NAACP's magazine.

Photo Credit: Library of Congress Reproduction Number LC-DIG-ggbain-11399

ters would do more to build political power and encourage solidarity than guilt trips.

Alleging that acts of altruism are always driven by self-interest is simply false and discourages empathic engagement.

The horrors of slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching are now more widely known thanks to several museums including the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC., the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) in Montgomery, Alabama, honoring the over 4000 African American lynching victims, and the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis.

America's Black Holocaust Museum (ABHM) was founded by lynching survivor Dr. James Cameron. He was inspired by his visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Israel dedicated to

the memory of the inhumane killing of six million Jews by Nazis. Just as Yad Vashem honors the "Righteous among Nations" – the many non-Jews who took "great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust ...at a time when hostility and indifference prevailed" one of these museums could create a memorial

honoring "the Righteous among Whites."

The Black Tennis Hall of Fame already took a step in that direction inducting White Jewish tennis star Angela Buxton who helped her doubles partner Althea Gibson become the first African American woman to win a Grand Slam Tournament Championship.



Angela Buxton and Althea Gibson awarded the 1956 Wimbledon Trophy by the Duchess of Kent  
Photo Credit: Alamy

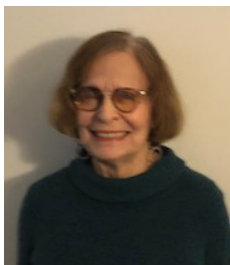


Hostility more than indifference now threatens the historic progress made in the 2020 election in Georgia. With Rev. Warnock running for election to a full term in 2022, Republican legislators are turning to a full range of voter suppression techniques to prevent him from succeeding. Black and White activists will have to work together again to secure his victory and to beat back voter suppression efforts now under way in dozens of states.

If an African American museum honored righteous White Americans, it would be an important step toward healing this nation's racial divide and would encourage thousands of White visitors to do the right thing when it comes to racial justice. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." But it will only bend that way if African Americans and enough empathetic White allies join hands and give it a good yank. ●



**GARY FERDMAND**, retired not for profit executive Gary Ferdman did ten year stints with Common Cause and Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities/True Majority, which he created with Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry's. In 1968, he founded the University of Rhode Island chapter of Student Committee Against Racism.



**MYRIAM MIEDZIAN**, former Philosophy Professor Myriam Miedzian (<https://www.myriammiedzian.com/>) is the author of three books and numerous magazine and newspaper articles, op-eds and blogs on issues of public concern. In the 1960s she volunteered for CORE and picketed Woolworths.



## Green Shirt

**NAOMI SHIHAB NYE**

His mother did not wash it for this,  
for him to be carried dead by two friends  
across the thirsty ground of Gaza.

That morning he put it on, she told him  
he looked handsome, a good deep color  
for a beautiful unfolding dream of a day. ●

**NAOMI SHIHAB NYE** is the Young People's Poet Laureate (Poetry Foundation) and her most recent books are *Everything Comes Next*, *Cast Away*, and *The Tiny Journalist*. In 2020, she received the Ivan Sandrof Award for Lifetime Achievement from The National Book Critics Circle.

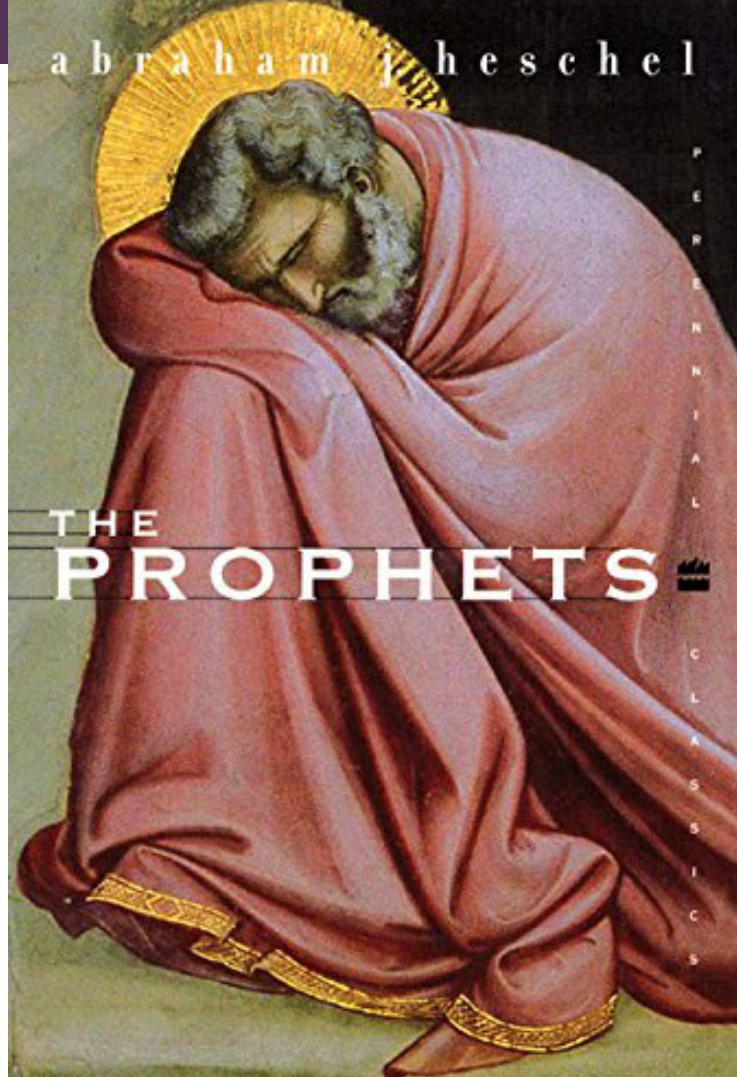




# Abraham Joshua Heschel—a Major Jewish Prophet

PETER EISENSTADT

“WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THE PROPHET?,” asks Abraham Joshua Heschel, in the opening words of his 1962 masterwork *The Prophets*. Heschel tells us that the prophet has an acute sensitivity to evil. Acts that others might dismiss with a shrug, or explain away as the dog-eat-dog way of the world, incite the full fury of their indignation at what Heschel calls “the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness.” This the prophet feels fiercely, a sensitivity to evil that is a divine illness. They know that God has placed a burden on their shoulders, and thrust a coal into their mouths. The prophet feels the pathos of God, and becomes its vessel. The prophet is an iconoclast, a breaker of images, a seeker of holiness who has no patience or tolerance for its feigned imitations or facsimiles, an unwelcome guest in the Temple. The prophet decries evil and the pollution of the divine word, but is aware that to castigate only the wicked lets everyone else off the hook, and in Heschel’s famous words, “few are guilty, all are responsible.” All misdemeanors become felonies. But in this refusal to accept gradations of accountability they are insisting on our linked fates, that God is less interested in the fate of individuals than our collectivities, our communities, cities, and nations. Prophets are bringers of both



comfort and wrath. And so while prophets are not sentimental, they are compassionate, recognizing human shortcomings and limitations, and that because of this, our shared fate will never eliminate desperation and suffering.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was in the English-speaking world, and in the Jewish world, the most influential writer on the Hebrew prophets of his time. It is probably an occupational hazard of writing about prophets to be considered one. Shortly before Heschel’s death in 1972, in an interview with NBC reporter Carl Stern, he was asked “Well, are you a prophet?” Like all true prophets, he answered in the negative, saying I won’t accept this praise.” What else can a prophet say? If Carl Stern had interviewed Jeremiah or Isaiah, they no doubt would have evaded the question as well. A

prophet with too much honor, who is too respected, who is only greeted and treated with reverence is a prophet whose prophetic edge has been dulled and blunted. They can only bring a butter knife to life's sword fight. A prophet is judged by the enemies they have made.

Let us take Abraham Joshua Heschel at his word. He was not a prophet. But he looked like a prophet, fitting in with the hirsute 60's with his white mane of hair and flowing wispy beard. And he sounded like a prophet, mixing his war against political and spiritual complacency by speaking of God's search for humanity and the radical amazement of finding this God, preaching a theology of passion and involvement. And like a prophet, wherever he turned his gaze he found God, and places suffering because of God's absence. He found God in the Black Freedom Struggle, arms locked with Martin Luther King, Jr in the Selma voting rights march of 1965, which became one of the enduring iconic images of the era. He spoke out in defense of beleaguered Russian Jewry in the Soviet Union and against the American atrocity of the War in Vietnam. And he was a pioneer in interfaith outreach, perhaps most notably in his extended efforts during Vatican II to get the Roman Catholic Church to repudiate its two-thousand-year-old anti-Jewish dogmas. He believed that "no religion is an island" to quote the title of one of his most famous articles. So perhaps he wasn't a prophet, but as he told Carl Stern, "it is arrogant enough to say that I am a descendant of the prophets, what is called a B'nai Nevi'im." In the end, I don't think Heschel cared what he was called. All he wanted was to be listened to, with the arrogance of someone who knew that he had something important to say, and with the humbling knowledge that at the same time, he was

too frail, too imperfect, and too befuddled a messenger for God's message.

