

# *The Witness*

Volume 80 • Number 10 • October, 1997

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*Allies in Judaism*



## Unmasking the death penalty

THERE ARE SOME VERY REAL AND destructive problems with our nation's juvenile justice systems. Not only has the system itself failed miserably, but it has failed children in the process.

Once upon a time, we were a people of compassion. We sought understanding of complex social problems, like "What causes children to turn to crime and violence?" and "What causes delinquency?" When it came to light that the obstacles of children were produced by a society of adults that failed them, we opted to dismiss our persistence to find answers.

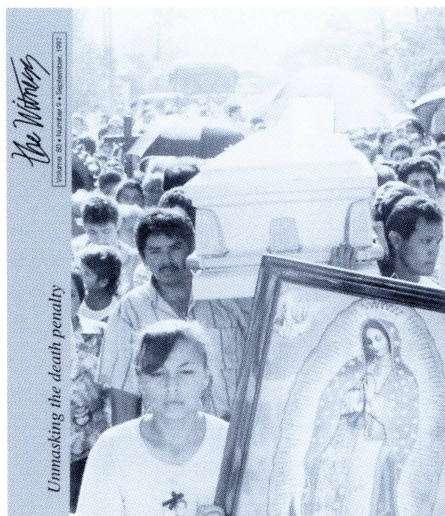
Once upon a time, the criminal justice system — especially in the critical area of juvenile delinquency — was concerned with issues of education, prevention, therapy, and rehabilitation. Once upon a time, someone gave a damn.

Welcome to today. Today, troubled youth are punished, tried as adults, permanently yanked from society, shipped to adult prisons as raw bait and, in some cases, sent to death row. And all this because of a subsiding nation which has lost its humanity and, accordingly, become a manufacturer of criminals from birth.

Children, if you are abused, just be sure the abuse doesn't affect you. You could be considered rebellious. When you are thrown out of your home, you shall not return to school. This may cause harm. When daddy beats mommy, act like you don't see it.

Every town has its right-wing nuts. What's really sad is the overwhelming public support for transforming the once progressive department of juvenile justice into a heartless penal system.

**G. Jeremy Ireland, 17**  
Burlington, NC  
Ireland101@aol.com



## July/August

THANKS FOR THE WONDERFUL review of *History Will Not Absolve Us and Orders to Kill* by Jim Douglass, which you recently sent me. Your willingness to review the book is a blow against the darkness which Jim has termed "the unspeakable" and which I called our society's "black star." I very much like the brief format of your magazine as well as its excellent content.

**E. Martin Schotz, MD**  
Brookline, MA

IMPRESSIVE! I haven't yet finished my complimentary July-August issue, and I know I would like to subscribe. Your magazine is like *The Atlantic Monthly* for liberal Episcopalians.

**Sara Brockway**  
Ashland, MA

I REMEMBER CLEARLY A SERMON given by our former rector of 17 years, now Bishop Orris Walker of Long Island: "When the framers of our Constitution finished their work they went across the street and wrote the Constitution of our Church." After reading your July/August issue about the failure of General Convention initiatives to help racial minorities in the area of economics: Might I suggest it's time that we "went back across the street" and gave folk their share of the power rather than "well meant" crumbs.

**John Kavanaugh**  
Detroit, MI

## Defying presumptions

YOUR JUNE ISSUE WAS EXCELLENT — one of your best. A special nod to William Countryman for his lucid comments upon biblical literalism. Indeed, the Bible is not a rule book. It is, rather, of the nature of a sacrament, because it conveys the hidden Wonder that it proclaims. To read its pages is to encounter personally as Lord and Savior that ultimate Word of God whom Christians know as the Christ — who equally embraces all, irregardless of race, creed, gender or sexual orientation. If we would dispense with the legalisms, accept our sexuality wholeheartedly and use it responsibly, we would be a long way towards resolving the dilemma that the church is creating for herself today. What you are doing is important!

**O. Sydney Barr**  
Grahamsville, NY

WHAT A *FABULOUS* ISSUE on "Defying presumptions" — am ordering 5 copies, to give to members of our ministry and Counsel at Quaker Meeting.

**Barbara Potter**  
West Buxton, ME

YOUR "CELEBRATING THE CALL to integrity, June, 1997" and statement "...us gay folks" — Wow!! I'm 73 and I am amazed at the gay and lesbian people. After a stroke nine years ago, I tolerate all kinds of people. As for church renewal vs. Alex Seabrook, I quite agree with him. Let Alex include St. Mark's of Storrs, Conn., into his list [TW 5/97].

**Charles Riemitis**  
Manchester, CT

## Spirituality of leadership

WHEN WE OPEN ADELYNROOD each May, the library is sure to have the winter issues of *Witness* out and available. Good material always for our justice-directed discussions. The issue about leadership — especially Parker Palmer — is still being referred to [TW 5/97]. We try to stand for justice and yet be reconcilers in this church of ours. Thanks for your help.

**Betty Sawyer**  
Society of Companions of the Holy Cross

*Letters*



## Getting the life you want

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ARTICLE ON Wally and Juanita Nelson, which appeared in *The Witness* [12/96]. Posted on my wall, I have one of my most treasured gifts: a photo of Ernest and Marion Bromley and Wally and Juanita Nelson in a fraternal embrace with Rev. Maurice McCrackin. (As you I am sure know, according to Rev. Fr. Daniel Berrigan, SJ, "Our Generation Runs on the Shoulders of Maurice McCrackin.") In some ways, Rev. McCrackin *IS* a gift from Marion Bromley and Juanita Nelson. Every time he has a chance, McCrackin explains that Juanita and Marion caused him to embrace in action the revolutionary world of non-violent resistance.

Thank you very much for presenting to us towering human beings in the simplicity of their lives.

**Pio Celestino  
Harlingen, TX**

## A Role Model?

IF A PERSON, BELONGING TO AN organization, aspires to its highest office, it is usual for that candidate to take an oath of allegiance and to swear to obey and uphold the rules and regulations and the resolutions and by-laws. If, after so doing and being installed into that top position, the appointee then publicly vows to violate those oaths and states that he or she will ignore those that bothers their conscience, it would seem to me to require one of two things; either the organization should remove that person from its membership or that person should resign the moment such a violation is voiced.

Here we have the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth, well aware that the laws (canons) he disagrees with have been in effect long before his quest to be made bishop, proceeds to be ordained and consecrated a bishop by kneeling before many of his peers and a big congregation in a church and swears before God and on the Holy Bible to "conform to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America."

This implies obeying the canons and resolutions of the triennial National Conventions one of which has just occurred. For a bishop

## Classifieds

### Episcopal Urban Intern Program

Work in social service, live in Christian community in Los Angeles. For adults 21-30. Apply now for the 1998-99 year. Contact: The Rev. Gary Commins, 260 N. Locust St., Inglewood, CA 90301. 310-674-7700.

### Vocations

Contemplating religious life? Members of the Brotherhood and the Companion Sisterhood of Saint Gregory are Episcopalians, clergy and lay, married and single. To explore a contemporary Rule of Life, contact: The Director of Vocations, Brotherhood of St. Gregory, Dept. W, Saint Bartholomew's Church, 82 Prospect Street, White Plains, NY 10606-3499.

### Catholic Worker history

*Voices from the Catholic Worker*, an oral history of the movement compiled and edited by Rosalie Riegle Troester. Available from your local bookstore at \$22.95 or for \$20 postpaid from Rosalie Riegle, The Mustard Seed Catholic Worker, 721 E. Holland Ave., Saginaw, MI 48601-2619. Call 517-755-4741 or e-mail [riegle@tardis.svsu.edu](mailto:riegle@tardis.svsu.edu) for details.

to violate the very solemn oaths he made at his consecration because he doesn't like some of them sends a terrible message to our young people as well as us older ones.

What a role model! He should have the intestinal fortitude to either obey or to leave.

**Peter Tringham  
Fort Worth, TX**

## Witness praise

IF COMPLACENCY IS A DISEASE, and *The Witness* is the best immunization shot fighting it, does that mean I can deduct this donation as a medical expense?

**Becky Robbins Penniman  
Columbus, OH**

## Benefit

*The Witness* enjoyed a wonderful Convention dinner at the Church of the Advocate in July. We'd like to invite all our readers to send donations to the church's building fund, since they have literally had to stretch nets over the sanctuary to prevent falling masonry from injuring worshipers. In the meantime, they continue to offer programs and meals to neighborhood youth, to respond to emergency needs and to host a soup kitchen. This church, which welcomed Black Panther Party strategists and women seeking ordination in 1974, is a continuing presence for justice. Donations can be sent to The Church of the Advocate, 1801 Diamond St., Philadelphia, PA 19121.

### Stringfellow booklet

Conversations at a 1996 conference on William Stringfellow, co-sponsored by *The Witness*, have been gathered together by Andrew W. McThenia, Jr. and Bill Wylie-Kellermann in a new book, *The Legacy of William Stringfellow*. Contributors include Eugene Rivers, Jim Wallis, Elizabeth McAlister, Nane Alejandrez and Michael Lerner, among others. The volume collects the remarks of the principal speakers as well as dialogue among participants. Send \$5 to *The Witness*, 7000 Michigan Ave., Detroit, MI 48210.

## Classifieds

*Witness* classifieds cost 75 cents a word or \$30 an inch, whichever is less. Payments must accompany submissions. Deadline is the 15th of the month, two months prior to publication.

THE ONLY TROUBLE WITH *The Witness* is if it comes when I am busy with other things, 99 percent of the time I drop everything else (figuratively) and read the whole magazine ... it's that good.

**Ann McElroy  
Cupertino, CA**

THANK GOD FOR A *SANE* publication in the Episcopal Church!

**Jason W. Samuel  
Lake St. Louis, MO**



# The Witness

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**8 Redeeming the world:**  
**Evely Laser Shlensky**  
by Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann  
*As chair of the social action committee for the Reformed movement, Shlensky tackles many justice issues.*

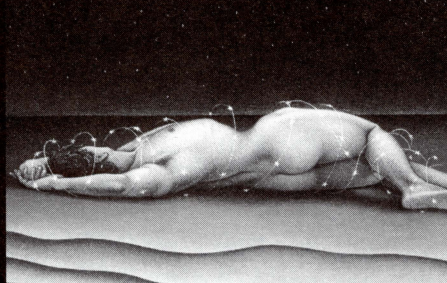
**11 Beyond indifference, forging solidarity** by F. James Levinson  
*As a Jewish activist, Jim Levinson reflects on why Jews are sometimes reluctant to be in solidarity with like-minded Christians — or claim faith as a reason for their commitments.*

**15 Celebrating the holiness of the material world** by Ileana Grams  
*Perhaps above all else Judaism teaches reverence for creation.*

**18 The role of Jewish feminists** by Susannah Heschel  
*Like Christian feminists, Jewish women are finding evidence of suppressed feminist histories and new forms for their faith.*

**21 Justice struggles and Judaism** by Lisa Gayle  
*As a radical and mother, Lisa Gayle's appreciation of her roots in Judaism deepen.*

**24 Converting to Judaism** by Kimberly Conwell  
*In an effort to better understand Christ, Kim Conwell turned to Hebrew texts and found a religious tradition that became home.*



*Cover: Rainbow Shabbat (center panel) from the Holocaust Project ©Judy Chicago, 1992, stained glass, fabricated by Bob Gomez, painted by Dorothy Maddy, photographed by Donald Woodman*

*Back cover: The 12 tribes of Israel by Carol Greger.*

*The Witness* offers a fresh and sometimes irreverent view of our world, illuminated by faith, Scripture and experience. Since 1917, *The Witness* has been advocating for those denied systemic power as well as celebrating those people who have found ways to "live humanly in the midst of death." We push boundaries, err on the side of inclusion and enjoy bringing our views into tension with orthodox Christianity. *The Witness'* roots are Episcopalian, but our readership is ecumenical. For simplicity, we place news specific to Episcopalians in our Vital Signs section. *The Witness* is committed to brevity for the sake of readers who find little time to read, but can enjoy an idea, a poem or a piece.

Manuscripts: We welcome multiple submissions. Given our small staff, writers and artists receive a response only when we are able to publish.

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# ‘Those who love living’

by Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann

**I**t’s tricky doing issues which cross cultural lines, perhaps especially when the culture is one that you believe you already know and share. I find myself suppressing the urge to say, “Some of my best friends are Jewish.” More recently I’ve noticed that some of my best friends are in the process of becoming Jewish. And then, of course, many friends raised Christian have a Jewish grandparent and even more families (my own?) have Jewish bloodlines that have been unacknowledged for so long that no one now remembers that the story is suppressed.

Some Christians will be quick to say, “So what? None of that matters. We are all Jewish in origin. We have a shared heritage.” But I wince to hear it.

It seems to me that who is a Jew is sufficiently challenged within Judaism as Israel’s Orthodox denounce all others. The last thing I would want if I were Jewish is a large, dominant and unwieldy religion calling my sacred places home. It can’t be anymore comfortable than if the Mormons, pointing out that they honor Jesus, claimed a deep understanding of Christianity. The community that believes it has received a further revelation and moves on is not the same in substance as the community that remains. No matter

how intimate the history, we need to adopt the manners we use when we visit, when we are aware that we are in proximity because of the other’s hospitality.

My family was invited to a Seder this year. The meal was beautiful. Our friend spoke the Hebrew prayers with reverence. The children were wide eyed. In the course of the meal, we began to talk of the Egyptian soldiers drowned in the Red Sea and our hostess said that there is a tradition of dipping a finger in the wine 10 times, once for each plague, as an indication that each plague, the destruction it caused, “diminishes our joy.”

We began, Christians and Jews, to talk about forgiveness and redemption. But it wasn’t long before a Christian launched into a sermon about Jesus and suddenly an ancient freedom feast complete with deeply rooted ethics was dismissed as though only what followed in the person of Jesus had merit.

I cringed, looking into the faces of our Jewish friends. I marvelled at their forbearance. It seemed necessary to tread lightly because the sermon-giver was an African American storefront pastor who had married into one of the Jewish families present. But I watched for openings that would allow us to return to Jewish texts and wisdom.

As Christians I suspect we are presumptuous most of the time. We want so much to be seen as the chosen people that we leap into the covenant pushing the Jews aside. Tom Jones notes that in reading the Book of Revelation most commentators reinterpret the salvation promised the Jews as salvation intended for the Church (p. 6). One of those self-serving abridgements, it says: Jew, read converted Jew, read church. The Christian Right, I

recently learned, asserts that they are “the real Jews”.

Meanwhile a Baptist Convention announced its intent to convert all Jews by the year 2000. And Susannah Heschel writes that Christian feminists, sometimes unthinkingly, contribute to anti-semitism when they paint Biblical Judaism as an unrelentingly patriarchal system against which Jesus stood alone (p. 18).

This issue is timed to coincide with the anniversary of *Krystall Nacht*, the November night, 59 years ago, when Nazis destroyed synagogues and Jewish businesses, killing dozens and relegating thousands to the earliest concentration camps. Recalling that night should help us as Christians remember to back up, to listen, to tread softly, to act like guests — we aren’t even your average guests, we’re guests who have done repeated harm.

At the same time, we need to find a balance. The interfaith dialogues that have consisted of Christian clergymen punishing themselves for the legacy but refusing to speak up when they actually disagree with their Jewish counterparts about something, perhaps as vital as Palestinian rights in Israel, is legendary and a little pathetic.

The times are now urgent. Within Judaism there are groups of people who share our concern that the ecosystem is sustaining what may be mortal wounds and global capitalism has most workers by the thumbs. As Marge Piercy writes, all religious traditions have their Right-wing hellions (p. 7). But those of us “ordinary people who love living” can support one another in baking bread, in

*continued on page 6*

*editor's note*

**Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann** is co-editor/publisher of *The Witness*.

This issue is part of a series on allies — others who are engaging in the work. We are grateful that we are not alone in it and find it useful to learn how other communities approach it, since this may broaden our own view or add light to what often seems unrelentingly bleak.



# Apocalyptic reconciliation

by Tom Jones

**F**or almost 2,000 years, the church's ingrained anti-semitism has blinded Christian believers to what the "Revelation to John" says about Jews. In commentaries, scholars have projected onto Revelation their anti-semitic notions that the Christians have replaced the Jews and the Jews have dropped from the sight of God. It will help in our understanding of what is said about Jews in Revelation if we accept the premise that when Revelation refers to the Jews it is in fact referring to the Jews, and not to Christians!

The last book of the New Testament has a very startling message for our divided world. Despite the interpretation offered in most commentaries, John, speaking for the "One who is God" in Revelation, is trying to bring Jews and Christians together. The historical context is that Revelation was written after the fall of Jerusalem at a time when schism between Jews and Christians was either beginning or imminent. Before this schism, Christians and Jews were seen by the Romans as one cult and the Jews could offer protection to the Christians from the Roman law of emperor worship.

John writes of two "synagogues of Satan" in Smyrna and Philadelphia in the letters to the churches. But critics are misleading when they don't point out that John is not speaking about all synagogues or all Jews when he talks about the synagogues of Satan. John calls the empire itself Satan, and when these synagogues give up Christians to the Roman authorities, they are then working with the em-

pire that is Satan, and therefore are called the synagogues of Satan. In the remainder of Revelation, John has only positive things to say about Jews as people of faith.

John reminds Christian believers that they are in this spiritual journey with Jews, not separate from them. The entire context of his heavenly vision is drawn from the Hebrew Bible. John is telling us that the Jews have and will receive the salvation of God through practicing their Jewish faith, and the Christians and Jews will then share the Heavenly Jerusalem.

The following scripture cites have been ignored or re-interpreted by scholars to mean the church, yet they speak of the salvation of the Jews.

Rev. 6:9-11: The description of the martyrs crying out from beneath the altar make it likely that both Jewish and Christian witnesses are included.

Rev. 7:3-8: Our commentaries say in one way or another, "This means the church." Why does this mean the church? The 144,000 receiving the seal of the Lord come from the twelve tribes of Israel which are called by name. If anything this number suggests that an infinite or complete number of Jews are to be sealed.

*continued from page 6*

"blinding quiet," in scholarship.

It may surprise Jewish readers that *Witness* subscribers also feel assaulted by the commercial and imperial manipulation of Christianity. We also try to sustain a vision that has nothing to do with blessing nuclear submarines or with Santa Claus. In teaching our children, we are hampered by the fact that the powers use our sacred symbols in their work.

Rev. 11:3-13: The commentaries go to great length in attempting to identify these two witnesses as particular Christian personages. Yet nothing could be simpler than to recognize in these two the figures of Elijah and Moses who repeatedly appear in the gospel transfiguration scenes as precisely such witnesses. Their being called up here is emblematic of all the Jews who were called up after the destruction of the Holy City.

Rev. 14:14-20: There are two separate harvestings of the earth in this passage. The Son of Man will harvest the grain (which may be read as Christians); the angel will harvest the grapes (to be understood as Jews). They are then thrown together into the violence of the empire.

Rev. 21:12-13: These angels stand at the 12 gates calling for all to enter. God has given the 12 gates of the New Jerusalem to the Jews, again posting those tribal names above each entry, for they have always shown the way. They have been a light to the nations. They have been God's chosen people to proclaim salvation to all who would hear. Now the angels are calling us, Jews and Christians and, indeed, all the people of the earth who have a right to the tree of life, to enter the city by way of the Jewish tribes, who are the gates.

Revelation presents a vision that promises redemption to Jews and Christians alike. It is a travesty that it has been read otherwise for so long. **TW**

There are differences between us, too. Many of the voices in this issue — which range from Reform and Reconstructionist to Humanist — are reluctant to talk about God at length. They are more relaxed explaining what God would have us do. They speak of blessings, not as things to beg for but, as things already received. The focus seems to be on the work that needs doing complimented by the enjoyment of creation that is required by the Torah. **TW**

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**Tom Jones** is a United Methodist pastor who is a full-time organic farmer. Jones is working on a book about Revelation.



# The Fundamental Truth

by Marge Piercy

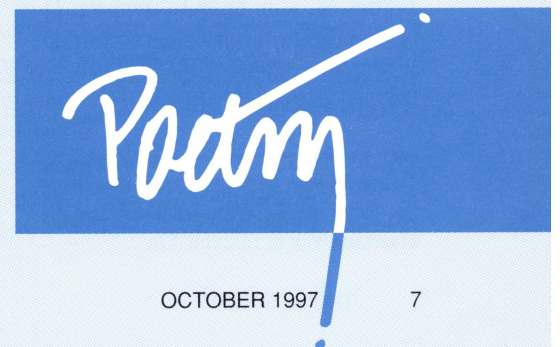
The Christian right, Islamic Jihad,  
the Jewish right bank settlers bringing  
the Messiah down, the Japanese sects  
who worship by bombing subways,  
they all hate each other  
but more they hate the mundane,  
ordinary people who love living  
more than dying in radiant glory,  
who shuffle and sigh and bake bread.

They need a planet of their own,  
perhaps even a barren moon  
with artificial atmosphere,  
where they will surely be nearer  
to their gods and their fiercest  
enemies, where they can kill  
to their heart's peace  
kill to the last standing man  
and leave the rest of us be.

Not mystics to whom the holy  
comes in the core of struggle  
in a shimmer of blinding quiet,  
not scholars haggling out the inner  
meaning of gnarly ancient sentences.  
No, the holy comes to these zealots  
as a license to kill, for self doubt  
and humility have dried like mud  
under their marching feet.

They have far more in common  
with each other, these braggarts  
of hatred, the iron hearted  
in whose ear a voice spoke  
once and left them deaf.  
Their faith is founded on death  
of others, and everyone is other  
to them, whose Torah is splattered  
in letters of blood.

© Marge Piercy, 1996  
(published in *TIKKUN*, Vol. II, No. 1, Jan. 1, 1996)





# Redeeming the world:

## an interview with Evelyn Laser Shlensky

by Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann

*Evelyn Laser Shlensky is widely known as a writer and speaker on the interface between social justice and Judaism. She is chair of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, a member of both the National Board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice.*

**Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann:** You've been actively working for justice. How does your spirituality relate to your political concerns?

**Evelyn Laser Shlensky:** Spirituality is not a word I'm particularly drawn to. I know that it's very much in vogue now.

But there is a traditional Jewish notion of how we're supposed to be in the world which is much more meaningful to me — that is the concept of holiness. There's a deeper word for it, *kedusha*. Probably the best way to understand what is meant by holiness is to refer to Leviticus 19, which is called the holiness code. It starts out, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." It goes on to detail many specific behaviors. While some are ritual behaviors like keeping the Sabbath and not making idols, others are — in fact most are — in the realm of an ethical mandate, instructing how you're supposed to treat the poor and the stranger.

**J.W.-K.:** With all the urgent justice issues before us, it is easy to despair. How do you maintain your sense of hope?

**E.L.S.:** Judaism is basically a hopeful religion. What Judaism has offered

uniquely to the world is a messianic vision of a world redeemed. A hope that there will be a time — that we can work for a time, that we *must* work for a time — when justice and peace will prevail.

When I become despairing — as I do — I can somehow drum up this vision that says there's a better time coming and



Evelyn Laser Shlensky

I am implicated in the process of bringing it into being.

But how I actually preserve my hope is through a list that I keep by my desk. It has the overthrow of apartheid and the beginning of a reversal of the nuclear arms race on it. It has the actual triumph of the sanctuary movement in terms of breaking some new legal and judicial ground. The women's movement and gay and lesbian movement — all these things which could have only been a dream a couple of

decades ago — are blossoming in ways I would not have felt possible. That hope list is a very real, tactile way for me to preserve hope. Aside from the redemptive vision of my religion, I have to look at what has actually been accomplished. Right now I have a lot of involvement with labor issues and it's helpful for me to look at Jewish history and to look at how people in the early part of the century organized and turned things for working people.

**J.W.-K.:** Are there rituals that help nourish your sense of hope? Arthur Waskow writes about the importance of the Sabbath in terms of teaching us how to take time out and how not to imagine that we're God [TW 1/96]. Are there particular ceremonies or festivals that help sustain your hope?

**E.L.S.:** The Sabbath would be very high — the Sabbath is a day when we taste the world as it might be if it were redeemed, when we stop feeling that we have to manipulate the world, when we attempt to live in a devout time of harmony.

I just read some rabbinic commentary that described the Sabbath as our preparation for revolution. It reminds me of Abraham Heschel's statement about prayer as a subversive activity when it's done right.

**J.W.-K.:** Say a little bit about what an observation of the Sabbath looks like.

**E.L.S.:** Sabbath is our weekly ritual to, in some ways, emulate God. If God rested after a very creative thrust, rested on the seventh day, then we too can take time out of the frenzy and rejoice in the created world.

When I moved to California, my initial inclination, as I walked through my orchard was: Want an orange? Pick one. But I learned

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*Torah study to me is even more engaging than prayer. It offers ways of thinking about how we are to rework the world.*

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**Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann** is co-editor/publisher of *The Witness*. Artist **Judith Hankin** lives in Eugene, Ore.



that one thing that is prohibited on the Sabbath is to pick fruit or in any way disturb the earth. When I practiced that, it put me into a very different relationship with a fruit tree. To see it on the Sabbath, is to see it as part of the glory of creation, a gift, and not necessarily something that is just there to serve me.

**J.W-K.:** I know there are a range of ways to observe the Sabbath. Is lighting candles part of what you do?

**E.L.S.:** On Friday nights we light candles. I make challah — that's the ceremonial bread — and we say blessings over that, blessings over the wine. It's usually a time for a family dinner. It's not so often for me a time to go to temple, although that's something I'm not necessarily proud of. Then there's Saturday, which I usually observe with Torah study, which to me is an even more engaging religious activity than prayer. One reason I'm interested in the text is because it offers ways of thinking about how we are supposed to rework the world. The rest of the day is often given to walking and just doing things that are not ordinary things. I do some things that traditional Jews wouldn't do, like drive, but I try not to do the things that are ordinary like grocery shopping and regular work.

There's a ceremony that honors the ending of Sabbath which we call *Havdalah* (which means separation). I used to have trouble with it because it's usually explained that this is the time to demarcate the separation of the holy from the profane. But a meaningful understanding of separating from the Sabbath for me became an understanding of moving between reflecting on a redeemed world and doing the work of redemption.

**J.W-K.:** This issue of *The Witness* was partly inspired by a conversation with Fordham law school professor Russell Pearce. He had participated in a

Stringfellow conference in which the focus was on Christian theology and radical politics. The conference examined ways to be faithful to our tradition by working for justice [see Classified ad, p.3]. Pearce said that there are many analogues in the



*Receiving the Torah by Judith Hankin*

Jewish community.

**E.L.S.:** During the Civil Rights Movement, going on Freedom Rides or the Poor People's March was considered a dignified religious act. Abraham Joshua Heschel apparently received some criticism for participating in the march on Selma from his congregants. He responded that he felt as though he was praying with his feet.

There has been an obvious rightward swing in the U.S. although Jewish voters consistently vote far more liberally than

their economic status would indicate that they ought to. Jews vote about 75 percent Democratic, which considering their socio-economic status is not so typical.

**J.W-K.:** Pearce noted that Jewish activists are less likely to condemn the U.S. government as evil, partly because it guarantees civil rights. Do you think that's true?

**E.L.S.:** Some of the most prominent social critics have been Jews. I don't know that they feel any more beholden to this country than anybody else. It seems to me that if we follow the prophetic model, it is our job to be social critics — to hold government to task, to say that even kings are not above the law and that there is a higher moral law that we all must accede to.

**J.W-K.:** This issue is dedicated to the work that progressive Christians and progressive Jews can do together. Do you find people you know reluctant to work politically with Christians?

**E.L.S.:** No, most social action these days is done in an interfaith context. It's hard for me to think of any area in which we've been involved in which we don't ally ourselves with progressive Christians. We try to be considerate of one another's religious sensibilities. Working together almost invariably enhances my understanding of Judaism.

For instance, when I went down to Mesa Grande, Honduras to participate in the repatriation of Salvadoran refugees, it was enlightening to understand their return to El Salvador as an exodus experience. It gave me a different take on what it was to have an experience of expulsion and an experience of return against great odds.

As I've worked with the farm workers, I've recognized that Moses was a great labor organizer who took his people from



being oppressed workers to a situation of freedom. It opens my eyes and I suspect that happens the other way, too.