It is always a good time to think about, to read, and now to watch Abraham Joshua Heschel. There is even a better reason now. There is a new film, just out from Journey Films, directed and produced by Martin Doblmeier, *Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story*. It includes interview material with Heschel along with commentary from his daughter, Susannah Heschel, a leading scholar of Judaism in her own right, Michael Lerner, Shai Held, Cornell West and many others. The film tells the story of his remarkable life. Heschel was born in Warsaw in 1907. Both parents were descended from prominent Hasidic rebbes. His immersion in Hasidic culture and learning is one of the keys to understanding Heschel. Perhaps my favorite among his books is *A Passion for Truth* (1973), a study of two Hasidic rebbes, the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859), (along with having a substantial detour into the angst-filled religion of the Danish Protestant theologian of existential angst, Søren Kierkegaard [1813–1855]). For Heschel, if the Ba'al Shem Tov preached and practiced a religion of inclusion and of spiritual equality, the Kotzker rebbe and Kierkegaard were practitioners of a religion of nervous intensity and interiority, and despisers of any religion that smacked of self-satisfaction. Kierkegaard and the Kotzker rebbe, who spent the last twenty years of his life in seclusion, raise the question for Heschel of how to handle spiritual truths; whether to restrict them to a small circle of adepts and acolytes, and keep them pristine, or spread them more widely, and risk their adulteration. Like most in the Hasidic tradition, he believed in the latter, while respecting the "passion

for truth” that animated difficult, unpromising religious seekers like the Kotzker rebbe.

Heschel, a Hasidic prodigy, did not follow a traditional Hasidic path, and chose to study in an academic Gymnasium in Vilna, and then went to Berlin in 1927, participating in the remarkable but tragic efflorescence of Jewish studies in Weimar Germany. Heschel shared, with writers such as Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, and Franz Rosenzweig, a rejection of both the staid rationality of classic Reform Judaism and the Haskalah, and the legalism of Orthodoxy, and instead focused on the importance of direct religious experience and the search to craft a new religious modernity. In Germany he published several books, the first edition of his study of the prophets, and short biographical studies of Maimonides and Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508). Heschel remained in Germany until 1938, serving the increasingly beleaguered Jewish community there, until he was expelled in 1938, and after a harrowing trip and confinement on the German-Polish border, returned to Warsaw.

However, Heschel, very afraid of the possibility of a German invasion, was eager to get out of Poland. In July 1939, six weeks before the Nazi invasion, he was able to leave for Britain, and then arrived in New York City in March 1940. (His mother and sisters and other family members perished in the Holocaust. He dedicated *The Prophets* to “the martyrs of 1940–45”.) He spent the war years teaching at Hebrew Union College, which had arranged for him to come to the United States, for which he was forever grateful, but he did not find the religious atmosphere at the Reform seminary particularly congenial, and in 1946 he began teaching at the Jewish Theological

Seminary in upper Manhattan, the main seminary for the Conservative movement, where he would teach for the remainder of his career. The theological outlook was closer to his own views, but he remained something of an outsider on the faculty, whose leading members focused on detailed “scientific” textual studies of the Talmud, and who often saw him as something of a lightweight, a dispenser of trite sermonic homilies, a writer of accessible books rather than dense articles in obscure scholarly journals. In their dismissal of Heschel’s weightiness, they could not have been more wrong. Anyone reading his Hebrew language *Torah min Hashamayim*—translated as *Heavenly Torah*—could have no doubt about his Talmudic chops, but he rightly felt that he needed to write in a different style to reach American Jews (and Americans in general).

After he was settled in New York, his books came out in a torrent. He was one of a number of European emigres who arrived just as the war was breaking out who rapidly mastered a richly idiomatic American English, Jewish theology’s answer to Vladimir Nabokov. It was primarily his books in the late 1940s and 1950s that secured his American reputation; *The Earth is the Lord’s* (1949), his incredibly moving eulogy to his lost culture of eastern European Jewish culture, *The Sabbath* (1951), and what are probably his two most important influential books, *Man is Not Alone* (1951), and *God in Search of Man* (1955). Heschel’s best writing is aphoristic, a theology of insight and acute observation, approaching God not through definition and theological proposition but a metaphor. Although written at the height of the vogue of existentialism and much talk about the age of anxiety, Heschel’s books have often impressed me with their lack of hand-wringing about



God's distance from humanity. It is rather a celebration, of God, the Jewish people, and people in general, and the "radical amazement" of belief. Heschel does not make God difficult to find and if anything, he has little patience with unbelief. At times he seems to think that since God is so real and present to him, anyone who hasn't found God just isn't trying hard enough.

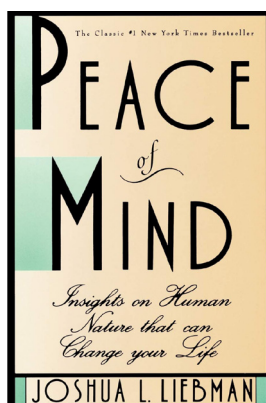
It is a minor paradox of sorts that if you read Heschel's major works of the 1950s, I don't think one would have predicted that in the 1960s Heschel would be best known as a social activist. It is not that this dimension of Heschel's thought is absent in his earlier work, but it was not its focus. Perhaps this is a reflection of the times. The 1950s was a decade in which there much discussion of a religious revival, in which Will Herberg's triad, Protestant/Catholic/Jew became America's official trinity. It is perhaps instructive to compare Heschel to a previous rabbinic celebrity, Joshua Loth Liebman (1901–1948), whose 1946 book, *Peace of Mind*, spent a year as #1 on the New York Times bestseller list. It is a book that can be judged by its title, a call for the finding of a personal and collective postwar calm after the hurly-burly of global combat and catastrophe, its sonorous tones edging into complacency, being at ease in Zion. It is a celebration of the serenity that can come from a deep connection to God, but Heschel offers a prophetic serenity, a confidence in God's message that leads outward, toward challenging unearned self-satisfaction, a serenity that is closest to God when the messenger is pissing off the right people.

In this, Heschel was hardly alone. He was part of a group of religious thinkers in mid-twentieth-century America, who differed in

many ways, but shared a general outlook; liberal or radical in their politics, radical in their insistence on the direct experience of God; inspired by the promise of America, outraged by its failures. For Martin Doblmeier, the head of Journey films, and a longtime director of documentary films on religious subjects, this is the fourth film he has made in recent years on mid-century religious figures. The first film was *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story* (2017), followed by *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story* (2019), *Revolution of the Heart: The Dorothy Day Story* (2020),

and now the film on Heschel. (I should note in the interests of full disclosure that I was interviewed for the film on Thurman.) All of the films are available as CDs, and have been broadcast on PBS. The subjects of Doblmeier's films make for quite a quartet: Two Protestants, one Catholic, one Jew; one African American, one woman; one immigrant; two pacifists; one Cold Warrior.

They were each quite distinct in their lives and their religious thinking, and at the same time, their lives were often entwined, borrowing and sharing insights among them. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) was a good friend of both Howard Thurman (1899–1981) and Heschel. Heschel and Thurman were both good friends with Martin Luther King, Jr. Dorothy Day (1898–1980) and Thurman were both pacifists, and worked closely with pacifist organizations and were close to the religious pacifist A.J. Muste (1885–1967), someone else who belongs in this little band of prophets.



The four religious figures of Doblmeier's films shared a rejection of the liberal theology of the early 20th century, which they felt was often a religion of complacency, both in matters spiritual and political. The oldest among them, Niebuhr, and the only white male Protestant among them, was the first to come to mainstream attention, especially with his blunderbuss of a book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) which criticized the Social Gospel for its focus on individual redemption as the basis of societal transformation, and for purveying a liberal theology that had forgotten the real meaning of sin. As Heschel, who came to know Niebuhr when they were teaching in adjacent upper West Side seminaries, wrote after Niebuhr's passing: "He began his teaching at a time when religious thinking in America was shallow, insipid, impotent, bringing life and power to theology, to the understanding of the human situation." Thurman, born poor and Black in Florida in 1899, by dint of intelligence, luck, and ambition, became a noted mystic and advocate of radical nonviolence. His 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, is the best book on American democracy that most people who write about American democracy have never read, and he was a major influence on King. Thurman and Niebuhr were friends from the mid-1920s on. In 1932, at a commencement ceremony at Thurman's alma mater, Morehouse College, the historically Black college in Atlanta, Thurman delivered the benediction while Niebuhr delivered the main address, cautioning the graduates against "aping middle-class white life," urging them to avoid "the rut of bourgeois existence." He doubted whether "the majority group of white people will ever be unselfish" because "power makes selfishness." Rather than preaching platitudinous sermons, Black Christians needed

to confront white supremacy, not with goodness but a religiously inspired realism about power. Because he thought pacifism was just another high-minded effort by persons of goodwill to evade political reality, Niebuhr was a sharp critic of pacifism, and Niebuhr's politics by the late 1930s was interventionist, strongly supporting the war effort. On the other hand, in 1936, his good friend Howard Thurman, his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, and one other man became the first Black Americans to meet with Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement, and famed practitioner of radical nonviolence. Thurman had been a pacifist since the early 1920s. After their meeting, Gandhi gave Thurman and the others a benediction: "It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world." In the 1920s, Dorothy Day, the one-time Greenwich Village radical, wearying of the bohemian life, and looking for something more stable and substantial, joined the Catholic Church, and within a few years started the Catholic Worker movement, dedicated to the rights of labor, radical insurgency against capitalism, the practice of poverty, the caring for the poor and outcast, as well as the teachings of the church. During the Cold War and War in Vietnam, Day's outspokenness won her a number of new admirers.

Martin Doblmeier made these films because he felt that the cause of progressive religion has been neglected and largely forgotten by the mainstream media. As someone who has worked extensively on the life and works of Howard Thurman, I have found that the most common response to the statement: "I am writing a biography of Howard Thurman" is, "who?"

In recent decades the focus on religion in

the United States has been almost exclusively about the rise and aggressive exercise of political power by the religious right and evangelical Christianity. Progressive religion is now commonly reduced to an oddity, a contradiction in terms, milquetoast apologists for a religion of inclusion, or just RINOs, religious in name only. They are treated as the losers in the struggle for the soul of America, with the hard, unbending intolerance of the hard right as the smug and contemptuous victors.

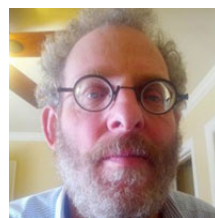
This is wrong on so many levels. First, the religious right has to be seen as a reaction against the success of progressive religion and its role in sparking the civil rights movement. As has so often happened in this country, the backlash, the reaction, was stronger than the initial action. And perhaps most importantly, religion is simply too important as a social glue to be abandoned to those who think the only role of religion is to exclude and anathemize, to create an exclusive club with God as the bouncer. Progressive religion, those who seek God's presence as an inspiration for personal and public lives, is not finished.

On the other hand, the future of progressive religion is uncertain. All four of the subjects of Doblmeier's films have had their successors, students, and sedulous biographers, but they did not create self-perpetuating movements. (The exception is Dorothy Day. The Catholic Worker Movement still publishes the *Catholic Worker*, and it still runs over two hundred "houses of hospitality" in the United States and elsewhere. And she is the subject of an active, ongoing effort for her canonization, and the only one of the four likely to be declared, at some point, a saint.) The institutions of progressive religion continue to exist, but at times they feel like redoubts in a land con-

trolled by their enemies.

One final comment: It is no doubt unfair on my part, but it seems that in recent decades, that the progressive religious left has produced no one with the stature of a Niebuhr, a Heschel, a Thurman, a Day, or a King. Chalk this up to my ignorance, or my lack of distance and appreciation of the spiritual leaders of our own times. Or perhaps the progressive left has become more suspicious of charisma and charismatic leadership than it was sixty years ago. It is striking that in the fights against global warming, or in the Black Lives Matter movement, no single figure has emerged as a dominant leader, and this is not unintended. Perhaps in our polarized times, we can no longer cross the divide between the secular and the sacred, with the ease of the subjects of Doblmeier's films. All I can say is that whether or not we are all just epigones, there is much to learn from the glorious history of progressive religion in twentieth-century America, for inspiration, for consolation, and the occasional prophetic kick in the pants.

Anyone needing an introduction, a refresher course on who they were, or to spend some time in conversation with four men and women who spent their lives walking with God, could do much worse than watching the films of Martin Doblmeier. And why not start with his latest release on that rabbi of rabbis, that rebbe of rebbes, Abraham Joshua Heschel. ●



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# For Montale at the Palio, 1938

ALAN WILLIAMSON

How beautiful and inventive, you think,  
the grand banners of the contrade—  
“Wave” with a silvery fish  
swimming at the center, Snail, Tortoise,  
Giraffe  
and the crowned Goose—sunburst and slashes of red.  
And the slight sense of irony  
about the aggressions—this is what  
you loved about your country.

But now, an odor of rage  
invades the purple pit  
of the Campo, the groaning  
riot of souls. And Irma, being Jewish  
and very striking, looks around anxiously  
though for you she always looks  
into eternity.

(But where is that--the ruby  
in whose water the images stir? In  
Duccio's  
rectangles and quiet colors  
which outlive us all,  
where the faces tell us Herod's soldiers  
do not like killing the children?)

Too soon, Irma will go home  
to America, Mussolini  
having promulgated the “Racial Laws.”



I too have come to fear  
things I once found charming  
about my country: boisterous bar-room  
put-downs  
unfitting on the lips of a head of state  
inviting a crowd to rage—  
their hypnotized  
faces, each of which, I must remember,  
has a soul. ●

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# Cri de Coeur: Lachrymose Reflections on Israeli-Palestinian Relations

PAUL MENDES-FLOHR

**M**Y CRY IS NOT A MERE RHETORICAL gesture. It is deeply and painfully felt. Jewish dignity is on the line — as is the dignity of the Palestinians.

The recent eruption of violence between Israel and Palestinians has exposed a tenuous fault line of the Zionist project. Reaching back to the very beginning of Zionist settlement, the relations with the native Arab population of Palestine were fraught with ethical and political ambiguity. Upon his first visit to Ottoman Palestine in 1891, Ahad Ha-Am — the spiritus rector of Zionism as a movement for the cultural and spiritual renewal of the Jewish people —

penned a scathing critique of the fledgling Zionist settlement projects: “Truth from Eretz Israel.” He found these projects to be poorly planned and managed, and thus beholden to venal land speculators and primed by a disgraceful dependence on philanthropy. Hence, he bemoaned that “even the most sublime idea can be emptied of any integrity when molested by such hands.” In voicing this lament, he made a parenthetical observation, touching upon what in time would be known in Zionist discourse as the Arab Question. With piercing prescience, he warned, “If the time comes when the life of our people in Eretz Israel develops to the point of encroaching upon the native population, they will not

yield their place.” To obviate such a regrettable conflict, he urged the Zionist pioneers to free themselves from the self-justifying delusion that “the Arabs are all desert savages like donkeys who neither see nor understand what goes on around them. But this a big mistake.”

Despite this dire prognosis, Ahad Ha’am deemed the problem, as Alan Dowry has noted, “simply in terms of behaving decently and humanely toward the local population. He failed to see it as a political problem. In this respect, he did not differ from the Zionist leadership.”

<sup>1</sup> By and large, they did not view, or perhaps refused to see the Arabs of Palestine as a political entity. Accordingly, they turned to the Ottoman authorities and later to the administrators of British Mandate of Palestine to address any conflict the Zionist project had with the local Arab population. They thus not only circumvented Palestinian leadership, but, in effect, also avoided negotiations with the Palestinians and the prospect of compromising Zionist political aspirations. Moreover, it was held that the Arabs would ultimately be appeased by the material and social benefits of the “advanced” European civilization that the Zionists would bring to Palestine.

The patronizing attitude implicit in this view is poignantly illustrated by a report of a tour that Martin Buber made some twenty-five years after Ahad Ha’am’s initial visit of the Zionist settlements in Eretz Israel. At one newly established kibbutz, Buber queried his host whether he had qualms about the dozens of Palestinian tenant farmers

and their families who were evicted with the purchase of the land on which the kibbutz was founded from a wealthy Arab landowner living in Beirut. In response, Buber’s host took him to the local cemetery, pointing to many graves of Palestinian children, some as young as six years old. “Our children,” he defiantly exclaimed, “will grow to healthy adulthood.”

In stark contrast to the sanctimonious reflexes of Buber’s kibbutz host, the venerated Nestor of the Zionist Right, Ze’ev Jabotinsky called for a sober acknowledgment of the brute political realities posed by the Arab Question. At an emergency meeting of the Zionist executive held in the wake of the Jaffa riots of May 1921, resulting in the death of 47 Jews and 48 Arabs, Jabotinsky declared:

“Today the Jews constitute a minority in [Palestine]; in another twenty years they could very well be the vast majority. If we were Arabs, we would not agree to this either. And the Arabs are good Zionists too, like us. The country is full of Arab memories. I do not believe that it is possible to bridge the gap between us and the Arabs by words, gifts and bribery. I have been accused of attaching too much importance to the Arab national movement. [Some say] I admire this movement unduly. But the movement exists.”

Political realism, Jabotinsky concluded, calls for Realpolitik, a politics of national self-interest, guided by the ethic of sacro egoismo: the view that the egotistic pursuit of the interests one’s own group, even if it entails the disregard of the existential reality of another group and the abuse of its human and political rights, is “sacred”

“Our children,” he defiantly exclaimed, “will grow to healthy adulthood.”



and hence ethically justified. In the face of Arab-Palestinian nationalism, political realism dictated a steadfast strategy of “either us or them.” In a testimony before the British Peel Commission of 1936 investigating the cause of unrest between Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine, Jabotinsky characterized the conflict as one of Arab appetite versus the starvation threatening the Jews of Europe. Accordingly, the Zionist cause overrides the interests of the Arabs of Palestine. With the looming horror of the Shoah, this perspective would determine the overarching political narrative of Zionism.

As the novelist Robert Musil observed, only inveterate criminals do not need a philosophy to justify their crimes. The rescue of European Jewry would justify the pursuit of Jewish statehood regardless of British and Arab opposition. This objective would perforce override “extraneous” ethical considerations.

To be sure, there were voices within the Jewish and Zionist community that found Zionist Realpolitik to be misguided. The wounds afflicted on the Arabs would not only fester and erupt with a pestilential rage but also further poison the Zionist project from within. Buber, for one, called for a Greater Realism, “a more comprehending, a more penetrating realism, the realism of a greater reality.” Renouncing a politics driven by cunning, calculated violence, egotistical self-assertion, and the othering of the other as an incorrigible adversary, the politics of a greater realism forges a path toward mutual trust and accommodation. The path so disclosed is not apparent, or willfully disregarded by the so-called political realists. This path, in the first instance, is illuminated by acknowledging, as Emmanuel Levinas beseeches

us, the face of the other<sup>2</sup> - the human face of the other in the fullness of her existential reality. To see the face of the other requires the courage and ethical resolve to discard the lens of ideology, fear, and a single absorption in one’s own story and woe.

The revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg proudly declared that she had no special room in her heart for Jewish suffering. But one can, of course, have room in one’s heart for both Jewish and Palestinian suffering. For Buber, in reaching out to the other, one must listen empathetically to his or her story, and include it within one’s own. Dialogue is not self-negation, but rather an expansion of one’s self-understanding by embracing the voice — the hunger if you will of the other who by force of circumstance is one’s neighbor. If we are to heed the biblical injunction to love one’s neighbors, one is not merely to live next to them, for it would but perpetuate an indifference to their story and perhaps the fear that their story would threaten one’s own story. To love one’s neighbors is to live with them, to forge bonds of mutual trust and sow the seeds of mutual accommodation that respects one another’s story, narrating both in a dialogue between each other’s story relating an existential reality, rife as it may be with pain. Dialogue so conceived, however, is not an exchange of respective litanies of anguish, which in the case of Jewish-Palestinian relations might take on the hue of an accusatory debate. It is rather an attentive listening to the grievances of the other and doing so with a magnanimous heart.