**J.W-K.:** I've been skimming through some of Jacob Neusner's books, because he does a lot of dialogue with Christians. He's written a book called *Trading Places*. He writes, in part, about what it means when a religion is associated with a power structure. In the first three centuries after Christ, Judaism was what he calls the "licit" religion — legitimate, because it had standing with Rome. There were compromises and arrangements that had been made between Rome and the Temple and consequently people had standing if they were Jews. Then, with the conversion of Constantine, it flipped and suddenly the Christians had political authority and the Jews did not.

He writes that each religion, when it was *not* in power, was focused in home and community ceremonies as well as in a vision of how things could be, an alternative vision. The religion was essentially one of resistance.

I like the idea that it flipflops. It really depends on global politics whether a religion is a state vehicle or not. Neusner thought most Christians would be delighted to see Christianity becoming a reigning force. And, yet, for progressive Christians that's one of the most difficult things — having chaplains blessing nuclear submarines.

**E.L.S.:** Let's hear it for separation of church and state! That's what gives us moral authority — *no* religion is supposed to be aligned with the state, or beholden to the state.

**J.W-K.:** Which leads easily into questions about Israel. You've gone to the Middle East. What do you make of what's happening now in East Jerusalem with Jewish Israelis evicting Palestinian Israelis and requiring identity cards?

**E.L.S.:** I feel very dispirited by what's going on now in Israel. I care very much

about the success of the peace process so that all peoples in the area can live in dignity and with some sense of control over their own destiny. One of the roles that Jews in the U.S. — as well as Christians and Muslims — have tried to play is to say that the U.S. has got to put heat on both sides so that they'll come up with some livable solution.

**J.W-K.:** How does that conversation play out with folks in the Reform movement?

**E.L.S.:** What I've expressed is close to what most people think. The Middle East situation is besieged by both terrorism and intransigence. Internally, the Israeli situation is complicated further by the increasing power of the ultra Right-wing Orthodox religious parties. They have their own vision of how things ought to be and that vision doesn't tend to comport with what I would like as a liberal Jew, because they certainly don't recognize my Judaism as being authentic, nor what I would hope for in the political configuration of the Middle East.

**J.W-K.:** Do you think there has been more openness within congregations to look at abuses of power in Israel than there used to be? Marc Ellis cautioned years ago that interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews had to deal with justice for Palestinians, but he said there wasn't much tolerance among Jews for criticizing Israel. In fact, he said there was more openness to questioning Israeli policies within Israel than there was in the U.S.

**E.L.S.:** When [Yitzhak] Shamir was in power and [Menachem] Begin, there was a sense in this country that you were betraying your people if you offered any critique, even though the very same critiques were offered by Israelis all the time. That has changed quite a lot, especially since the peace process.

**J.W-K.:** Where are the areas where Jews, in conversation with Christians, should call Christians to account? It could be

really useful for Jews to say to Christians, "Why do you bless nuclear submarines? What about having flags in churches?" Can you imagine that conversation?

**E.L.S.:** I'm not sure.

**J.W-K.:** You could ask Christians to challenge the Baptists' intent to convert Jews.

**E.L.S.:** I wish they would. But I would rather lead by just doing what I think is right and hoping that other people might think about what might be right for them. We've thought about this in relation to our work with Jewish manufacturers who use sweatshops — maybe other religious groups might decide they have a role too.

**J.W-K.:** That would be a great invitation to issue, if you find out that some major manufacturer is a Methodist or a Lutheran or an Episcopalian.

**E.L.S.:** When Jews — when we do confront our own — we often hear this allegation that we're going to engender anti-semitism by airing dirty linen in public. Frankly, that possibility is something that makes us a little nervous.

I remember standing on the border between Honduras and El Salvador and somebody came up to me and said that as a Jew I should talk to [then Assistant Secretary of State] Eliot Abrams. I was thinking, "There are a lot of Christians in power, Ronald Reagan for one. Maybe you ought to talk to them!"

Somehow the scrutiny should work both ways.

**J.W-K.:** Absolutely! Some of those conversations would be painful — maybe *Witness* readers would be surprised to learn of people in our camp who are causing harm. But often it wouldn't be difficult — it could be a tremendous opportunity to join forces. I would be glad to protest simultaneously with you if there are Episcopalians using sweatshop labor in L.A.

**E.L.S.:** That would be very powerful. And very comforting.

**TW**





Wall of Indifference from the Holocaust Project ©Judy Chicago, with photography by Donald Woodman

photo by Donald Woodman

# Beyond indifference, forging solidarity

by F. James Levinson

Over the years, when I have picked up a copy of *The Witness* or *The Catholic Worker* or read about a religiously based civil disobedience relating to some cherished cause, I often have found myself lamenting the absence of a viable Jewish equivalent. Certainly there have been attempts. The Jewish Peace Fellowship founded in the 1930s has made a valiant effort to stay afloat despite marginal support. Local chapters of the New Jewish Agenda have tried to serve as a counterweight to mainline organizations. The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism occasionally has taken important positions on issues of peace and justice. And yet Jews, acting as Jews, are often absent from the interfaith barricades.

**James Levinson** is on the faculty of Tufts University and leads a Jewish congregation in central Massachusetts.

I remember with more than a little sadness my own participation in a Massachusetts “Witness for Peace” group heading for Nicaragua in the early 1980s, this at a time when such ventures were particularly dangerous. I was the only person in our group who had trouble finding a clergy person or organization representative to represent me at the commissioning service. After I was turned down by a half a dozen rabbis, I finally requested the participation of the one person who couldn’t turn me down, my 14-year-old daughter.

## Spiritually-based resistance

Then, and on other occasions, I would ask myself, why is this the case? Why have we Jews, of all people, not been eager and active participants in spiritually based resistance activity addressing evils in our society?

The question, on reflection, subdivides into two. The first concerns the frequent

absence of a Jewish identification in the progressive actions we take. The second concerns our reticence to participate as Jews in actions together with Christians who might logically be kindred spirits. The first is more complex, the second relatively straightforward. Let’s take the second first.

While Jews in America today are in most respects highly assimilated into the society at large — too much so, some of us might argue — we become, almost uniformly, wary and cautious when this assimilation brings us too close to a Christian church, or indeed to Christian practice of any kind. No reader of *The Witness* is unfamiliar with the Christian roots of anti-Semitism or Luther’s diatribes against the Jews or the Spanish Inquisition or the horrors of the Holocaust. Yet even a focus on these shattering events may not fully explain the reticence we feel, the discomfort we experience when



we get too close to Christianity.

### Christianity and exclusion

However assimilationist we might be, Christianity evokes exclusion. It barrages the Jew on the airwaves, on the streets, and in the supermarkets (particularly during the three months a year during which commercial America sells Christmas and Easter) leaving us with reactions which fall somewhere between indignation and weariness.

Indeed, since the founding of the Republic, our ancestors recognized a need to protect themselves against the dangers posed by those seeking to "Christianize" this nominally secular republic. The histories of our Congress and our state assemblies are filled with debates over proposed constitutional amendments not over whether school prayer should be permitted, but over whether our governments

should be based on "the rulership of the Christian Lord." The activities of the Christian right in America merely extend this tradition.

Thus while we are always willing to have Christians join us in *our* seders and our Bar Mitzvahs, we continue to be wary of Christian forms. The cost, sadly, is that those Christians who today are cognizant and sensitive, and who do seek to be genuinely inclusive, often find their invitations for interfaith witness rebuffed, sometimes unkindly, by Jews still feeling a need to keep them at bay.

### Rabbinic focus and secular activism

But what of the first question, that of identifiably Jewish witness? The question must take us back to our European roots in the latter decades of the 19th century. At the risk of oversimplifying a highly complex issue, most rabbinic Ju-

daism at that time was actively absorbed in understanding, interpreting and adhering to Jewish law, and to adjudicating disputes according to this law. Its purposes were almost exclusively religious. Those who sought political or social expression did so outside of the religious frame.

Accordingly, although some late 19th century Zionists sought to function within a religious context, Jewish social reformers and political dissidents, influenced by the new Socialist-revolutionary ideologies sweeping through Central and Eastern Europe, almost uniformly, acted not as Jews but as individuals, and often rejected their religious Jewish roots as reactionary or irrelevant. While some, like Trotsky, chose to remain in Europe, many left and became, like Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky and Samuel Gompers, active participants in the American labor movement.

This legacy of socially and politically active Jews continued through the 20th century and has included such diverse notables as Emma Goldman, Clara Lemlich, Howard Fast, Saul Alinsky, Bella Abzug, William Kunstler and Abbie Hoffman. In virtually every case, their activism was not identifiably Jewish. Often it rejected Jewish practice outright. When Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were about to be executed in the electric chair, they angrily opposed the presence of a rabbi.

The same has been the case in Israel where peace and justice activity is uniformly the domain of secular Jews. And a recently published book by Immanuel Suttner on South African Jews makes clear that the same was true of Jewish activists such as Joe Slovo, Helen Suzman and Johnny Clegg in that country.

For some potential Jewish activists, there may be a third factor to be added to our wariness of Christianity and this traditional separation of religious and so-

## Luther's terror text

During the early years of the Protestant Reformation, Luther was sure he could accomplish what the Catholic Church had failed to do: bring large numbers of Jews to Christianity. In a 1523 pamphlet entitled, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, he denounced the blood libel as slander, and blamed the Church for alienating the Jews. "If I had been a Jew and had seen such idiots and blockheads ruling and teaching the Christian religion," Luther wrote, "I would rather have been a pig than a Christian."

Less than 20 years later, Luther, incensed that the Jews had not followed his brand of Christianity, wrote, "I would threaten to cut their tongues out from their throats, if they refuse to acknowledge the truth that God is a trinity and not a plain unity." He also outlined the following eight actions to be taken against them:

Burn all synagogues; destroy all Jew-

ish homes; confiscate all Jewish holy books; forbid rabbis to teach, on pain of death; forbid Jews to travel; confiscate Jewish property; force Jews to do physical labor. If necessary, expel all Jews.

Four hundred years later, Hitler proudly claimed Luther as an ally: "He saw the Jew as we are only beginning to see him today." At the Nuremberg trials, Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher defended himself with the claim that he had not said anything worse about the Jews than had Martin Luther.

— J.L.

(This general information is taken from Joseph Telushkin's book, *Jewish Literacy*. Luther's eight proposals against the Jews were published in *Concerning the Jews and Their Lies*, quoted in Jacob Marcus, ed., *The Jew in the Medieval World*. Julius Streicher's defense at Nuremberg is cited in A. Roy Eckardt, *Your People My People*.)



cially active Jews. This is the ambiguity of the "Israel" issue. Most of us are drawn to Israel for reasons which cut to the core of our religious and cultural heritage, yet we often despair of that country's abuse of power. Put simply, how does one both support Israel and witness for peace and justice?

### Breakthroughs

And yet, we have seen in the latter part of this century that a highly visible, concrete challenge is sometimes capable of cutting through these obstacles of fear, tradition and doubt. We have seen it most visibly in the civil rights struggle and in opposition to the war in Vietnam. The breakthrough was manifested in Selma, Alabama and Albany, Georgia where rabbis joined black and white Christian clergy in seeking to integrate a public pool. In each case, Jews wore for identification the yarmulke or traditional head covering — even Reform Jews who never wore them in their synagogues!

We associate these breakthroughs with the figure of Abraham Joshua Heschel, although many, in fact, preceded him. Heschel was an outspoken rabbi during the Vietnam era and a colleague of the Berrigans.

Many Americans remember Heschel standing together with Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy at Arlington National Cemetery and decrying the tragic loss of life in that senseless struggle. Although today he is also recognized for his many contributions to Jewish theology, I find it revealing that I heard about him first not in religious school, but from Christian anti-nuclear friends.

Heschel may have been a prophet in more ways than one. For during recent years we have seen increasing erosion in

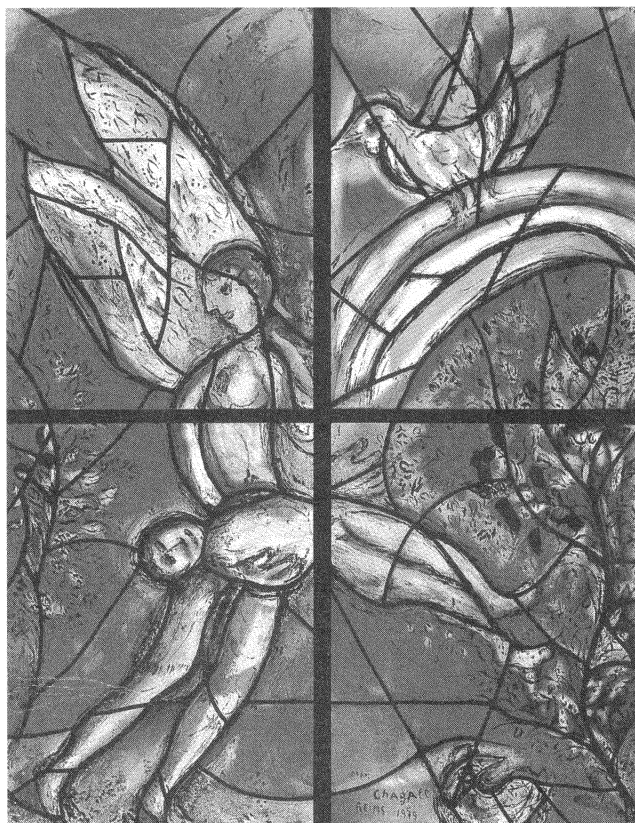
the traditional bifurcation of religious and socially active Jews. As younger Jews begin to reclaim the dormant spirituality of Jewish practice (the earlier absence of which led so many Jews to seek other spiritual forms) many of us are also finding it possible to reclaim the Jewish

to participate, was active testimony to the potential power of this re-joining of Jewish faith and Jewish justice, and may itself have been a force in helping to catalyze that very rejoining. As Christians, Hindus and Buddhists joined us in mourning the nightmare of Auschwitz, many of us, as Jews, were able to reaffirm, as a faith community, the great teachings of that trauma: that the only thing worse than the Holocaust was that the world allowed it to happen; that we must never again turn our backs on evil and suffering wherever it might appear.

From the ashes of Auschwitz we are able, Jews and non-Jews, to generate new resolve to address today's sources of suffering: Bosnia, Cambodia, Burma, Tibet, Rwanda, and the problems which continue to plague the poor and the dispossessed throughout the world. In that context — and, not unimportantly, in a place of Jewish pilgrimage — other remarkable re-joining was able to take place, including an understanding of the linkages between the tragedies at Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and the convening of a pilgrimage linking them.

It was also the occasion for me to meet Helga Mueller. Mueller had grown up near Munich believing her father was a German war hero. The fiction was reinforced by her family at every occasion. It continued after her father returned from the war, then suddenly died. But something didn't ring quite true to the now teenage Mueller who, in time, came upon information indicating that far from being a hero, her father had been a Nazi war criminal.

Mueller began to dig deeper into the war archives: the Nazis, believing they would be around for a 1,000 years, kept



*In the beginning* by Marc Chagall. Chagall prepared this window for a German Christian church after World War II in an act of reconciliation.

concepts of *rachmones* (compassion) and *tzedakah* (justice) in our social and political activism. Under the tutelage of such mentors as Naomi Goodman, Arthur Waskow, David Saperstein, Michael Lerner and Everett Gendler, increasing numbers of American Jews are feeling comfortable for the first time protesting social evils not simply as individuals, but as Jews.

### An Auschwitz pilgrimage

The 1994 Interfaith Convocation for Peace at Auschwitz, in which I was privileged



## Affluenza

According to a PBS documentary, an epidemic known as “affluenza” is sweeping the country. Its symptoms include chronic stress, swollen expectations, social scars, fractured families, shopping fever, and a rash of bankruptcies.

The makers of *Affluenza*, John De



shoot takes

Braaf and Vivia Boe, define the disease as “an unhappy condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”

Although the film is cleverly written, reminiscent of *Atomic Cafe* and *Roger and Me*, De Graaf and Boe have a serious message: Overspending is a real ailment with serious side effects, including headaches, low back pain, heart

palpitations, unexplained aches and pains, hyperacidity, depression, anxiety attacks, and sleeplessness. Of course, there’s a cure for affluenza that’s surprisingly easy to administer: Spend less. And, as *Affluenza* points out, a growing number of Americans are downscaling their lifestyles and generally getting by on less. Some 5 percent of all baby boomers have embraced some form of voluntary simplicity, according to futurist Gerald Celente, and he expects the number to grow to 15 percent by the year 2000.

— Jay Walljasper,  
*Utne Reader*, 9-10/97

## ‘Inclusive language’ fight

When North Carolina-based *World* magazine accused Zondervan publishers of planning a revision of the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible — the best-selling edition in the North American evangelical world — using “gender inclusive language” (except when referring to God), the article set off an explosion among evangelical leaders. Stung by the criticism, the International

Bible Society, which licenses Zondervan to publish the NIV in North America, announced in May that it would “forego all plans to develop a revised edition of the NIV.”

But there are complications. In 1995, Hodder & Stoughton, the NIV’s publisher in Britain, issued a revision of the NIV that used inclusive language with a preface saying “it is often appropriate to mute the patriarchalism of the culture of the biblical writers through gender-inclusive language.” And in the same year, Zondervan published a simplified-language Bible for children and adults learning to read English that also uses inclusive language, but contains no announcement to that effect and was not marketed as an inclusive edition.

According to a report by Darrell Todd Maurina, Southern Baptist Convention president Tom Elliff now cites the inclusive language controversy first in a list of seven battles which must still be fought and won, placing it even before an indirect reference to President Clinton’s position on “partial birth abortion.”

— **Ecumenical News International**

*continued from page 13*

meticulous records. Mueller even learned that, quite possibly, what she had experienced as the death of her father had been a staged funeral and that he may have escaped to South America.

As she began to learn more about her father, she found herself more and more estranged from her family. Now, in addition, she began to have dreams of herself living in a house built on skulls, of the river near her home filled with floating corpses.

Mueller told her story before the assembled group of us at Auschwitz, concluding it by saying that her father had been the Nazi commandant responsible for the liquidation of the Jewish ghetto in the town of Lida in Little Russia. As she mentioned the name of the town, I gasped aloud. Lida was where my family had

lived for countless generations.

My knees became very shaky, and a knot formed in my stomach as I walked up to the front of the room after the session and proceeded to speak with her. As I made the connection, Mueller became visibly pale and then nearly hysterical, telling me she knew that one day she would have to meet someone whose family had been victims of her father. I was filled with dread as I wondered whether Mueller would ask me for the forgiveness that was not mine to give.

In my ears rang the words of the prophets that the children were not to suffer for the sins of the parents. But I heard also the infinitely harsher words of Eli Wiesel; “Do not forgive the murderers and their accomplices. God, merciful God, do not have mercy on these who had no mercy

on Jewish children.”

I experienced all of these emotions and more as Mueller and I talked, and then walked together, weeping, past the ruins of the crematoria. What became clear from our hours together is that we were both victims, the broken and tormented — Mueller just as clearly as any of us who had lost our families.

More broadly, that spirit of solidarity, expressed at a place where so many of our ancestors had lost their lives, went a long way in assuaging the fears and doubts that had been holding some of us captive. At the same time, that same spirit held out for all of us present the possibility of *Tikkun Olam*, the healing of the world — and the possibility that the cycles of violence might someday be broken.

**TV**



# Celebrating the holiness of the material world

by Ileana Grams

When considering what is most basic to Judaism, both Jews and non-Jews are perhaps unlikely to see it as above all a celebration of creation and of the holiness of the material world. Yet its most important holiday, the theme of most of its prayers, and much of its code of behavior are centered on the preciousness and beauty of the world that came into being “In the Beginning.”

First, there is the Sabbath, the weekly holiday that celebrates the creation of the universe. To honor the Sabbath, Jews rest as God did, and contemplate the beauty of what has been created, just as the Creator did. Thus they refrain from work, which is defined as any intentional activity altering the material world. As the Sabbath candles are lit, the children blessed, and God praised for the wine and bread which begin the meal, we enter a holy period of contemplation and enjoyment of what God has made. The Sabbath brings home the point that such enjoyment is only possible when we give up our efforts to dominate. By making us stop, by making us rest, the Sabbath shows us the

goodness of Creation, a goodness which is always there but whose enjoyment is obscured on the other days of the week by the need to earn our bread and to make our human environment. The Sabbath is the only festival instituted in the Ten Commandments. It is both the most important and the most frequent.



*Tidings* by Michael Bergt

For the observant Jew, the other six days of the week are holy as well. “Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest.” The rabbis who codified the Talmud said this means that the obligation to work is as great as the obligation to rest. That is, all of one’s life, and all one’s activities,

belong to the realm of Torah. One’s duty is to live each moment in such a way that all of life is made holy. This is done not by escaping or transcending the material, but rather by being conscious of it. Consciousness makes us human, consciousness is the image of the Divine in us. A fully conscious life is both truly human and truly divine. Plato would agree, but Plato sees the body as a prison, limiting the full consciousness that the soul can attain only in bodiless purity, focussed on the immaterial Forms. Judaism sees human consciousness as operating fully only when it is focussed on the

works of God: Creation. Where Plato sees pleasures as nails that fasten the soul to the body and keep it earthbound, Judaism says that in the afterlife we shall be called to account for every legitimate pleasure that we failed to enjoy. Creation is good, and therefore we are not only permitted but obligated to enjoy it.

I grew up with my mother’s injunctions not to waste and not to destroy anything. Picking leaves off trees was frowned upon, as was abuse of any living thing. What we could not use ourselves was given to someone who could. Clothing was discarded only when quite worn, not because we no longer liked it or it was out of fashion. My mother viewed the creative reuse of something otherwise useless as a triumph, and she was a mistress of the art. She

deplored a superabundance of toys, clothes, or anything else, because excess made it impossible to appreciate and enjoy each thing as it deserved. To do much with little was not just a tactic to make money go farther. Rather, it was living in accordance with the truth that the world is precious.

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Without knowing it, I was being exposed to three Jewish principles about the material world: *Bal Tashchit*, *Tikkun Olam*, and *Kavanah*.

*Bal Tashchit* (Thou shalt not destroy) is a general prohibition on destruction or wastefulness of any kind, derived from Deuteronomy 20:19-20, which forbids the destruction of trees in warfare. The rabbis expanded this to forbid any wanton destruction, any use of more where less would do, explicitly on the grounds that we are obligated to treat the creation with respect.

*Tikkun Olam* (repair or perfecting of the world) is the human responsibility to improve the world. God alone cannot make the world perfect, because he has given over so much power to humans. Therefore, if God is to realize the full goodness of Creation, it can only be with the active participation of humans. Thus, we are obligated to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison, and work to remedy injustice. But we are also obligated to tend the natural world so that its beauty and fruitfulness are preserved. Planting trees, in particular, is such a mitzvah (good deed/commandment) that a famous rabbinic saying is, "If you are about to plant a tree, and the Messiah comes, first plant the tree, and then go greet the Messiah."

It might be thought that humans have an obligation to perfect the world because it is their Fall that has blemished it. But Judaism rejects the idea of original sin. The good world which God has created is not tainted by Adam and Eve's disobedience. Neither are other humans. Rather, Judaism teaches that each human has both an inclination to good and an inclination to evil, as the tradition would put it, or free will, as moderns put it. Each individual must choose good and reject evil, and is accountable for the choice. A midrash (a rabbinic commentary on the Scriptures) notes that, in the creation ac-

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*A short bracha is recited by observant Jews every time they eat, drink wine, hear thunder, see lightning, smell a beautiful smell, see a rainbow, eat the first new fruit of a given kind for the year, or see a beautiful or remarkable natural object (as well as on numerous other occasions).*

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*Each bracha begins "Blessed are You, Lord our God..."*

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count, it says several times that God saw that creation was good, but it does not say this about the creation of humans. Why not? The answer is that humans are not good or bad until they make themselves so. Thus, God could not say yet. Because humans have such freedom, God needs their cooperation in the perfecting of the world, and it is their task and their privilege to cooperate.

The midrash seems to make God less than omnipotent by transferring to humans power to determine themselves. And indeed, this is a major theme in Judaism, with implications for the Creation. A midrash on Ecclesiastes pictures God leading Adam through the Garden of Eden and saying: "See my works, how fine and excellent they are. Now all that I have created, I created for your benefit. Think upon this and do not corrupt and destroy my world. For if you destroy it, there is no one to restore it after you."

Humans have not only to refrain from destruction and to work actively to better the Creation, but to appreciate what is there. To do this, they need *kavanah*, or focussed attention. (The word *kavanah*

means both intention and attention.) Moments of *kavanah* throughout the day are guaranteed by the institution of the most common Jewish prayer, the blessing or *bracha*. A short *bracha* is recited by observant Jews every time they eat, drink wine, hear thunder, see lightning, smell a beautiful smell, see a rainbow, eat the first new fruit of a given kind for the year, or see a beautiful or remarkable natural object (as well as on numerous other occasions). Each *bracha* begins "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe," and continues according to its special subject. (The blessing for beautiful sights, which I say frequently, living as I do in the Southern Appalachians, continues, "maker of the works of Creation.") Since different kinds of food get different *brachot* (plural), according to whether they grew in the ground, on a tree, are made of one of the five grains mentioned in the Bible, or had another origin, saying a *bracha* is an opportunity to stop and pay attention to the connection between the food in our hands and the natural world that it came from. It is noteworthy that the blessing does not consecrate the food or other object, but is rather a blessing or a praise of God for making the object. The object needs no consecration. It is holy already. It is we who need to notice its holiness and to thank God for it — and that is what we do in the *bracha*.

The main prayer for the morning service thanks God for "your miracles which are with us daily: evening, morn and noon." It is not just eating and seeing beautiful sights which are miraculous and worthy of praise. The *brachot* to be recited as one gets up in the morning begin with blessing God who has given the rooster understanding to distinguish between darkness and light, and include, among others, blessings for opening one's eyes, stretching, putting one's feet on the floor, dressing, and eliminating. This last,



too, is a time to praise God who has designed the body with marvelous intricacy. Very observant Jews used to try to say 100 *brachot* a day. To come anywhere close to this goal requires a Zen-like living in the moment, a being here-and-now that differs from Zen in being expressed in words, but shares the same outlook: "How marvelous! I chop wood, I carry water."

Judaism rejects very strongly the anthropomorphization of God. So what to make of the strange story in Exodus in which Moses asks to see God? "No man can see my face and live, but hide yourself in the cleft of the rock, and I will pass by you," says God. So Moses does, and sees God's rear. For the rabbis, the meaning of this strange incident is that we cannot see God as he is in himself (God's face), but we can know him as he is revealed in his Creation, which is, as it were, the back side of God.

Christianity has emphasized the accessibility of God in the person of Jesus, and in the sacrament of communion which he instituted. In communion, the material elements of bread and wine are the carriers and manifestation of divinity. For

*Where Plato sees pleasures  
as nails that fasten the soul to  
the body and keep it earth-  
bound, Judaism says that in  
the afterlife we shall be  
called to account for every  
legitimate pleasure that we  
failed to enjoy.*

Christians, this is because those elements are consecrated in the eucharist. But what if communion were a dramatic showing forth of the divinity which is always present in every element of the Creation?

What if the real purpose of communion were to start with the back side of God, as it were, the bread and wine, and, by heightening our consciousness, to show us that the front side of the bread and wine — and everything else — is God? Jesus was Jewish, after all. In that case, Christians not only could, but should, adopt the attitude that the material is holy. **TW**

## Resources

Richard H. Schwartz, *Judaism and Global Survival*, New York, Atara Publishing Company, 1987. This is the best short survey of what Judaism has to say about our responsibilities to the Creation.

Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*, Simi Valley, California, Tze Ulmad Press, 1975.

Herman Wouk, *This is My God*. Abba Hillel Silver, *Where Judaism Differed*. Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism*. These three first came out more than 30 years ago and have been through multiple republications.

Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993. This book takes St. Augustine's accusation that the Jews are carnal and shows that indeed, a major difference between Patristic Christianity and Talmudic Judaism was in attitudes toward the flesh.

# SEEKING FOOD FOR THOUGHT?

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# The role of Jewish feminists

by Susannah Heschel

“A woman may not read from the Torah because of the honor of the congregation” (*isha lo tikra batorah mipnei l’vod hatzibur*). That proclamation from the Talmud became one of the hotly contested dicta of Judaism during the 1970s, as the Jewish feminist movement took shape. At the outset, Jewish feminist objectives seemed clear: equality of women with men, primarily in religious ritual, but also in secular communal affairs.