Palestinian grievances indisputably outweigh those of the Zionists. One need but cite Moshe Dayan, named Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense of Forces soon after the founding of the State of Israel:

“We came here to a country that was populated by Arabs and we are building here a Hebrew, a Jewish state; instead of the Arab villages, Jewish villages were established. You even do not know the names of those villages, and I do not blame you because these villages no longer exist. There is not a single Jewish settlement that was not established in the place of a former Arab Village.”

The Palestinian plight is marked by the expulsion and flight of hundreds of thousands of Arabs from more than 450 villages and towns in what was to become the Jewish state. In a recently surfaced uncensored passage of Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion’s diary, he summarized a conversation with one of his ministers: “We have to ‘pester’ [the refugees] relentlessly. ...We need to pester and motivate the refugees in the south to move westwards”; most actually moved eastward to the Gaza Strip, then under the control of Egypt.<sup>3</sup> From the city of Jaffa alone over 60,000 Arabs were driven from their homes under the calculated assault of Jewish armed forces, most of whom found refuge in the Gaza Strip. Only 3,800 Arabs remained in Jaffa, which was soon annexed to Tel Aviv. By December 1948, a quarter of a million Palestinian refugees gathered in the tiny sliver of 25 miles in length and between 3.7 and 7.5 miles wide; today Palestinian refugees and their descendants constitute 70% of the Gaza Strip’s population. c. 1.4 million.

In the early 1950s the Palestinians mounted cross border raids from the Gaza Strip into Israel. In a moment of candor, General Moshe Dayan remarked that one should not be surprised that Palestinian refugees peering across the border and noting that Jews were tilling the fields that had been theirs for generation would seek revenge.

Any understanding of the cause of the Palestinian marauders — known as fedayean in Arabic, hailed by Palestinians as “freedom fighter,” as “terrorists” by Israelis — did not yield sympathy for the cause of the refugees, however. On the contrary. The military operations of the fedayean played into the strategic net cast by Dayan to keep the refugees at bay: “Israel must invent danger, and to do this it must adopt a strategy of provocation and revenge.”

Consequent to the Six Day War of 1967, two and a half million Palestinians in the West Bank came under Israel’s rule. One may quibble whether Israeli occupation is to be properly characterized as apartheid. In fact, it may even be worse than South Africa’s former policy of racial separation. In creating autonomous territorial zones for the Black population, the South Africans accepted responsibility to support their educational, medical, and social services. This is not the case for the Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank. Hence, during the recent epidemic the Israeli government opted to offer to give its sizable surplus of Covid-19 vaccines to prospective political allies in Africa and South America — and even contemplated selling it to a luxury cruise company — rather than share the vaccines with the desperate Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. In July 1980 the Israeli parliament passed legislation which effectively annexed East Jerusalem with its more than 300,000 Arabs, who were thereby granted the special status of Israeli residency, but not citizenship. They may request citizenship on an individual basis, the request subject to a long administrative process (requiring the applicant to prove East Jerusalem to be one’s “center of life,” show fluency in Hebrew (sic), and approval of the Israeli security authorities). In effect, in Jerusalem there are two legal systems, one for Arabs

and another for Jews (who are granted Israeli citizenship as an inalienable right). The legal inequality between the Jewish and Arab residents of Jerusalem has come to the fore with the flare up of tensions between Jews and Arabs in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheik Jarrah, which together with aggressive Israeli police action during Ramadan on the plaza of the al-Aqsa Mosque served to spark Hamas's nigh-two-week barrage of rockets from the Gaza Strip on Israel, and Israel's relentless counterattack.

Prior to the war of 1948, Sheik Jarrah had a mixed population of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Ensuing to the war, the Jewish population fled to West Jerusalem, where they received homes of Arabs who fled to Jordanian controlled East Jerusalem. In what may be considered *quid qua pro*, Arab refugees who were driven from neighborhoods conquered by Israeli armed forces in Western Jerusalem were housed in the homes of the former Jewish residents of Sheik Jarrah. But here's the rub, with the unification of Jerusalem, Jewish organizations claim the right in the name of the people of Israel to the property formerly owned by Jews in Sheik Jarrah. *Nota bene*: Their claim is not based on the property rights of individuals and the heirs who prior to 1948 had lived in these dwellings but rather as self-appointed representatives of the nation of Israel. But should Arabs whose families have lived in Sheik Jarrah for over seventy years wish to reclaim their homes in Western Jerusalem, they cannot. For according to the Absentees' Property Law enacted by the Israeli parliament in 1950, in effect, their right of ownership was annulled.

In an article published shortly after the founding of the State of Israel in May 1948,

Martin Buber held that the founding of the modern state "confronts Judaism with the gravest crisis in its history." For, "even should the spiritual wealth of the People of Israel residing in its own land greatly increase, it does not necessarily follow that from this wealth will flower new life for Judaism. For if we properly comprehend the uniqueness of Judaism, then it has but one content and purpose: a divine commandment that stands above the existence of the people as a people. ... The Lord expects that Israel should live a life of justice before itself and the world." Hence, "the people of Israel are called upon not only to build just institutions but even more demandingly just relations between itself and other peoples." Alas, "Israel now seems to believe that, as a state, it has been granted the right and indeed the duty, like other modern states, to see in the demands dictated by transient interests, that is, as understood by its leaders, to be the decisive and indeed the ultimate demand. The divine demand seems to have disappeared." The Hebrew Bible reports that when the people and its leaders would stumble in the realization of this overarching commandment, there were prophets who would reproach "the people and its rulers and remind them whenever the interest of the moment, that is, what seemed at the moment to be the collective interest, was opposed to the unchanging will of the Lord, to the will of justice." Turning to the citizens of the nascent State of Israel, Buber reminded them that above all we are "the children of Amos."<sup>4</sup>

The prophets exemplify the supreme virtue of a critical solidarity with one's people. They exhort us to be ever alert to the inherent foibles of a myopic vision of sacro egoismo that contorts the biblical commandment to pursue justice by limiting its focus



to the calculus of national self-interest. On the eve of the Fourteenth World Zionist Congress in August 1925, Robert Weltsch published an editorial in the prestigious German Zionist weekly, *Jüdische*

*Rundschau* that voiced such a prophetic admonition:<sup>5</sup>

“We may be a people without a home, but, alas, there is not a country without a people. ... Palestine has an existing population of 700,000, a people who have lived there for centuries and rightfully consider this country as their fatherland and homeland. That is a fact which we must take into account. Palestine will always be inhabited by two peoples, the Jewish and the Arab. ... Palestine will only prosper if a relationship of mutual trust is established between the two peoples. Such a relationship can only be established if those who are newcomers — and such we are — arrive with the honest and sincere determination to live together with [the Palestinians] on the basis of mutual respect and full consideration of all their human and national rights. ... The realization of Zionism is unthinkable if we do not succeed in integrating our movement into the ever-stronger nationalist wakening of the neighboring Asian peoples.”

Weltsch concluded his editorial with a clarion warning that resonates with an uncanny contemporary immediacy:

“World public opinion cannot forget the existence of a large native population in Palestine; the growing sympathy with the [Palestinian Arab] aspirations toward national self-determination will make Zionism unpopular in many circles, not out of anti-Jewish feelings

but out of consideration for the natural rights of the Arabs.” ●

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Dowty, “Much Ado about Little. Ahad Ha’am’s ‘Truth from Eretz Israel,’ Zionism, and the Arabs,” *Israel Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 158.

<sup>2</sup> Levinas himself was reluctant to apply this principle to the Palestinians. Indeed, he was hesitant to criticize Israeli policies, at least in public. Founding of the State of Israel in the shadow of the Shoah, was pivotal to his identity as a Jew. Israel was thus a “shameful exception (Annabel Herzog). This position is perhaps typical of many Jewish public figures in the Diaspora. In Israel citizenship allows us critical latitude. Indeed, to voice our ethical and political concerns is our civic responsibility. As Michel Foucault would say, “fearless speech” is our duty as citizens. See Annabel Herzog, *Levinas’s Politics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ofer Aderet, “Ben-Gurion’s Uncensored Diary Revealed: ‘Pester and Motivate the Refugees to Move Westward.’” *Ha-Aretz*, March 9, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Buber, “The Children of Amos” (April 1949), trans. from the Hebrew in *A Land of Two Peoples*. Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs, edited with commentary, with a New Preface, by P. Mendes-Flohr, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 253-258.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Weltsch, “Zum XIV. Zionistenkongress. Worum es geht?” *Jüdische Rundschau*, 30, no. 64/65 (Berlin, 14 August 1925):549f.



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# Why Jews Should Embrace Critical Race Theory

JONATHAN JUDAKEN

**I**N 26 STATES, INCLUDING TENNESSEE where I live and teach, lawmakers have introduced or passed legislation that preempts the teaching of Critical Race Theory (or CRT) in public schools.

Jews should resist this crusade. It is based on a manufactured moral panic resulting from a backlash against the racial reckoning brought about by the murder of George Floyd and it originates in an alt-Right anti-Semitic meme targeting “Cultural Marxism.” Instead, Jews should embrace critical race theory, knowing that some of its progenitors, along with contemporary practitioners like me, are Jews committed to fighting the entangled history of racisms

in all their forms.

Anti-CRT laws explicitly seek to silence teaching basic ideas about racism, like white privilege and unconscious bias, alongside claims that the United States “is fundamentally or irredeemably racist,” as the law in Tennessee puts it.

Ultimately, these bills aim to stifle the often-uncomfortable conversations about our nation’s contradictions raised by undertakings like the New York Times 1619 Project, which aims to show that slavery impacted every aspect of American development from its advent more than 400 years ago.

Critical Race Theory emerged in law

schools in the 1970s and 1980s. Harvard Law Professor Derek Bell is often credited as its founding father, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is its most famous idea.

For academics today, critical race theory describes a conglomeration of approaches to racism that is both malleable and evolving. But at its core is a shared understanding that racism is not only about what individuals might think about other groups, but that it is also systemic, accounting for the historical patterns of discrimination and inequities in policing, healthcare, housing, wealth accumulation, and education that continue to impact America and much of the world.

For its opponents, CRT is a catch-all tag for a radical ideology that promotes divisive concepts bent on shaming white students, and endorses a distorted image of American history and American culture spreading rapidly through higher education and K-12 schools.

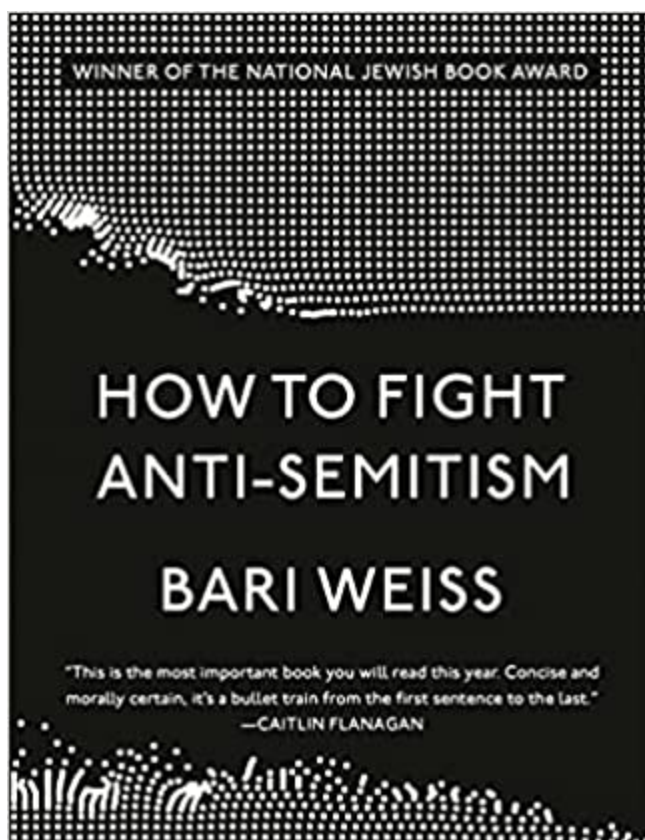
Some prominent Jews are among the opponents assaulting CRT. They argue that it pigeonholes Jews as privileged and powerful, thus ostensibly reiterating old tropes of unmerited Jewish power, and that it delegitimizes Israel as a colonial, racist, apartheid state. It is a gateway to anti-Semitism, they claim, a movement purportedly advanced by anti-Zionists and antiracist "social justice warriors" who divide the world into black and white, oppressor and oppressed, problematically positioning Jews as the embodiment of white supremacy. Bifurcating the world this way has long been denounced by Tikkun and by Rabbi Michael Lerner in works that stretch back to *The Socialism of Fools: Anti-Semitism on the Left*.

But insistently today, well-funded groups

like the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values warn that "Critical Social Justice," an ostensible variant of CRT group-think, is not only behind cancel culture, undermining free speech, but that diversity training can lead to discrimination against Jews.

Ironically, some of the leaders of this campaign against CRT, including renowned journalist Bari Weiss and her many acolytes who echo her warnings against it, make very similar arguments about anti-Semitism to those that CRT scholars make about racism. Namely, that it morphs and changes, but it remains a persistent and fundamental threat.

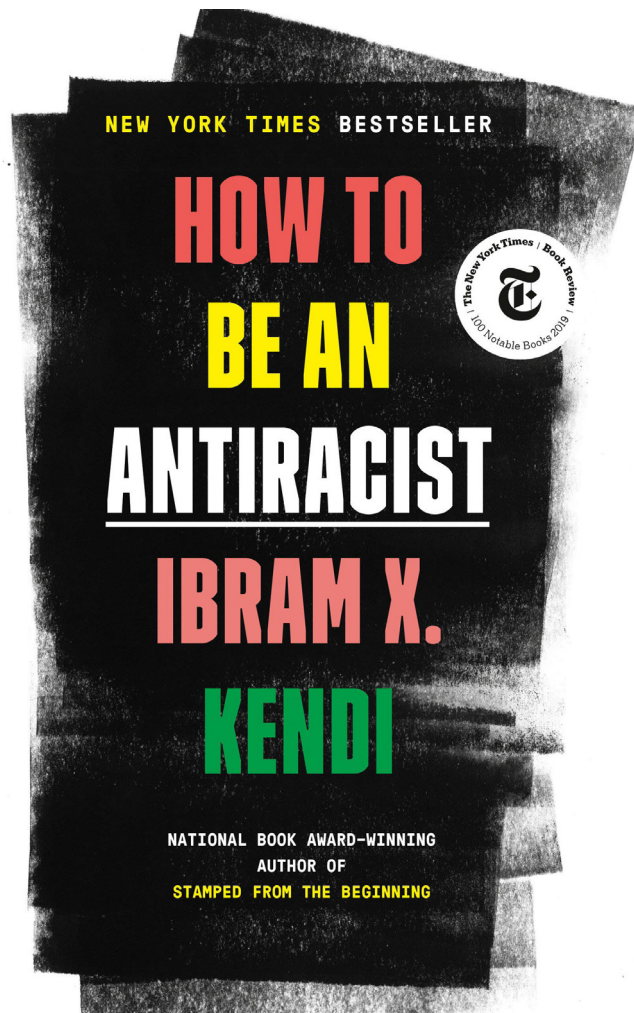
The title of Weiss' 2019 book, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, even mirrors that of leading antiracist Ibram Kendi's manifesto, *How to Be an Antiracist*, which was published only weeks before hers. Both use the analogy that racism and anti-Semitism are a





disease that spreads and metastasizes when the body politic is ill. Weiss even calls upon her readers to wake up to the dangers of anti-Semitism, even as she warns about the perils of antiracist wokeness.

But Weiss and Kendi crucially differ in how



they understand the struggles against anti-Semitism and racism. Kendi is resolute that antiracism must be intersectional. Following Crenshaw, he highlights the links between differing forms of racial, gender, and class oppression.

He does not, generally, include Jews in this intersectionality, however. He seldom mentions the historical oppression of Jews. This

is a blindness since Jews are to the history of Europe what Blacks are to American history: the primary Other against whom the culture and its institutions were defined and constructed. Weiss, on the other hand, is committed to a narrative about the uniqueness of anti-Semitism, insisting that it fundamentally differs from anti-Black racism and xenophobia.

Contrary to Weiss' assertions, it is vital that Jews understand how anti-Semitism overlaps with other histories of stigmatization, even if there are aspects that differ and make it unique. This is stance long advanced in Tikkun. Constantly insisting on how anti-Semitism is exceptional and demands special treatment alienates our potential allies in the struggle against it and actually misunderstands the history of anti-Semitism.

It is equally important that antiracists appreciate how Judeophobia was part of the scaffolding that underpinned color-coded racism as it developed with the advent of the Atlantic slave system.

The discovery and conquest of the new world by Columbus in 1492 was the dawn of the modern world. Columbus' voyages were paid for, in part, by the confiscated millions extorted from Jews who were banished from Spain, alongside Muslims, as the Spanish Inquisition reached its apex that same year.

As the transatlantic slave system developed in the Americas, the idea of dividing humans into "races" emerged. "Race" was a word coined in sixteenth-century Spain and originally applied only to describe animal breeds and blue-blooded nobility. But as the African slave trade expanded, race blended with the concept of indelible

“blood purity” that had targeted Jewish converts to Christianity during the Inquisition.

The concept of unchanging races used to differentiate and hierarchize group character was fully birthed during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as Europeans sought to describe, classify, order, and label the world they were beginning to dominate.

The term “racism,” only goes back to the early twentieth century when scholars first challenged some of these ideas. Jews played a key role in dismantling the concepts behind racism. As an intellectual historian whose research focuses on anti-Semitism, but who also teaches courses on racism, I expose students to the origins of Critical Race Theory by introducing them to some of its Jewish progenitors, like Franz Boas and his student Ashley Montagu (born Israel Ehrenberg).

With the rise of the Nazis and following the Holocaust, a group of anthropologists who were students of Boas at Columbia were key to undermining the false claim that race is a biological fact inscribed in the natural order, dividing up the human species. They showed instead that whether it took the form of Aryan supremacy underpinning Nazism or color-coded racism opposing Blacks and Whites, it was a “social myth,” as Montagu called it in the important UNESCO Statement on race in 1950. This laid the foundation for the idea that race is a social construction that reinforces a social system bent on privileging some and handcuffing others, a key tenant of CRT.

Critical Race Theory also built on the insights of the Frankfurt School, another influential group of social theorists, most of whom were Jewish. With the Nazi assumption of power, they fled Frankfurt in 1933

for Geneva and then went on to New York in 1935, initially setting up camp at Columbia. In America, they were supported by the American Jewish Committee to produce the pioneering “Studies in Prejudice” series, a set of groundbreaking works that appeared in 1950, which laid the groundwork for the critical study of anti-Semitism. The body of the Frankfurt School’s work is known as Critical Theory, which is where the term “Critical,” used in Critical Race Theory and Critical Social Justice, got its original significance.

Some of the ideas behind the campaign against CRT originated in the alt-Right conspiracy theory opposing “Cultural Marxism,” another bogeyman whose origins are traced to the Frankfurt School critical theorists by its adversaries. “Cultural Marxism” is said to be behind political correctness and the identity politics of the Left. The campaign against “Cultural Marxism,” coded as Jewish and Marxist as embodied by the Frankfurt School, really just recycles and updates the anti-Semitic myth of “Judeo-Bolshevism” that was at the heart of Nazi anti-Semitism. The crusade against CRT has mainstreamed this anti-Semitic alt-Right meme.