In discussing the Talmud’s stated reason for not granting women an *aliyah* (call to the Torah to recite a blessing during synagogue services), Jewish feminists at first debated the term “honor.” Was it really a dishonor to men if a woman said the prayers and read from the Torah scroll in the synagogue? Surely not; how could men’s honor be violated if a woman, too, recited the blessings? Only gradually did we realize that the word at stake in the Talmudic dictum was not “honor,” but “congregation.” Whose honor was being respected? Did the Jewish congregation consist only of men, as implied in this Talmudic statement? What about the honor of women? Even more fundamental, who makes the determinations concerning honor and dishonor? If Judaism’s normative rabbinic texts were authored solely by men, what is their religious and moral authority for women? Those were the questions raised by the next stage of Jewish feminism.

## Suppressed feminist history

Feminist analysis today is less a search

for a single intention or meaning of a text, and far more an effort at unmasking hidden interests, a search for the politics of the text. We don’t simply ask what the text seems to be saying, but whose interests are being served. We examine what the text reveals, but also explore what the text conceals.

One feminist historian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, has suggested a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, which views a prohibition as evidence that the action in question was at least occasionally practiced — otherwise, why would a ban be needed? For example, Fiorenza views the New Testament prohibition in 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 that women should be silent in church as evidence that women did, in fact, speak up. Returning to the example above, that “a woman should not read from the Torah because of the honor of the congregation,” we

might deduce the prohibition as evidence that women, in fact, were reading from the Torah, at least in some congregations. Additional evidence corroborates that possibility. Another early

rabbinic text includes women among those called to the Torah in the synagogue; the Tosefta (additional writings) to Megillah 3:11 states, “Everyone is included in the *minyan* of seven [to go to read the Torah on the Sabbath], even a woman, even a child.”

Feminist scholarship has uncovered forgotten aspects of Jewish women’s history. For example, although women were excluded from composing the major textual traditions of Jewish mystical litera-

ture, they developed their own spiritual practices and prayers. And while the major non-Orthodox denominations of Judaism did not officially approve the ordination of women rabbis until recent years, a 17th century Jewish woman in Kurdistan was called a rabbi. A Hasidic woman, the Maid of Ludmir, briefly served as spiritual leader of her community — until her marriage, which allegedly spoiled her spiritual gifts; and a German-Jewish woman, Regina Jonas, was ordained privately as a Reform rabbi in 1935 — only to be murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz in 1944.

While the historical record emerges as far more supportive of feminist goals than initially expected, problems remain as women call for changes in Judaism. Feminists differ concerning the roles they seek for themselves; they debate whether feminist theory calls for equality between men and women or respect for their differences; they disagree over the nature of the Judaism they ultimately envision.

While the past 20 years have brought important opportunities for Orthodox

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women, they have also generated disappointments in the failure of rabbinic leadership. To be sure, sources have been mined to reveal far greater opportuni-

ties for women’s religious activities than was previously recognized, and many changes have taken place. Schools to train women in classical rabbinic texts, or to study traditional biblical commentaries, have been established, and all-women prayer groups have formed for *Shabbat* services, for reading the Scroll of Esther on Purim, and for other occasions.

Yet even with a clear mandate, opportunities for women often come under attack. Orthodox women who gather sim-

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A longer version of this article appears in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, edited by **Susannah Heschel**, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1995. Artist **Amy Hill** lives in New York City.



ply to pray together have been harshly criticized by Orthodox rabbis, although these women do not call themselves a *minyan* (prayer quorum), since they accept the *halakhic* mandate that a *minyan* is limited to 10 or more men. Although they violate no Jewish laws, these women's prayer groups are sometimes called disruptive to the community, and charges of sexual impropriety and violations of women's allegedly inherent modesty have been raised. In other cases, feminism is given a blanket condemnation as a secularizing movement, despite the fact that many Jewish feminists seek greater, not lesser, involvement in communal religious life.

### Is emulating men the answer?

The question arises, Should women voluntarily assume the obligations of praying three times a day, putting on *tefillin*, wearing a prayer shawl and head covering? Or does that presume that the life of a religious Jew is the life of a religious Jewish *man*? If the goal is achieving what men have, the danger is giving added weight to the assumption of men's superiority. How should feminists proceed — by demanding access to traditionally male roles, or demanding higher status for traditionally female roles?

Feminist theorists increasingly go beyond assertions of equal opportunity for women and men, arguing that as women enter professions hitherto dominated by men, they not only become female doctors, lawyers, rabbis, and professors, but they also change the nature of the professions. Studies of women's professional behavior and management techniques, for example, indicate that differences do exist. A woman rabbi may turn out to be a distinct kind of rabbi.

As increasing numbers of women are ordained, Jewish religious life might be transformed.

### Christian feminist errors

Most of the negative depictions of Judaism in Christian feminist writings are inaccurate and biased, drawing from age-old stereotypes rather than reliable schol-



Amy Hill

arship. They hinder the efforts of Jewish feminists by magnifying Judaism's sexism into an antisemitic distortion. The sexism that exists in Judaism is parallel to the sexism that exists in virtually all other religions and cultures; sexism simply takes different forms in various eras and locations, and cannot be weighed and measured to determine which is more or less oppressive. The distortion begins with some feminists' argument that Judaism's sexism is worse than all others and is even responsible for inaugurating Western civilization's patriarchy. That claim cannot be proven historically and functions instead solely as an anti-Jewish ideological charge.

Feminist anti-Judaism began as women sought an explanation for patriarchal

structures as an evolving characteristic of human societies, rather than as an immutable law of biology. Some subscribed to the myth that prehistorical societies had been goddess-worshipping matriarchies, destroyed by the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, which introduced worship of an exclusive, mono-theistic father-God. Just as Christian theologians have blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus, some feminist theologians blame Jews for the death of the goddess and the introduction of patriarchy.

Another popular claim is that Jesus was a feminist, liberating women from Judaism's patriarchy and establishing an egalitarian Christianity. His liberation of women, however, was foiled by the patriarchal convictions of his earliest followers, who were Jews imbued with Judaism's sexism. Again, Jews and Judaism are blamed for the sexism of Western civilization.

This particular form of Christian feminist anti-Judaism seeks an explanation for Christianity's sexism by blaming it on the Jews. The statements and actions attributed to Jesus in the gospels are contrasted with a very negative picture of first-century Palestinian Jewish mores regarding women. In this case, too, the anti-Jewish stereotypes are in no way based on the actual historical evidence. These Christian feminists draw invariably from much later Talmudic sources, composed several centuries after the Gospels by rabbis living in Babylonia, in order to draw a contrast to the Gospel stories. The Talmudic sources, in fact, do present a predominantly patriarchal picture, with limited scope for women's influence and power. But the Talmud does not necessarily reflect the situation of Jesus's own lifetime, any more than the later misogyny of the church Fathers can be placed in the mouth of



Jesus. The more appropriate evidence from first-century Palestine indicates that women served as synagogue leaders and maintained positions of social and financial importance, suggesting that Jesus' behavior was no different from that of other Jews in his day. Indeed, the very act of trying to draw a contrast between Jesus and Judaism is absurd, given the multiple Judaisms that flourished during his lifetime, and the fact that he himself was a Jew, and all that he preached was an expression of Judaism. The egalitarian impulses reflected in the Gospels are as much a source for Jewish women's history as they are a theological mandate for Christian women.

Finally, the most problematic example of feminist anti-Judaism is found in writings that depict Judaism as a misogynist, militaristic, violent religion, which is contrasted to the allegedly pacifistic, feminist teachings of Jesus. In the most egregious example of feminist anti-semitism, the German Protestant feminist theologian Christa Mulack has drawn an analogy between Nazism and Judaism, suggesting that just as the Nazis obeyed the commands of Hitler, the Jews obey the commandments of God. Both, she concludes, are moralities of obedience to orders, in contrast to Christian and feminist ethics of compassion and responsibility.

A sizable body of literature has developed in recent years to refute the anti-Judaism found in some Christian feminism, and the effect has been significant in heightening awareness of the problem. While the excesses of some feminists demand specific refutations, they should not diminish the valuable work of other feminists. On the contrary, the analyses of sexism in other religions often provide valuable perceptions that may be applied to Judaism. For example, the remarkable insights of Mary Daly into the nature of Christianity's sexism were instrumental in shaping Jewish feminism.

### Inclusive language

The issue of religious language, particularly the language used to describe God, has aroused intense controversy. Suggestions that God be addressed as "she" as well as "he" are met with claims that female language would violate the gender-neutrality of Judaism's God. At a conference debate over gender-inclusive language a few years ago, one opponent of feminism insisted that changes in religious language were unnecessary, because "God is neither male nor female; He is above gender."

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*For Jewish women, feminism has come as a great promise and an enormous relief. Feminism signals the intense engagement of women in Jewish creativity.*

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In fact, gender-inclusive language is not foreign to traditional Judaism, although modern Jewish apologetics have tended to reject female imagery as signifying a departure from strict monotheism. Within medieval Jewish spiritual writings, for example, God's immanent presence is called *Shekhinah*, a female personification, and much of classical Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, focuses on the reunification of male and female aspects of God that will occur at the time of messianic redemption. In that way, inclusive language may not be an innovation, but a recovery of an older tradition.

In recent years efforts have been made to retranslate or rewrite the prayerbook to make its language gender-inclusive. The Conservative prayerbook has eliminated references to the congregation as if it were composed exclusively of men. In the reconstructionist prayerbook refer-

ences to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are augmented with the names of the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

### New feminist rituals

Even the *mitzvot*, "prayers in the form of a deed," have been recast by feminists. In contrast to the efforts of many modern Jews to assimilate by casting off religious obligations, feminists have expanded the range of women's *mitzvot*. New feminist prayers and rituals abound for marking important moments in women's lives, including naming baby girls, celebrating childbirth, marking menarche and menopause, as well as elaborating women's participation at weddings, *bat-mitzvah* ceremonies, *Rosh Hodesh* observances and Passover Seders.

The strengthening of our position as feminists in recent years has also brought a diminution of the anger and frustration women justifiably have felt over our exclusion from so much of Jewish life. That rage had motivated some women simply to reject religion as hopelessly patriarchal. Yet it would be absurd to abandon Judaism solely for its patriarchy. While much in Jewish religious thought is biased and distorts our identity as women, we find there is a great deal that still speaks to us. Jewish spirituality, although developed in an exclusively male world, can be deeply inspiring for us.

For Jewish women, feminism has come as a great promise and an enormous relief. Feminism has infused women with a new sense of opportunity, and has brought the talents and insights of women to positions of leadership. Most important, feminism signals the intense engagement of women in Jewish creativity. Jewish feminism began as women felt left out of Jewish life; it is continuing as women determine they have something to contribute. In the future, we shall see how Judaism itself is transformed by their participation.

**TW**



# Justice struggles and Judaism

by Lisa Gayle

My parents joined a synagogue when I was 11. I was at least two years behind in Hebrew when my teacher called on me to read what I now recognize as the basic beginning to Jewish prayer. I struggled over the first two words, my finger dragging along the page from right to left as I worked to read each consonant and the vowel below it. *Baruch atah*, “Blessed art Thou.” The stumpy-looking third word looked easy, but when I tried to pronounce it, my jaws contorted and sound stuck in my throat. My teacher interrupted sternly, “Always, when you see this word, say *Adonai*.”

*Adonai* is translated as Lord. The Hebrew letters read something like Yahweh, but Jews do not speak the Name of God. There is a deep and continuing tradition of Divine presence and inspiration in Judaism, but God is purposely abstract. A good Jew performs *mitzvot* (good deeds). Faith is not our defining piece.

In Sunday school, I learned Jewish songs, dances, ethics, history and Hebrew, but never others’ ideas of God. This was the 1950s and 1960s. Jews were coming to terms with the Holocaust when God didn’t save us, and the State of Israel, so dependent upon the action of people. This was also post-war America that believed in Technology, Progress and Anti-Communism, which had a strong dose of anti-semitism.

## Motivated by ethics

I know Christians who are motivated to

work for social justice through a personal, faith-based relationship with Jesus, or through modeling themselves after Jesus. The Jews I know are most often motivated by a sense of what is right and wrong, a broadly drawn sense of community, and obligation — joked about as guilt.

Toba Spitzer, of Newton, Mass., became a rabbi to do social justice work, in part because she was disturbed by the lack of a spiritual core in the secular Left.

“The split between spirituality and social justice is a modern one,” she says. “I don’t think ancient Jews would even understand that split. The point of Judaism is to sanctify every single aspect of your life. You say a blessing before you eat and after you go to the bathroom. The laws for how you slaughter an animal are right up there with the laws of giving *tsedakah*, with the laws of having to take care of poor people. In Biblical and Rabbinical Judaism there is no way to separate the just treatment of people and the environment with religious practice.”

Spitzer sees three fundamental principles running through Judaism, from Biblical times, through Rabbinical Judaism, to the present. First, from Genesis is the notion that every human being is created in the image of God. The rules indicate that in giving, the main concern is the dignity of the person who needs.

Second, in Exodus, the Jewish people standing together at Sinai entered into a covenant with God that also implies obligations to the community. Ritual and

ethical rules are listed side by side. You don’t steal or kill. *Shabbat*, a weekly day of spiritual renewal, has social justice implications. We don’t create for the sake of economic growth. *Shabbat* is a constant reminder that there is something bigger than you that says stop.

Third, in Leviticus is the idea that the land, the source of prosperity, belongs to God. People are to take care of the land. There are very particular rules about tithing, giving away a portion of the produce and letting the land rest.

A society based on these principles would be very different, Spitzer observes. Modern Orthodox Jews apply these principles within their community. They visit the sick, they comfort the grieving. These are obligations. Outside of what they consider their community, they may do little, but they do a good job of taking care of their own.

Pearl Marcus, a friend of my parents, tells this story about Jewish life on the lower east side of New York 70 years ago: At *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, she would accompany her grandfather on visits that had both ritual and social content. Her grandfather would go to the butcher, the tailor, all the people with whom he carried on the business of daily life. At each stop he would ask if he

*I am finding out that Judaism has a depth, beauty and mystical side that is now in process of once again becoming fused with the struggle for social justice.*

owed anything. Usually he didn’t, but if he did, he’d pay. Then he would ask forgiveness for anything he might have done to offend the person. They would forgive

each other, drink a shot of schnapps, and he, with little Pearl in tow, would go on to the next store.

The entire community engaged in this period of forgiveness and renewal, a prac-

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tice carried over from Eastern Europe. It helped the community that was often severely stressed by the limits placed on Jews from the outside and it helped individuals prepare for forgiveness and renewal in the eyes of God.

Fundamental Jewish values were passed on to me through my family. The language was neither religious, nor political, but the ideas that each person deserves to live with dignity, that we have obligations to contribute to the community, and that we work only for what we need underlined my parents' approach to the world. It's no accident that the Yiddish word *mensch*, close to the German word for man, connotes a kind, decent person.

### **Jewish political activism**

Movements for social change in the 20th century U.S. and in Europe before the Holocaust were disproportionately Jewish, although these activists rarely made a point that they were Jews. Even so, the backlash against communists and socialists was often anti-semitic — think of the deaths of the Rosenbergs, the purges in Hollywood, the activities of HUAC. In my own family, my great aunt and uncle were fined with 300 others when the N.Y.C. government smashed anti-racist union organizing efforts in the early 1950s. Black-Jewish relations in New York would be very different if the vision of these Jewish and black teachers had succeeded. With their removal, narrow union politics prevailed.

I learned the same lesson again when their son, an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War and contributor to the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) Port Huron Statement, was beaten and left for dead by a Right-winger.

I visited my grandfather for the last time in 1970. I schlepped my guitar from Boston to Florida. He was dazed from a weak heart and lots of medications. The mask of Parkinson's Disease made his

emotions impossible to read, but when I sang Phil Ochs's anti-war song "I Ain't A-Marchin' Any More," his face lit up and he applauded loudly.

My grandfather had been an IWW (International Workers of the World) organizer. He worked from the time he was a young boy. Finishing *Les Miserables* in the street car coming home from work, he wept. By the time he was 11, he had left school, but seized an education in the milieu of progressive workers and intellectuals who organized and argued in the coffee houses and factories around New York City. He refused to fight in World War I and hid from the draft in the woods of upstate New York. He was an atheist, but a Jewish atheist, and Phil Ochs helped me let my grandfather know that a Jewish tradition had been passed on.

### **Becoming a radical**

The feminist movement brought out the radical in me and introduced me to Lesbian and gay liberation. From there it was a short bridge to embracing the liberation struggles of people of color. Nothing short of a total revamping of society could possibly make the world just. No rulers give up their power without a fight. I became a revolutionary.

From 1975 until its dissolution in 1988, I belonged to the Revolutionary Socialist League. What attracted me to the RSL was its vision of a just world that bordered on spiritual. We valued all oppressed, each group having a unique view of liberation that formed an essential piece of a truly free world. We took our vision absolutely seriously, for example, emphasizing gay liberation in the auto plants, steel mills and garment factories where many of us worked.

We believed that the liberation of workers and other groups oppressed under capitalism could happen only when those people were controlling the process. That led us to reject the tenets of Marxism one at a time: How could Stalin's

Soviet Union be a worker state if the workers didn't control it? How could Lenin's and Trotsky's Communist Party carry out the dictatorship of the proletariat if they were repressing the proletariat in order to hold on to state power? With so many righteous viewpoints, how could there be one Truth?

### **What did it mean to be Jewish?**

For much of that time, I struggled with my Jewishness and spirituality. I have a difficult time with Israel. Holocaust survivors needed a safe place to go. At the same time, the Nazis, the Russians, and the U.S. anti-communists had wiped out the progressive Jewish leadership. The Jews who took leadership in forming Israel were those willing to make an imperialist arrangement in the Middle East. The dynamic is similar to the evolution of the N.Y.C. teachers union. When capitalism smashes visionary movements, people opt for survival. Still I am saddened when other oppressed peoples react to Israel with anti-semitism. Ironically, some parts of the Palestinian movement have worked hard to distinguish between the Jewish people and ardent Zionism. I still am deeply saddened as I try to untangle anti-semitism from class- and race-based conflicts.

While in the RSL, I meditated daily. We held Passover Seders. Occasionally, on a Friday night, when I'd find myself alone with a roasted chicken and a bottle of wine, I'd take out my candlesticks and say the blessings.

### **Uniting the political and the religious**

In 1983, I was diagnosed with a malignant tumor in my hip. The political me began to read, write and think about capitalism, its relationship to cancer and environmental destruction. At the same time, cancer is a personal event that shoved me up against death, insanity, birth and possibility. As I turned inward to focus on healing, I was often touched, sometimes shaken, by experiences that were dis-



tinctly non-material. I wound up holding two sets of beliefs, a revolutionary, materialist philosophy that seemed just, but exhausting to sustain, and a spirituality that was becoming mystical.

I felt uncomfortable talking about my beliefs with anyone. They were intensely personal. And then I became a parent. One of Jacob's early questions was "What's God?" Suddenly my visits to various synagogues during *Yom Kippur* and saying *Kaddish* for my father were far too little. I needed words. I needed structure. I needed a religious framework for my son.

Jacob was born in Guatemala. He is part Native American and, as a convert, 100 percent Jewish. Assisted by elders, we opened ourselves to Native American traditions. We do social justice work in support of Guatemalan Indians returning to their land after the genocide of the 1980s. But I have come to understand that Judaism is the only spiritual belief system I can authentically pass on. At the same time, I am finding that Judaism has a depth, beauty and mystical side that is once again becoming fused with the struggle for social justice.

### Jewish Renewal

At the center of this fusion is the movement for Jewish Renewal.

Arthur Waskow, a rabbi in Philadelphia who was once a secular social activist, says that Jewish Renewal draws on Jewish mystical teachings that understand the Divine as embodied as well as present in the teachings of the prophets and the rabbis. Jewish Renewal infuses ancient wisdom with the insights of contemporary ecology, feminism and participatory democracy. There is respect for, and often learning from, other spiritual paths, he adds.

A component of Jewish Renewal is that people seek to heal the earth and society. Kosher — a way of infusing food preparation with Divinity by humanely slaughtering animals and keeping people healthy — has been expanded to Eco-

whom this was the first burst of a light-filled Judaism that is at the same time spiritually passionate, Torah-informed and *Tikkun Olam*-committed. A Kabbalistic Seder was held as well as civil disobedience.

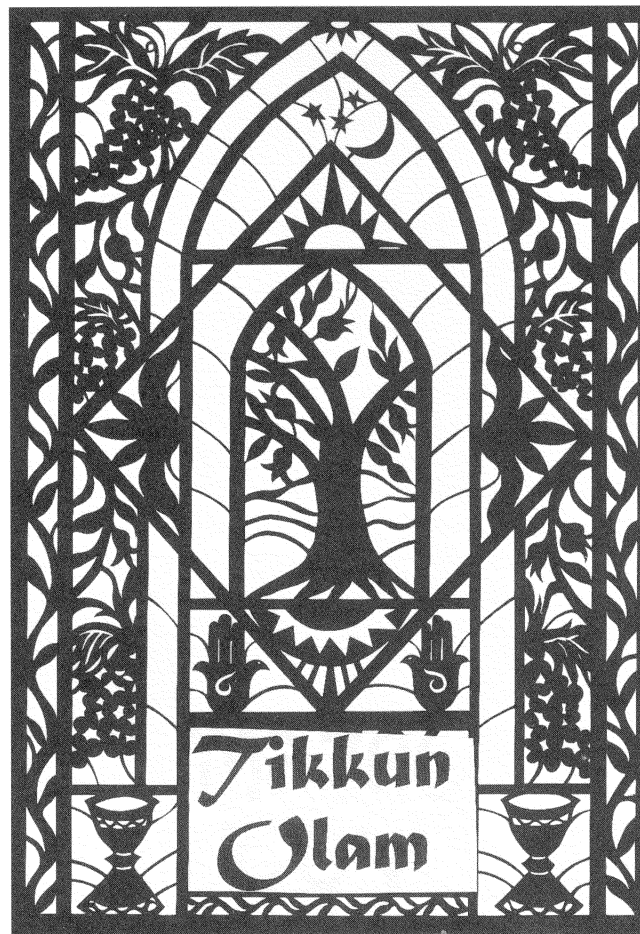
"All this was treated as Torah," says Waskow, "the aiming toward Divine wisdom that comes through our own process of making holy our own approaches to biology, ecology, law, and social change, as much as it comes from quoting words of Torah from previous generations." Jewish Renewal is influencing all aspects of Jewish life.

"The process is going on in Jewish music, liturgy, midrash, education, politics, in synagogues and *havarot*, in 'secular' or communal settings and even in ashrams and on Broadway," says Waskow.

"There are literally tens of thousands of people now living the kinds of Jewish life-practice that only a few dozen people were living just 25 years ago."

Waskow likens these tens of thousands to seedbeds. With Judaism's just traditions, still alive even in secular Jews, the soil for Jewish Renewal is fertile.

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*Tikkun Olam*, papercut by Judith Hankin

kosher, practices to heal the wounded earth. There are efforts toward mutual respect between Jewish people and other peoples and paths, in the world at large and in Israel.

At the most recent festival of *Tu B'Shvat*, the holiday marking the New Year of Trees, 250 Jews gathered to honor the Redwood forest and to resist Pacific Lumber Company's logging. Waskow describes the 250 participants as experienced rabbis, Hillel students and teens for

### Resources

Jewish Renewal can be explored by reading Arthur Waskow's works, Zalman Schacter-Shalomi's *Paradigm Shift* and *From Aging to Sage-ing*, Michael Lerner's *Jewish Renewal*, Roger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus*, Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai*, Marge Piercy's *He She and It*, and Judy Petsonk's *Taking Judaism Personally*.



# Converting to Judaism

by Kimberly Conwell

I did not start my journey to conversion on purpose. I was an active member of my church, attending services and Bible studies regularly, serving on many committees. I even took a job there. The church has a million-dollar service agency and I became the bookkeeper. But I was always restless, not with the local church itself which I still love, but with the church in its larger sense.

I felt compelled to seek out the roots of Christian liturgy and theology, while simultaneously exploring other religious traditions. My local librarian finally asked if I was pursuing a theology degree. The deeper I went, however, the less satisfied I was. I became a great debater, subjecting my friends and pastors to hours of questions digging at inconsistencies.

I was often angry with God. I felt God was driving me towards something I could not identify. God was relentless and I was tired of it.

Finally, I reached a point when I had to stop attending services. I spent two years in private study and reflection. Often I wished I could be secular and leave the work of religious ideas alone. A simple moral life (to the best of my abilities) seemed well enough, but I was driven.

Time and again, I found myself drawn to religious writings and teachings and I immersed myself in them. I spent a few months at the Zen Center. I attended neopagan goddess events. And I kept read-

ing, particularly within Buddhism and Judaism, yet I knew that any one religion could demand more than a lifetime of study. No matter how attractive the idea was of taking bits and pieces of various religions and cobbling them together into some sort of practice, I knew I would never achieve any kind of depth that way. And I desperately wanted the deeps. I decided to concentrate on the Judeo-Christian tradition. (Like most Christians, I did not realize how distinct the two traditions are.)

I returned to church with a renewed devotion to God and spiritual life.

I found a kind of peace with the Christian service, but often felt that hymns or prayers referred to aspects of Christian theology in which I no longer believed. At the same time, I was immersing myself in Jewish writings and teaching myself Hebrew, reasoning that the only way for me to understand Jesus was to be able to understand his people and their Scriptures, and that the only way I could, in conscience, remain a Christian was to come to terms with who Jesus was. I had also read literary criticisms of the Hebrew scriptures which made me long to be able to read the original.

Although studying Jewish texts never reconciled me to the Christian Jesus, I did fall in love with the texts themselves.

I began to realize that I would not be able to complete my journey until I had visited a synagogue. My partner, a non-

practicing Jew, agreed to go with me to a local Reform Temple. I was excited and afraid. When the ark was opened, I almost missed it. I had been trying desperately to keep my place in the prayerbook. Then I looked up as the Rabbi lifted the Torah. I felt like Isaiah in the temple. A feeling of awe and mystery washed over me. My Hebrew has gotten better since then, but the thrill of watching the Torah, wrapped in brocade and crowned, being carried by the rabbi through the congregation has never left. I was hooked.

Converting to Judaism is not something invited by designated greeters at coffee hour. In fact, when a proselyte approaches a rabbi with the desire to convert, the rabbi is required to ask, "Why?!" and then to list the difficulties and persecutions Jews face.

I decided to take it slow and live a Jewish lifestyle for a year before making any decisions. At least I told myself that I was keeping my options open, but in my heart I knew that I had found a home. Over the course of that year, I discovered a deeper dimension of myself than I knew existed. For the first time, I began to understand the meaning of concepts like discipline, ritual, good deeds. I found in

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Judaism a delightful playground between authority and autonomy. Finally, I went to the rabbi and asked to convert. As Talmud instructs, he explained the difficulties inherent in such a choice. Even knowing that he was

required to say this, it threw me, but I couldn't go back. When I came up out of the *Mikvah* (ritual bath) and was officially a Jew, I was both laughing and crying, filled with joy. The days since have felt increasingly normal, but the

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underlying joy is solid. I'm still quick to question, but the framework is right.