The fear-mongering against CRT is used to deflect criticisms of white privilege, including among Jews. One central insight of critical race theory is that whiteness is the organizing framework for structuring the racial caste system in the United States. Central and Eastern European Jews were the beneficiaries of the passport of whiteness when they arrived in an America defined by this system. It was a factor in their social mobility. As much as the founding principles of American democracy like religious freedom benefitted Jews, along with their hard work, whiteness advan-

tagged Jews from the moment they arrived on American shores. It guaranteed them privileges denied to Blacks and many immigrants of color.

This is true even as Jews suffered from Christian's religious prejudice and from discrimination, like quotas at some colleges, housing covenants that prevented Jews from moving into a neighborhood, or clubs and resorts that barred Jews. As scholars of Jews and whiteness like Eric Goldstein have shown, Jews' whiteness was often conditional.

This is evident when Jews are depicted as the puppeteers of the replacement theory advanced by the white Christian nationalists like those marching in the torchlight parades in Charlottesville at the Unite the Right rally in 2017. These same ideas radicalized the terrorist Robert Bowers when he massacred Jews at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. Racial reckoning requires recognition of all of this history, which is rife with tensions for Jews.

Jews are also afraid of the ramifications of CRT when it is applied to Israel, worrying about the claims that it is a colonial, racial, apartheid state. But denial or dismissal of these claims by insisting that they are anti-Semitic is a deflection that will only help to foster them. We need to demonstrate how

these terms fail to account for the lived realities in Israel or acknowledge the analogs with other states.

Anti-CRT laws are part of a global backlash designed to quell the reckoning with racism unleashed by the murder of George Floyd. Jews should oppose these laws and lean into the insights of critical race theory, some of which were shaped by Jewish anti-racist theorists. We should do so because anti-Semitism is on the rise, we need to build coalitions in the struggle against it, and the resources of critical race theory can help us to analyze it more acutely. Ultimately, we should embrace critical race theory because the core Jewish narrative in the Bible is a story about the movement of a people from slavery to freedom, which is precisely the goal of Critical Race Theory. ●



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*Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism:*

*Confronting Modernity and Modern Judeophobia.*



# The Bible Does Not Validate Endless Exploitation and Domination of the Environment

RABBI ELLEN BERNSTEIN

Gen. I:26 And God said, “Let us make the human creature in our image, after our likeness. They shall have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.”

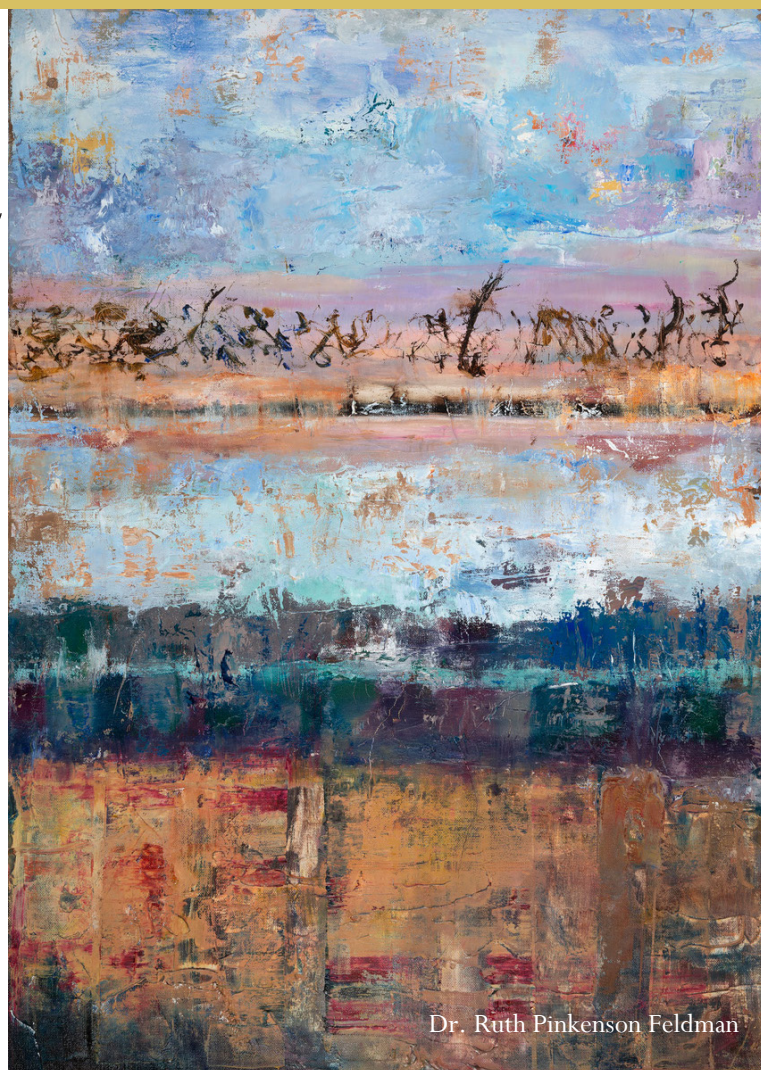
Gen. I:27 And God created the human in God’s image, in the image of God, God created him; male and female God created them.

Gen. I:28 God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and *master* it; and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

**A**S A COLLEGE STUDENT IN THE EARLY 1970’s, in one of the first environmental studies programs (U.C. Berkeley—CNR) in the U.S., I was taught that the “Judeo-Christian” tradition was, in part, responsible for our present-day environmental crisis. We

had been required to read historian Lynn White’s influential essay, “The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” in *Science* magazine, in which he argued, among other things, that the Bible gave humanity a mandate to control and exploit the natural world. As a young person who had no knowledge of the Bible nor any positive experience of religion, I naively accepted this idea.

White’s interpretation of the biblical creation stories had enormous ramifications on a whole generation of environmentalists and their students, as well as on many Christian and Jewish clergy and scholars. White’s article also had an enormous effect on me. It caused me to ask questions about how Judaism understood our relationship with the natural world. I began studying



Dr. Ruth Pinkenson Feldman

the biblical portion of the week and realized that those who argue that dominion means domination tend to take the verse out of context, paying scant attention to the verses that precede or follow this mandate. Furthermore it was—in part—in response to Lynn White’s essay that I came to found the first national Jewish environmental organization, Shomrei Adamah, Keepers of the Earth, in 1988.

A colleague asked me recently, why do we need yet another essay on dominion? That’s simple. Because the idea that the biblical creation story has led to the human exploitation of nature is still very much alive in certain circles today, and when this position is taken as the authoritative interpretation of Genesis I, it can be divisive. Furthermore, if religious people took seriously and acted upon the Bible’s first command to care for—rather than exploit—the creation, I believe we would be one step closer to insuring a healthier future for the earth and all its inhabitants.

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It’s impossible to grasp the meaning of dominion without understanding the vision of Genesis I. The primary trope of Genesis I, the first biblical creation story, is that everything, every aspect of the creation, is designated good. Everything created, all that exists, is called *tov* or good. The light is *tov*; the water, air, and earth are *tov*; the trees and vegetation are *tov*; the stars and planets are *tov*; the fish and birds are *tov*, and the land animals are *tov*. *Tov*-ness or goodness is proclaimed seven times in the story. The rabbi, philosopher, and physician Maimonides, writing in the twelfth century, said that the goodness of all the creatures is a testament to their intrinsic value. Goodness does not rely on any hu-

man measure. Each organism is good in its essence, just as it is. Each has a purpose and a place. Each has integrity, each contributes to the whole and is required for the whole. The world is built on the foundation of the goodness of the creatures, without which it could not exist.

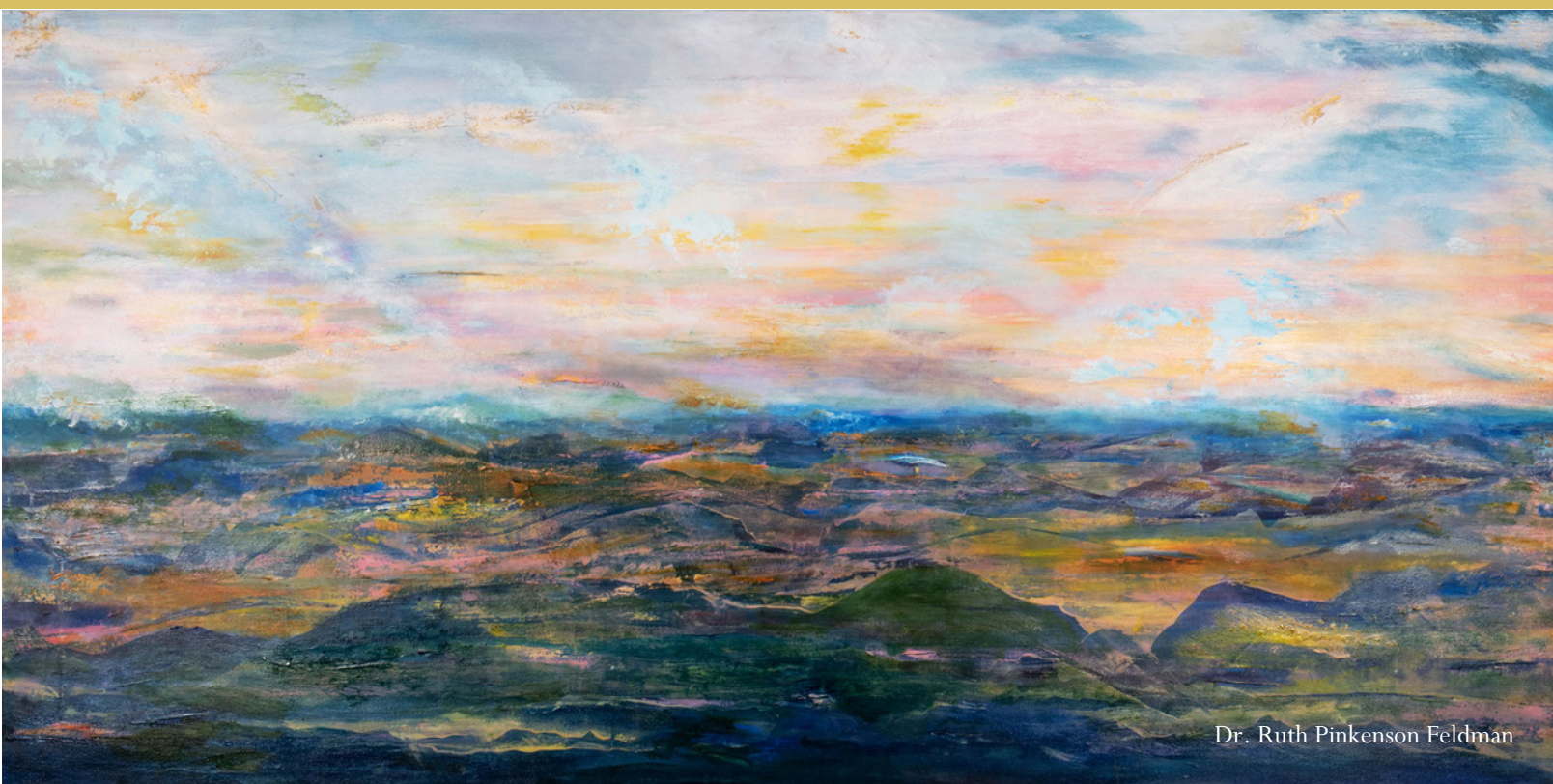
In this story, on the sixth day of creation, after all the habitats and all the other beings are established, the human creatures are dreamed into being. Just as all the creatures have their purpose and place, so do the human ones. Human creatures are an integral part of the whole natural system and humanity is given the charge to preside over—have dominion over—the land and its creatures (Gen I:26, 28). The job of humanity—our job—is to help ensure the life and health of the whole biological world. This profound ecological instruction is humanity’s first and foremost assignment in the Bible. When we understand, as Genesis I does, that the world is built on interconnections of all the creatures and suffused with *tov*—goodness—it becomes clear that the only response adequate to the call for dominion is love.

### *Dominion as Communion*

And God said, “Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness.”

The understanding of dominion as domination (as critics suggest) assumes that we humans stand over and above the whole creation, entirely separate from her. And yet we could not be more intimately related. The very goodness—the ultimate goodness—proclaimed on the sixth day, after the entire creation has been completed, alludes to all the creatures together—the web of life—and not just a compartmentalized humanity as many moderns surmise.





Dr. Ruth Pinkenson Feldman

Since we are all born of the One, we are kin to the earth and its creatures. This understanding moved the Jewish philosopher and rabbi A.J. Heschel to speak of the earth as our sister.

A midrash on this text imagines a sense of trust and intimacy between animals and humankind. The midrash wonders: who is the us that God is referring to in the enigmatic verse, “Let us make a human in our image.” The midrash posits that us refers to all the creatures. The story goes that they gathered together to ask God to design the human with dominion in order to keep the peace among them. They feared that without one being to preside over them, they might destroy each other.

No creature is entirely independent; no creature is an island. Everything exists bound up with everything else. Being alive means being in ceaseless relationship with others: other people, creatures, the earth, the water, the air. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote poignantly of the inti-

macy between humankind and the creatures. He understood dominion as a loving presence: “The ground and the animals over which I have dominion constitute the world in which I live—without which I cease to be.” Created last, the human creature is vulnerable and depends on all the other creatures in order to survive. Bonhoeffer continues, “In my whole being, in my creatureliness, I belong wholly to this world: it bears me, it nurtures me, it holds me. It is my world, my earth, over which I rule.” Bonhoeffer uses the word “my”—not in terms of possession—but in terms of relationship. He is reflecting the sentiment of the Bible where there is no concept for human ownership. Rather, dominion implies a deep connection, a communion with nature.

### ***Dominion is Conditional***

The Bible hints that dominion is not given to humans arbitrarily. Dominion is conditional. It is given and can be taken away. The Hebrew word for dominion,



RDH, points to this conditionality. Since Hebrew words are built on a system of three-letter roots, and one root can lend itself to multiple meanings, sometimes even a word and its opposite share the same three-letter root.

In certain grammatical forms (in the imperative form and the plural imperfect for 2nd and 3rd person) including the form that RDH appears in Gen 1:26, RDH looks exactly the same as another Hebrew word, YRD “to go down.” When RDH appears in one of these forms, you must determine the word’s meaning by its context. Rashi, the foremost medieval rabbinic commentator, pointed out the wordplay inherent in this root. He explained that if we consciously embody God’s image, ruling responsibly with wisdom and compassion, we will RDH, have dominion over, the creatures and insure a world of harmony; but if we are deny our responsibility to the creation and take advantage of our position, we will YRD, go down below the other creatures and bring ruin to ourselves and the world. If we upend the blessing to further selfish goals, the blessing becomes a curse. It is upon us to choose.

Bonhoeffer recognized the conditionality of dominion. He stressed that we bear the likeness of God, but only when we act on behalf of “our brothers and sisters,” the earth and its creatures. Dominion implies service to all the creatures of the Creator. Bonhoeffer laments that if we do not regard the earth and its creatures as my kin or my relations, if we abuse our dominion and seize it for ourselves, then dominion becomes domination and we are no longer worthy of the role we have been assigned. We lose our kinship with God and we lose our kinship with earth. There can be no

dominion without serving the whole, the One.

### *Dominion Out of Context*

In the academic and environmentalist circles in which I often work, dominion is rarely understood as a life-affirming relationship, a communion with the creatures. As I mentioned at the outset of this essay, many people read the dominion of Genesis 1:28 as a mandate to control nature, and the root cause for the ruin of our natural world.

Many clergy, academics and even bible scholars, writing in thousands of articles have apologized for and tried to distance themselves from the aggrieved verse. The esteemed Israeli soil scientist and irrigation expert, Daniel Hillel, critiquing Genesis 1:28 wrote, “His [the human’s] manifest destiny is to be an omnipotent master over nature, which from the outset, was created for his gratification. He is endowed with the power and right to dominate the creatures toward whom he has no obligation.” Some, like Hillel, who disavow the first creation narrative, Genesis I, laud the second story where Adam is bidden to serve and observe (work and guard) the creation (Gen. 2:15). Hillel considers the human creature to be “arrogant and narcissistic” in Genesis I, yet “modest and earthly” in Gen II.

The reading of dominion as domination has always struck me as a mis-reckoning. It is a profoundly unfortunate example of how biblical texts have been distorted to satisfy the desires of those in power. Sadly, the idea of dominion as domination has endured a long and dark history that has led to terrible suffering and disastrous consequences, particularly for native peoples

around the world. The verse was appropriated by the pope in 1493 to justify the Doctrine of Discovery and legitimize the confiscation of native lands everywhere. Tragically, this ideology persists. I believe that redeeming the deeper ecological meaning of dominion is therefore all the more critical today.

The Bible is itself an ecosystem—a whole; you can't pluck a word or verse from among its neighbors and expect to grasp its meaning. Extracting a word or verse from its context is like removing a tree from its habitat—taking it from the soil, the mycelium, and the creatures with which it lives in total interdependence. Isolating words or verses and analyzing them out of context, mirrors the reductionist tendency that has characterized much of western thinking in modern times. For centuries scientists have attempted to break down the world into its smallest constituent parts in order to scrutinize the pieces. But scientists now recognize that we can only truly understand things in relationship, in the context of

the whole. Dominion, too, only makes sense in the context of the entire biblical creation narrative, in the context of the whole of the creation.

To conflate dominion with domination, as exploiters of the text have done and continue to do, is reductive and harmful. It narrows the scope of the meaning of the word. Dominion from the Latin *domus* is related to domicile, dame, madam, all words related to the household. The earth is God's household and the job of the head of the household is to serve the household. Dominion means perpetuating the good of all the creatures and preserving the wholeness of the creation. Anything else is not dominion.

The word dominion, of course, is a translation that is used in the King James Bible, and other terms could be substituted; Jewish Publication Society uses *rule*. Govern, preside over, and take charge are all appropriate translations. I continue to translate RDH as dominion because I believe it forces us to confront both dominion's posi-



Dr. Ruth Pinkenson Feldman



tive side of dignity, wholeness and justice and its negative side of domination and exploitation. The word dominion preserves the layers of meaning that the word RDH implies. Dominion is not intrinsically bad; it depends on us and how we exercise it. We can recognize our responsibility to nature and rise to the occasion to uplift the world, or we can deny our responsibility and exploit and dominate nature, further destroying the world and its peoples.

While the term RDH has garnered the most attention, the other problematic word in Gen 1:28 is KVSH, which is generally translated as subdue or master. If you view the text generously, mastering the earth means utilizing skillful means to tend and sustain it, so that it can continue to yield its fruits forever. While, KVSH does convey the use of force, the nature and degree of the force is determined by the context. If you ask a farmer, they will tell you that they master the earth to grow crops by subduing weeds, cultivating the soil, laying down mulch, creating terraces, growing stands of trees, and planting cover crops. They are adding value to the soil.

Jewish tradition often relies on rabbinic commentaries to help elucidate difficult texts, yet for the last 2000 years, the rabbis have barely even mentioned the word dominion. It's as if the entire idea were outside of their experience. Historically, Jews were often marginalized and prohibited from owning land, and would not have had an opportunity to exercise dominion over the earth. When the rabbis did comment on dominion, they considered it in terms of the governance of nature. Adam's stewardship of the garden of Eden in the second creation story was their prototype of dominion (Gen. 2:15).