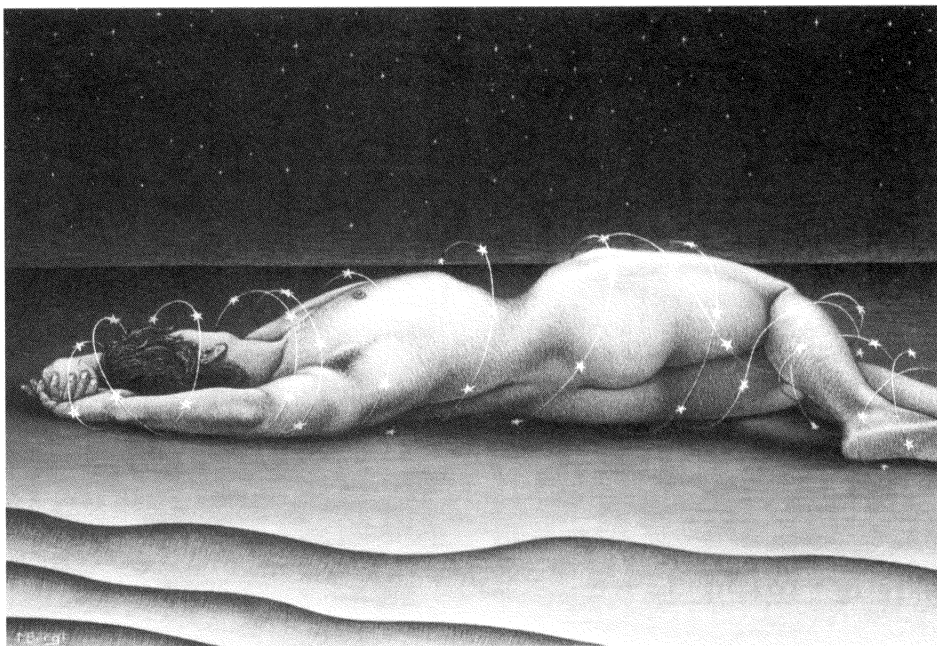
Among the things I consider, a few are worth mentioning:

- The first is that within Jewish-Christian discourse, we often fail to understand each other. Christians especially tend to think that because we share certain Scriptures and talk about them using the same words, we have the same meanings attached to those words. Often there's a slight tilt on the interpretation.
- The basic understanding of human nature differs. In Christian theology, Jesus — the divine child of God — died for the sins of humanity. This implies that human beings are bad enough for this to have been necessary. Jews never had to deal with the death of divinity. Within Judaism, there is a balance. The *yetzer hara*, the inclination toward evil, and the *yetzer hatov*, the inclination toward good, are both found within individuals. The individual's task is to nourish the inclination for good and to focus the inclination to evil into productive pursuits. For the Jew, evil is less permanent and less irredeemable than it is for the Christian.
- Sex is viewed very differently — sex is a good thing! You are required to have sex. I say that the Talmud teaches that both partners are to enjoy it, but since the Talmud was written for men, it actually says that your wife must enjoy it. Having sex is considered a *mitzva*. Having sex on the Sabbath is a double *mitzva*.
- There are differences, too, in understandings of the personal and the communal. Both religions do both pieces, but in Christianity there's more emphasis on a personal relationship with God and personal salvation — the communal follows. In Judaism, the primary relationship is between the community and God — the individual fits into that relationship. It's a different slant.

This journey through conversion has

given me a framework around which to grow. Often I imagine Judaism as the

trellis and myself as the rosebush. I find new possibilities opening up daily. **TW**



*Caught in a dream* by Michael Bergt

## Remembering Ben Linder 10 years later

On April 28, 1987 Benjamin Linder, a mechanical engineer working as a volunteer in northern Nicaragua, was assassinated by a squad of *Contras*, anti-revolutionaries sponsored by the Reagan administration. Two Nicaraguan workers, Sergio Fernandez and Pablo Rosales, were murdered in the same assault.

Linder, 27, had come to Nicaragua in August, 1983. An accomplished juggler and unicyclist, he loved to entertain children in the villages where his work for the Nicaraguan Energy Institute brought him. His murder came by a creek, where he was making preparatory measurements for a small hydroelectric plant. The *Contras* immobilized him with hand grenades and then shot him in the head.

"Some critics will go out of their way to characterize Ben as a starry-

eyed idealist who saw Central America as a stage for acting out repressed desires for social change back home," Tom Kruse, one of Linder's close friends and fellow volunteers, recently observed. "But Ben was hardly ungrounded. He witnessed official arrogance and indolence, yet he also recognized that the 1979 revolution had created real spaces of empowerment and opportunity unparalleled in Central American history."

Linder was a member of the New Jewish Agenda, an organization of progressive Jews attempting to resist a "neoconservative" trend in the Jewish community. The latter's leading partisans included Elliot Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State in the Reagan administration — a prominent architect of the *Contra* war.

— David Finkel

# 80 bishops pressure pension fund to intervene in labor dispute

by Julie A. Wortman

**L**os Angeles Bishop Frederick H. Borsch is spearheading a move by 80 Episcopal Church bishops, including presiding bishop-elect Frank T. Griswold, to call upon the Church Pension Fund (CPF) to use its influence with one of its asset managers on behalf of a Washington, D.C., janitors' union.

The bishops' July 18 request is the second CPF has received in recent months. The first came from the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice (ENEJ) last April. In late May, CPF rejected ENEJ's request, citing "negligible" influence in the matter. In addition, CPF senior vice president and general counsel John Geer told ENEJ president John Hooper that, owing to "the nature of the Fund" and the large size of its investment portfolio, the Fund has chosen "to limit its corporate activities to voting in favor of shareholder resolutions on social topics, with an occasional letter to management explaining the nature of our vote."

As this issue went to press CPF had not yet formally responded to the 80 bishops' plea that CPF take a more active role in this particular case.

At issue is the eight-year struggle of Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, Local 82 (SEIU) to organize janitors who clean commercial office buildings in an effort to win them basic job rights. Carr Real Estate Services (CRES) is a business that hires only non-union

cleaning contractors and provides all the janitorial labor for its parent company, CarrAmerica, the largest private building owner in Washington, D.C. One of the contractors hired by CRES has been found guilty of several labor law violations. Likewise, CRES and CarrAmerica have attempted to discourage janitors from unionizing by denying the unions access to CarrAmerica buildings (in defiance of a court order) and by photographing those who attend after-work, off-site union meetings. The National Labor Relations Board has issued a complaint about some of these actions.

Bill Ragen, a SEIU organizer, says that SEIU believes the Church Pension Fund could help the union persuade CarrAmerica to use only contractors that "pay fair wages, comply with federal labor laws and wage and hour laws and treat their employees with dignity and respect." The reason, according to SEIU's Julie Gozan, is that some of CPF's considerable assets are invested with the advice of Security Capital Group, which owns 40

percent of CarrAmerica through a subsidiary, the Luxembourg-based Security Capital U.S. Realty. CPF is also reportedly a U.S. Realty shareholder.

The bishops are asking that CPF sit down with union leaders and hear their concerns with an eye to possibly influencing "the position of Security Capital Group with respect to CarrAmerica's apparently anti-union policy," a policy that facilitates "poverty wages with few, if any, benefits."

CPF operates, as its letterhead declares, "In the Service of the Episcopal Church," providing pension benefits for Episcopal Church clergy and lay employees. With over \$3 billion in total assets, CPF follows DuPont and Eastman Kodak as one of the largest employee benefit funds in the country, a distinction, the bishops noted, that "carries with it a special social responsibility."

"One of the issues that we constantly need to work on in this country is support and care for our families whose income leaves them below the poverty line and without basic benefits, especially health benefits," said Los Angeles' Borsch in commenting on his decision to press this matter with CPF.

"I and many of the other bishops feel that the church and church agencies should do all that we can to support this basic fairness."

## Lutherans jilt Episcopalians

By only six votes, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), meeting in a churchwide assembly on August 18, voted down a concordat providing full communion between the two denominations. A two-thirds majority was needed to pass the measure. The Episcopal Church's General Convention had approved the concordat a month earlier by an overwhelmingly positive vote.

Most observers believe that Lutherans opposing the concordat did so largely because of its requirement that ELCA bishops be incorporated into the historic episcopate. Lutheran bishops

are currently elected to six-year terms, after which they return to being pastors. Under the concordat they would have been elected bishops for life, even if they only served a limited term in the position. Episcopal bishops would have had to help "install" each new Lutheran bishop to ensure their inclusion in the apostolic succession.

In other action, over 81 percent of the Lutheran assembly participants voted to approve full communion with three Reformed churches — the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ.

— based on an ENS report

**Julie A. Wortman** is co-editor/publisher of *The Witness*.





# Continuing the 'dialogue' on human sexuality: an untouched universe of difference

by Jennifer Phillips

**T**he church has hardly begun to talk about the theological dimensions of the complex arena of human sexuality. Debates about whether gay and lesbian Christians comprise new categories of potentially holy and Christian life divert us from the larger issue of how all persons as fully sexual and spiritual beings may live lives lifted toward God.

Eight years as a hospital chaplain and eight more as rector in two highly inclusive urban parishes have convinced me that human sexuality is far more complex and various than I once could have imagined. Like most Christian children, I was raised with stories from Genesis and Noah that suggested that the world of creatures was divided into two tidy categories of male and female that paired easily one with the other.

I picked up a *New York Times Magazine* one Sunday in 1969 and read of the plight of Olympic women athletes who had been denied the right to compete since testing had revealed that they had an extra Y chromosome (XXY combination) and therefore were not "genetic females." "But I'm a woman! I have always been a woman," was the pained cry of one. I began to do research and quickly came across the phenomenon of XYY men, who at that time were being studied for suspected tendencies toward violent behavior. My world of neat dualities began to crumble.

In the 1980s I worked in a major medical center where I heard the stories of dozens of human beings in time of medical crisis whose lives did not fit the categories. I remember a young man dying of cancer whom I visited during repeated hospitalizations over two years until his

death. "I grew up in a male body knowing I was female," he told me. "My father whipped me for putting on lipstick when I was nine. For years I secretly believed I wasn't a real person — that I was some kind of awful mistake. I had to sneak into a medical library to finally read about myself, to find out who I am ... and find out I wasn't the only one. I chose not to have transgender surgery. I don't often cross dress any more — it just doesn't seem that important. I married my best friend who is a woman and she loves me as a woman in a man's body. Her love saved my life and gave me faith for the first time that maybe God had made me." I remember his voice after 20 years, transparent with trust.

Since then I have listened to people born with no, or both male and female, or ambiguous genitals. I have heard those who lost their genitals traumatically or iatrogenically, and those who went through the long difficult process of transsexual surgery.

I have sat with those whose sex was altered by hormone treatments, those who experienced themselves as trapped in a wrong-sexed body, and those who have shifted gender by dress and hormones with no desire to alter their overall physiology.

I have counseled those who have lived for a time as gay and then fallen in love with someone of the opposite sex and made good passionate marriages. I have listened to far too many gay and lesbian people who married out of desperation, fear or at the urging of clergy in order to try to change their erotic feelings into what they were not. I've met those who feel clear they have chosen from among real alternatives for their orientation and identity, others who felt no choice from earliest childhood. I have sent parishioners off to try celibate vocations in religious orders.

I have listened to many, many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight and gay transvestite people and their loved ones — often under those pressured circumstances of illness where vulnerabilities and souls are shared, confessions made, and pretenses dropped. And I tell you, the sex and gender of human beings is more marvelous, poignantly challenging, and various than most people imagine! Most of the people I met were trying valiantly to craft humane intimate relationships of integrity. Few had given up on the possibility of a whole life, on the possibility of being loved by another human being.

Faced with lives that departed from societal norms, each of these people, too, suffered much and struggled mightily to sort out where they had come from, how they became who they were, and to what eternal dimension — what God — they belonged. In the 1980s virtually none of them had found significant help from clergy or religious organizations. I like to believe this is changing.

The conversations we are having in the church so far hardly even touch on this universe of difference which derives from the mysterious mind and intention of God. We can choose to believe God constructs creation sloppily with many mistakes, that these lives are somehow perversions of human being, or we can investigate the deeper mystery that God has far more in mind than we find comfortable or easy to organize in our minds — so much that reverence and wonder are our necessary response.

Our need for political identities and debates in order to manage our anxiety and confusion often blinds us to the world as it is, in its hungering for God and its most tender need for compassion, and simply to be seen and heard.

I believe God desires us to pay attention in order to know something more than we would otherwise know of the Holy One. The church must be a place where our categories cease, where no life-testimonies are denied, where love seeks the truth.

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Jennifer Phillips is rector of Trinity Parish, St. Louis.

## Bishop to chair Colorado commission on same-sex relationships

The bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado, William J. Winterrowd, has been named chair of the state's newly formed Commission on the Rights and Responsibilities of Same Sex Relationships. Created by Colorado's Governor Roy Romer, the commission is to "examine issues of civil law relating to same-sex relationships," especially the rights and benefits, both legal and economic, that persons in long-term committed relationships ought to be accorded.

Romer announced the Winterrowd appointment following his veto of the anti-gay marriage bill passed by the Colorado legislature in June. He vetoed the bill, he said, because "it became clear to me that, regardless of how benign the wording, this bill is fundamentally negative and

divisive," doing little to "protect marriage" and much to "target gay and lesbian people and to exclude and stigmatize this group in our society."

Romer said he hoped the commission will provide a forum for "thoughtful and thorough debate which we have not yet had." Among issues which need review, he said, were "estate, property, inheritance, health care and other topics."

Winterrowd, who has been diocesan bishop in Colorado since 1991, said he had favored the governor's veto. "The commission is not to debate or in any way consider homosexual marriage," he stressed, "but I think there is a justice issue that we can look at. I hope we can defuse the issue for people — I hope we can get away from emotions and ideology and promote fairness."

Winterrowd said he thought the governor saw him as a "mainline centrist" who could bring "the values the church represents" — and not just the perspective of the Religious Right — to bear on the debate over how to respect the dignity and rights of gay and lesbian persons living in committed, faithful relationships.

"Some people think that being a centrist means you want to straddle a fence, but I think 'centrist' is a dynamic perspective when people are so deeply divided on an issue."

In terms of the church's stand on homosexuality, Winterrowd said he does not support ordination for homosexual persons, but at this past General Convention he did vote in favor of allowing the Church Pension Group to offer medical insurance for domestic partners.

The new commission is due to produce a set of recommendations within the next six to nine months. — Julie A. Wortman

## Investigators issue report on *Penthouse* allegations

Investigators seeking the truth behind allegations of sexual misconduct by clergy in the Diocese of Long Island as reported in a December 1996 *Penthouse* magazine article called "The Boys from Brazil," have issued a 22-page report both confirming and disputing the story's claims.

The report stated that there was evidence that William Lloyd Andries, during his tenure as rector of St. Gabriel's church in Brooklyn, had had sexual relations with a number of male partners, including Jairo Pereira and some parishioners, one of whom might have been a minor. Andries also had "gathered around himself a number of men who were either homosexual or bisexual themselves or, at least tolerant of his lifestyle," the report said. However, the story's claims that Andries and his friends had engaged in sexual rituals and orgies in the church and while wearing church

vestments seemed to be without foundation.

The report concluded by noting that the investigators could not find any evidence "that those who knew of Andries' sexual behavior, including those who had authority over him, reprimanded him or even brought the inappropriateness of it to his attention," a finding that distressed Long Island's bishop, Orris G. Walker, Jr.

"I have no personal knowledge of any sexual involvement by then Father Andries with any member of his congregation, and certainly not with any person who was a minor," Walker said. "I am distressed that this report suggests that Mr. Andries may have engaged in sex with a minor, a criminal act, based upon a mere allegation. I would have hoped that a charge of this nature would have been based upon substantial proof." — based on an ENS report

## Canada now has two women bishops

In September Ann E. Tottenham was consecrated suffragan bishop of Toronto, making her Canada's second woman bishop. Toronto also elected Canada's first woman bishop, Victoria Matthews, in 1993. Matthews left Toronto following her election to the post of diocesan bishop of Edmonton earlier this year.

Tottenham, 56, was ordained to the priesthood in 1983. She had been headmistress of Toronto's Bishop Strachan School for 14 years before becoming a parish priest in 1995. She will be area bishop of the Credit Valley, located on the western side of the diocese.

### Jerusalem jottings

William Spofford, retired bishop of Eastern Oregon, has written a memoir called *Pilgrim In Transition: Jerusalem Jottings, Galilee Gleanings and Sinai Solitudes*. It is available for \$10 a copy (\$2 s/h) by writing him at 8029 S.E. 29th, Portland, OR 97202.



# Humanistic Judaism

by David Finkel

**Celebration. A Ceremonial and Philosophic Guide for Humanists and Humanistic Jews, by Sherwin T. Wine. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988; 1-800-421-0351.**

**H**umanistic Judaism represents an organized movement for a way of being Jewish, of practicing *Judaism Beyond God* (the title of another of Sherwin Wine's books), in a modern society where secular liberal values have become well established — yet remain always under attack. Too few Jews and non-Jews alike recognize that this kind of Judaism exists.

"Humanistic Judaism," writes Wine in this collection of readings, songs and meditations, "is a philosophy of life which has been part of the Jewish experience for over 100 years. However, it grew out of attitudes and beliefs which were part of the 'underground' of Jewish life for over 2,000 years.

"It is very distinct from Orthodox Judaism in rejecting the authority of the rabbinic tradition. It is also very distinct from the three non-Orthodox 'liberal' alternatives — Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionism — in rejecting the need for theistic language. The age of science, capitalism, and the secular revolution have so transformed Jewish life that it has become impossible, without a dogmatic arbitrariness, to maintain conviction in traditional beliefs.

"Combining humanism, a people-centered philosophy of life, and Judaism, the culture of the Jewish nation, creates humanistic Judaism. *(T)he real experience*

*of the Jewish people has humanistic significance. Jewish history, more than any other national history, testifies to the moral indifference of the universe and to the necessity of human beings to take control of their own fate"* (emphasis added).

"The moral indifference of the universe" is the key phrase here: The Cosmos doesn't care about us. Rather, human beings draw their moral convictions, their solidarity, their strength and salvation only from each other and from themselves. The rituals developed by Wine and other members of his congregation (the Birmingham Temple in suburban Detroit) and the humanistic-Jewish movement celebrate the instinct to come together for expressions of joy, grief and observances of seasons and life cycles — things that are at the actual core of human religious life for thousands of years—in ways with roots in Jewish culture and custom, yet without prayer.

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*The cosmos doesn't care about us. We draw salvation from each other and ourselves.*

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How is this possible? A representative example is recasting the most sacred prayer in Jewish tradition, "*Kol Nidre* (All Vows)," sung on the eve of Yom Kippur, which asks God to release us from any promises we make to Him—before we have actually made them. In this collection (p.416), the melody is preserved, with the words changed to:

"We affirm all promises and resolutions/ Which we have made for the sake of love."

Inasmuch as humanistic Judaism is a

philosophical and cultural rather than political movement, its adherents will be found along many points of the "Left-Right" spectrum. It does, however, actively engage in struggles for the separation of religion and state—in the United States and in Israel, too.

Humanistic Judaism is philosophically pro-Zionist, but resists the temptation to view the State of Israel in a messianic light, whether religious or secular. Israel, that is to say, is seen as a human creation and a means toward an end (Jewish national freedom), not the teleological working out of a manifest or divinely decreed destiny. The growing power of Orthodoxy and fanatical nationalism in Israel is seen as profoundly contradictory to the mission of the Zionist pioneers. (The degree to which this is historically accurate is a separate and highly complex problem.)

Thus a humanist *Haggadah* written by Wine for the Birmingham Temple's Passover seder celebrates freedom for Jews wherever they are — not the traditional "This year we are slaves here, next year we will be free in the land of Israel," or "Next year in Jerusalem."

It remains an open question whether the rituals and songs of a humanistic Judaism (or, for example, of an approximate Christian counterpart, Unitarian Universalism) can match the astonishing emotional power tapped by traditional religion. On the other hand, comparatively speaking, organized humanism is still in the process of birth. Humanistic Judaism, in any case, as an expression within a highly pluralistic modern Jewish existence, deserves wider attention. **rw**



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**David Finkel** is an editor of the Detroit-based magazine *Against the Current*.



As a Jewish feminist, Sally Frank would like to exonerate Eve, and as a lawyer, she has some strategies for doing it.

"There is the youth defense," says Frank, a law professor at Drake University Law School. "If a three-year-old throws a rock, even if it kills an infant you don't charge them, because they don't know right from wrong. How could Adam and Eve know right from wrong before they ate the fruit?"

Frank, however, prefers an approach that would lead to vindication, not merely acquittal.

"With a justification defense, you can argue that the law was not a law for all time. Maybe God's command was like telling a two-year-old not to touch an oven.

"There is *midrash* that asks, 'Why did God rest on the sabbath?' One theory is that God didn't want to finish the work of creation, but left it to humanity. How can we be God's partners if we don't know good from evil? Therefore, God *wanted* Adam and Eve eventually to eat the fruit. Eve ate the fruit so she could become God's co-worker."

Everything hinges on storytelling, explains Frank, who published her work on Eve's case in the *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*.

"There are five possible defenses with five different summations," she says. "What a lawyer does is to figure out which story to tell."

Stories are important to Frank's spiri-

*Christians need to make sure they are not trying to convert or pressure, and Jews need to learn to distinguish conversation about our views from conversion attempts.*



Sally Frank

## Defending Eve

by Marianne Arbogast

tuality as well as her profession. The stories of her faith tradition have always connected with her passion for social change.

"The demands of the prophets for justice and treating everyone well, the concern for the widow and orphan really hit home," she says.

"In college, I was active in South Africa divestment work. I once came home from a sit-in to the Passover seder. There is the reading of the 10 plagues, with the words, 'May the recitation of these plagues teach us that no nation that oppresses its people can endure.' You don't need any extra commentary to see the connection."

She recounts her rabbi's retelling of the Hanukkah story soon after the invasion of Panama. "He gave it something like this: 'The imperial power was trying to impose its will on the recalcitrant locals, who waged a guerilla war in order to

behave in the way they felt was right for themselves.' Basically, the Hanukkah story is an anti-imperialist struggle for religious freedom."

Frank grew up in New Jersey, with parents who were deeply involved in their Jewish community. She attended her first demonstration, a protest against the persecution of Soviet Jews, with her mother. By seventh grade she was active in the United Farmworkers' grape and lettuce boycott, and the following year worked for McGovern's presidential campaign.

Frank drew national attention in 1979 when she brought a sex discrimination lawsuit against Princeton University's all-male eating clubs, arguing the case herself for the first six years.

"I began as an undergraduate and finished as a law professor," she says. "It took 13 years to establish that they were public accommodations. I argued before the New Jersey appellate division in 1983,

*Witnesses,  
the quick and the dead*

Marianne Arbogast is assistant editor of *The Witness*.



during my third year in law school.”

As a law student at New York University, Frank’s non-curricular field experience also included several arrests for non-violent civil disobedience actions protesting nuclear weapons and nuclear power.

Frank clerked for a New York judge and taught at Antioch and New York Law Schools before joining the faculty at Drake in August of 1990.

Arriving in Iowa at the outset of the Gulf War, she found support in an inter-faith group of spiritually based peace activists.

“We found we had a lot in common in how we saw our different faith traditions,” she says. “In New York, my peace action came out of a more political perspective. I think, traditionally, most Jewish activists haven’t worked through Jewish groups, but many are influenced by Jewish traditions and the obligations of those traditions.”

In addition to working with the social action committee of the Reform Movement in Judaism, Frank has chaired the Iowa Program Committee of the American Friends Service Committee.

Interfaith work raises “sensitivity issues,” she acknowledges.

“Are all meetings and programs organized for Saturday? It shocks me how many things are planned for Saturday morning, when no one would think to plan them for Sunday morning.”

Sometimes Frank has pushed for a time change. At other times, she has applied the principle that “you can violate the sabbath to save a life” to activities like anti-death-penalty demonstrations.

It is particularly important to Frank to identify herself as Jewish when testifying against the death penalty, because Christians so often act as though the Hebrew scriptures militate for capital punishment, ignoring Judaic arguments for mercy.

Perceptions of proselytizing are an-

other concern. “Christians need to make sure they are not trying to convert or pressure, and Jews need to learn to distinguish conversation about our views from conversion attempts.”

Respecting the humanity in others, whether or not you agree with them, is a core value for Frank, and she struggles to understand others’ intolerance of her views. She recently won a tenure dispute with Drake, which she attributes to “sex and politics.”

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*Traditionally, most Jewish activists haven’t worked through Jewish groups, but many are influenced by Jewish traditions and the obligations of those traditions.*

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“I don’t know that they ever had a street activist on the faculty before,” she reflects. “In a small community that may be shocking.”

Frank literally wears her heart on her sleeve in the form of political buttons which are part of her daily attire. But she welcomes disagreement from her students, regarding it as “good class participation.”

She also rejects the school’s competitive teaching style, which she sees as antithetical to feminist principles.

Frank’s spirituality is based on the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam*, “repair of the world.”

“The theory is that God took up all space before creation, but had to kind of withdraw into God’s self to make room for the universe,” she explains. “There were rays of light from God, and when God pulled back, what was surrounding the rays broke, and that’s how evil got

into the world. Whenever we keep a commandment, one little piece gets glued back. Our job is to put all the pieces back together. We don’t need to succeed in doing it all ourselves, but every act we do has ultimate meaning in the cosmos.”

She applies that to keeping a kosher home, assisting a domestic violence victim, investigating police brutality.

“It’s sometimes painful to open the paper or watch the news,” she says. “There is an increase in homophobia, fear of the other, immigration and poverty. There is the high when Arafat and Rabin shake hands, then the low when Rabin is assassinated. But we have to act as if we do have hope.

“We have to define victory by very small steps,” she says, citing a Jewish legend that the world is preserved by the righteousness of 36 people in each generation.

It’s a “myth” that the 1960s are over, Frank believes.

“There are people who care working at the local level. There are health clinics, legal clinics, co-ops, but it’s not seen as a national movement.”

Returning to Eve, Frank quotes Talmudic discussion of humanity’s origins.

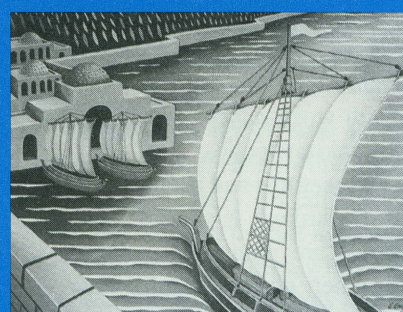
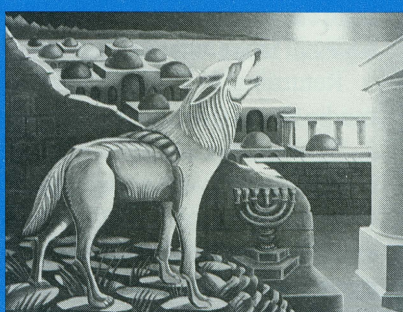
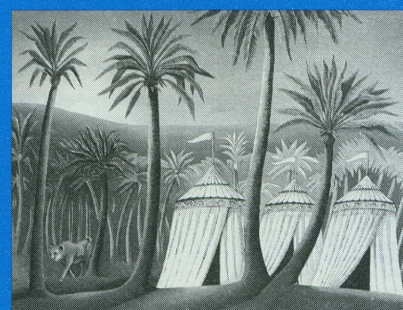
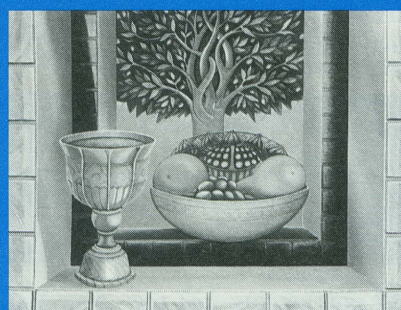
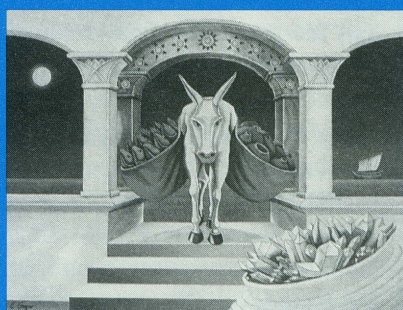
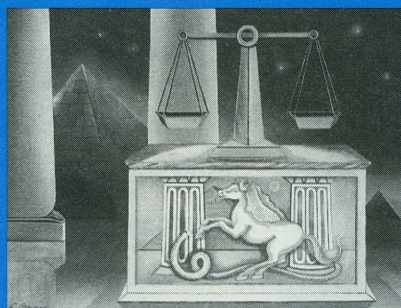
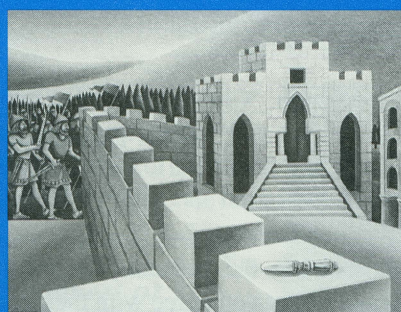
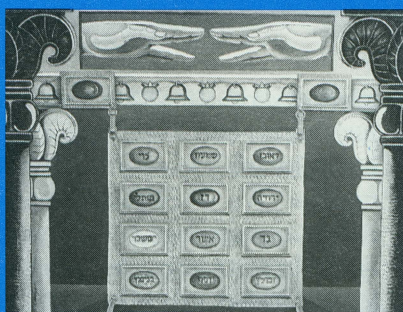
“There’s the question of why did God start humanity with a single person. One answer is that God didn’t want anyone to say, ‘My lineage is better than yours.’ But another is that anyone who saves a single life, it is as though they have saved an entire world.”

**TW**

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