### ***Dominion as Hierarchy?***

Some people are less concerned with the actual meaning of the words dominion and mastery and more disturbed by a connotation of hierarchy or kingship that they associate with these words. Since the word dominion (RDH) often refers to royal contexts in other places in Torah, one might assume that dominion in Genesis 1:28 refers to kingship. In the ancient near east, the ideal king was thought of as a vessel funneling energy and abundance from the source of life down to all the creatures of the earth. There was a sense of interconnectedness between the king and his subjects. Together they comprised one corporate body—the kingdom. It was in the king's best interest to rule benevolently for the good of the whole. Were the king to rule justly, the land and people would be fertile, the seasons temperate, the grain abundant, cattle would flow with milk, rivers with fish; the afflicted would be protected and victory over enemies assured. Were the king to rule in his self-interest, neglectful of the people and creatures, the land and the people would become barren, the rivers would dry up, the fish would die, the poor would suffer, and the kingdom's enemies would triumph.

But, although the language of Genesis I may seem to suggest the archetype of kingship, notably, there is no actual king. Rather, ordinary people, regardless of race, religion and gender, are elevated to royal stature and given royal responsibility. Rejecting the ideology of kingship and its power and privilege, the Bible's concept of dominion, suggests a radical egalitarian worldview that affords dignity and responsibility to all human beings. All of humanity stands in the image of God and all are obligated to the creation.



### ***Dominion in Context: The Blessing: Fruitfulness and Dominion***

God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and master it, and have dominion over. . .

As I have been asserting throughout this essay, context matters. Dominion is bestowed as part of a two-fold blessing or bracha. The word bracha in Hebrew is related to the word beracha, a pond of water. A blessing is enlivening and regenerative, like an oasis in the desert. The blessing in verse 1:28 is for both fruitfulness and dominion. It lays the foundation for the two basic necessities of life. Fruitfulness promises generativity of the body and dominion—through the human creature’s benevolent rule—promises generativity of the earth and its creatures. Barrenness of body and barrenness of land (famine) would be the greatest threats to the Israelite people, while fruitfulness in both realms would be the greatest gift. The two-fold blessing for fertility and land reverberates through the Torah in the promise that God makes to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Israelites.

Given that fruitfulness and dominion are knit together into one blessing, “God blessed them and said to them: Be fruitful and multiply. . . and have dominion over,” some rabbinic commentators extended the idea of fruitfulness to mastery and dominion. They imagined dominion metaphorically as fruitful productivity, the beginning of culture and civilization. Saadia Gaon, the eleventh century sage, said that mastery of nature meant harnessing the energy of water, wind and fire, cultivating the soil for food, using plants for medicines, fashioning utensils for eating and writing, and

developing tools for farming, carpentry and weaving. It meant the beginning of art, science, agriculture, metallurgy, architecture, music, technology, animal husbandry, land use planning, and urban development.

When considering the context of a text, it’s also important to keep in mind the verses that follow the text in question. Immediately after God grants dominion to the human creature, God assigns the seed plants for food for the humans, and the leafy greens for the animals. Dominion, then, ensures that both people and animals can eat and thrive. Without this invitation to partake of the creation, perhaps the adam, the human creature, so awed by the beauty of the world, would have hesitated to eat from it. Notably, dominion over the animals does not include the right to eat them (1:29-30).

### ***The Risk of Dominion***

A blessing is a gift. According to anthropologist Lewis Hyde, “the recipients of a gift become custodians of the gift.” The word custodian implies a sense of humility; it originally meant care for children. Our role on earth is as custodians of the earth. We are here to care for the earth as an intimate relation, a sibling, a beloved.

But we have become so disconnected from the earth and her creatures that we are often blind to the good of the entire natural world and oblivious to our dependence on the rest of creation. Domination occurs when we are indifferent to the gift of creation and fail to approach dominion with love and careful attention.

Dominion in the context of creation is both humbling and elevating. Dominion wants to lift us out of our customary hu-

man focused reality to regard the whole of creation. Dominion calls us to help raise up the other creatures—not to force them down; to preserve and perpetuate the original goodness, the integrity of all life. Even though we are given dominion over the earth and its creatures, the Torah never suggests that we can own or possess the earth, just like we cannot own the waters or the air. “The land cannot be sold in perpetuity.” (Leviticus 25:23). The land is the commons and therefore belongs to all its inhabitants equally and jointly. In the biblical system, private property does not even exist because God owns the land and everything in it.

The earth is the source of our lives. It provides our air, water, food, clothing and shelter. The blessing of dominion over the earth calls us to participate with nature so that the creation will continue creating for future generations. Dominion asks us to lovingly and carefully consider which lands and which creatures should be designated for the needs of civilization, and which must remain untouched by human hands for the health of the world and the good of the whole community.

Some of the rabbinic sages, as well as the Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria, read dominion allegorically and suggested that people must have dominion over their own desires, and master the tendency towards gluttony. Such readings have heightened meaning today in view of our insatiable craving for the resources, services and products of the earth. Dominion over the earth first requires dominion over our selves. “We, in this generation, must come to terms with nature,” wrote Rachel Carson. “We’re challenged as [hu] mankind has never been challenged before

to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves.”

The rabbis questioned why God created humanity, with this tendency towards self-aggrandizement, in the first place; wouldn’t people just destroy themselves and the world? But the freedom to choose is what characterizes us as human beings. To practice dominion as a relationship with nature is our greatest challenge, our growth edge. It demands that we guard against our own excesses and exercise a constant degree of heightened awareness. It is upon us to decide if we will make of ourselves a blessing or a curse, if we will work toward the preservation of the earth and her inhabitants, or if we will allow ourselves to despoil her and our collective future. ●

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155, (10 March 1967)

<sup>2</sup> Gen 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

<sup>3</sup> While the acknowledgement of goodness doesn’t occur on the 2nd day, when the waters were initially divided and the air was formed, “goodness” is proclaimed twice on the 3rd day—first after the water and earth emerge as distinct habitats and again after plants are created. Ecologically speaking it makes sense that the declaration of goodness comes only once after all three elements or habitats are completed—they form one interconnected whole. The biblical author extols the goodness of the habitats before all else. A disregard for habitat is the beginning of all of our environmental problems.

<sup>4</sup> RDH does mean rule, however elsewhere in the Bible when RDH occurs, it is modified by an adverb that indicates harshness. Without the adverb, the feeling tone of RDH is neutral and depends on context.

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word for rule (or have dominion) is RDH; we’ll be exploring the Hebrew RDH in more depth later.

<sup>6</sup> Many commentators assume that “very good” on the 6th day refers to the human creatures created on that day. But a close reading of the text indicates that “very good” refers to “everything” that was created—the

whole web of life.

<sup>7</sup> Heschel, A.J. *God in Search of Man*, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Reprint edition 1976

<sup>8</sup> The “us” of God expresses the plurality in God’s Oneness. The “us” of God mirrors the “us”—the diversity of life on earth.

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, N.Y.: MacMillan, 1969, P.67

<sup>10</sup> The root of the Hebrew word for “have dominion over,” RDH, generally refers to the “rule over subjects;” it can also mean supervision. It is often found in regal contexts and it carries a sense of restorative justice. The tenor of the word is usually neutral. When the Bible wants to indicate a harsh rule, it adds the word *perach* to modify the word RDH—to rule ruthlessly.

<sup>11</sup> Rashi, Commentary on Genesis I:26

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, P.67

<sup>13</sup> It’s always surprising to me that so many progressives champion the Genesis 2 story, since here, woman comes from the rib of the man—an afterthought—while in Genesis 1, male and female are created simultaneously as equals. In addition, in the Genesis 2 version, the world revolves around the human creature—it is anthropocentric while Genesis 1 can be understood as theocentric and/or biocentric.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Hillel, *Out of the Earth*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p.13-14

<sup>15</sup> <https://christianhegemony.org/the-doctrine-of-discovery-manifest-destiny-and-american-exceptionalism>

<sup>16</sup> In English KVSH appears to be a 4-letter root, but SH is one letter in Hebrew.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Franklin Lowe, *The King, As Mediator of the Cosmic Order*, Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 68-11963, 1968), pp. 2-16

<sup>18</sup> Raymond O. Faulkner, *Myth Ritual and Kingship Essays on the Theory and Practice of Kingship in the Ancient Near East and in Israel*, ed. S. H. Hooke, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960, p. 75. The natural consequence of this understanding “was that theoretically everything in religious and secular life was linked with the king, and every religious ceremony and ritual was in a sense a royal ritual” (ibid., p. 76).

<sup>19</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 3; pp. 277-78

<sup>20</sup> This is the model of kingship in the royal psalms.

<sup>21</sup> The conclusion of George W. Coats, “The God of Death,” *Journal of Bible and Theology* 29 (July 1975): 229, argues that the primary focus of dominion terminology is not rule or exploitation but productivity: David Tobin Asselin, “The Notion of Dominion in Genesis 1-3,” *CBQ* 16 (July 1954), p.282.

<sup>22</sup> Rav Saadia Gaon, Commentary on Genesis I:26

<sup>23</sup> We are not told this directly—the story is built on positive affirmations, not on negative decrees.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*, N.Y.: Vintage, 2007

<sup>25</sup> The farmer poet Wendell Berry contends: “The ecological teaching of the Bible is simply inescapable: God made the world because He wanted it made. He thinks the world is good and He loves it. It is His world; He has never relinquished title to it. . . If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or justified in destroying it?, “How, for example, would one arrange to ‘replenish the earth’ if ‘subdue’ means, as alleged, ‘conquer’ or ‘defeat’ or destroy?” Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990, p.99

<sup>26</sup> NY Times obituary of Rachel Carson



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