

SHALOM

Jewish Peace Letter

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Now What?



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David Shulman

Israel: The Stark Truth

BENJAMIN NETANYAHU has won again. He will have no difficulty putting together a solid right-wing coalition. But the naked numbers may be deceptive. What really counts is the fact that the Israeli electorate is still dominated by hypernationalist, in some cases proto-fascist, figures. It is in no way inclined to make peace. It has given a clear mandate for policies that preclude any possibility of moving toward a settlement with the Palestinians and that will further deepen Israel's colonial venture in the Palestinian territories, probably irreversibly.

Netanyahu's shrill public statements during the last two or three days before the vote may account in part for Likud's startling margin of victory. For the first time since his Bar Ilan speech in 2009, he explicitly renounced a two-state solution and swore that no Palestinian state would come into existence

on his watch. He promised vast new building projects in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. He made it clear that Israel would make no further territorial concessions, anywhere, since any land that would be relinquished would, in his view, immediately be taken over by Muslim terrorists.

And then there was his truly astonishing, by now notorious statement on election day itself, in which he urged Jewish voters to rush to the polls because "the Arabs are voting in droves." One might have thought that those Arab voters were members of the body politic he headed as prime minister. Imagine a white American president calling on whites to vote because "blacks are voting in large numbers." If there's a choice to be made between democratic values and fierce Jewish tribalism, there's no doubt what the present and future prime minister of Israel would choose.

Mindful of Netanyahu's long record of facile mendacity, commentators on the left have tended to characterize these statements as more dubious "rhetoric"; already, under intense pressure from the US, he has waffled on the question of Palestinian statehood in comments directed at a foreign, English-speaking audience. But I think that, for once, he was actually speaking

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the truth in that last prelection weekend — a popular truth among his traditional supporters. What does this mean? On the face of it, things are not all that different today than before the election. But the now seemingly impregnable rule of the right has at least four likely consequences for the near and mid-term future.

First, the notion that there will someday be two states in historic Palestine has been savagely undermined. We have Netanyahu's word for it. If he has his way — and why shouldn't he? — Palestinians are destined for the foreseeable future to remain subject to a regime of state terror, including the remorseless loss of their lands and homes and, in many cases, their very lives; they will continue to be, as they are now, disenfranchised, without even minimal legal recourse, hemmed into small discontinuous enclaves, and deprived of elementary human rights.



Benjamin Netanyahu.

Take a mild, almost innocuous example, entirely typical of life in the territories. Last month I was with Palestinian shepherds in the south Hebron hills, at a place called Zanuta, whose historic grazing grounds have been taken over, in large part, by a settlement inhabited by a single Jewish family. Soldiers turned up with the standard order, signed by the brigade commander, declaring the area a Closed Military Zone. The order is illegal, according to a Supreme Court ruling, but the writ of the court hardly impinges on reality on the ground in south Hebron. Within minutes, three of the shepherds and an Israeli activist were arrested.

The people of Zanuta live with such arbitrary decrees on a daily basis, as they live under the constant threat of violent assault by Israeli settlers, acting with impunity. In short, these Palestinian villagers are slated for dispossession and expulsion. We are doing what we can to stop



Israel's President Reuven Rivlin (left) consulting after the 2015 election with Ayman Odeh (right), leader of Israel's Joint List alliance of four Arab political parties.

the process, but it isn't easy. The situation in the northern West Bank is considerably worse.

Second, we may see the emergence in the West Bank of a situation like that in Gaza, with Hamas or other extremist organizations assuming power. It seems ridiculous to have to write this, but in case anyone has any doubt: There is no way a privileged collective can sit forever on top of a disenfranchised, systematically victimized minority of millions. We can expect mass violent protests of one sort or another (maybe, with luck, some large-scale nonviolent protest as well). Sooner or later, the territories will probably explode, and the Palestinian Authority may be washed away. At that point Netanyahu will complain loudly that you can never trust the Arabs.

In fact, however, there is an ongoing, intimate, many-layered relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, and what one side chooses to do always has a very direct impact on the other side. More generally, if we Israelis fail to cut a deal with the Palestinian moderates, or at least to strive in earnest for an agreement, we will by our own actions bring their extremists to power. There is no dearth of examples from recent decades.

Third, Palestinians will rightly turn to the International Criminal Court in The Hague (as early as April 1, according to the official announcement) and to international forums such as the UN Security Council, where Israel may soon no longer enjoy the protection of an automatic American veto. The international boycott will intensify to a level far beyond what we have seen. It may in the end force a change, at immense cost to the cohesion of Israeli society and to the state's claim to legitimacy. In this respect, I think we are approaching the tipping point.

Fourth, and most important, the moral fiber of the country will continue to unravel. Already for years the public space has been contaminated by ugly, violent voices coming from the heart of the right-wing establishment. As Zvi Barel has cogently written in *Haaretz*, "Netanyahu has succeeded in overturning the principle that the state exists for the sake of its citizens and putting in its place the Fascist belief that the citizens exist for the state."

In accordance with that belief, there will be more hyper-nationalist, antidemocratic legislation, more deliberate and consistent attempts to undermine the authority of the courts, more rampant racism, more thugs in high office, more acts of cruelty inflicted on innocents, more attacks on moderates perceived as enemies of the state, more paranoid indoctrination in

the schools, more hate propaganda and self-righteous whining by official spokesmen, more discrimination against the Israeli-Arab population, more wanton destruction of the villages of Israeli Bedouins, more war-mongering, and quite possibly more needless war.

The danger from within — to who we are and how we live in the world — is infinitely greater than any external threat. The corruption (I am not talking about money) is already far advanced. Israel has, in effect, knowingly moved further toward a full-fledged apartheid system. Those who don't like the word can suggest another one to describe what I see each week in the territories and more and more inside the Green Line.

IS THERE ANY good news? The Joint List, a new alliance of four Arab parties, having won thirteen seats in the election, is now the third largest party in the Knesset and two seats stronger than the combined Arab parties in the outgoing Knesset. A certain tentative awakening was evident in the Arab sector during the campaign. We will have to see if it continues. The great discovery of this period was the eloquent, charming, always unruffled leader of the Joint List, Ayman Odeh. It has called for full equality for the Arab-Palestinian minority within Israel and for an end to racist discrimination and to the occupation of the West Bank. A little new energy on the left can't hurt. For the moment, it won't be enough to challenge the right-wing tide.

We have work to do. Holding on to hope is part of that work. Though Netanyahu has now won four elections, it is in his nature that he will eventually destroy himself (and probably many others along the way). In the end, the alliance between moderates and activists on both sides may turn out to be as strong, or stronger, than the unspoken blood alliance of Netanyahu with Hamas, Hezbollah, and ISIS. We will have many opportunities to test this proposition.

Justice, generosity, and empathy are not foreign to the Jewish tradition, though at times they go underground. Perhaps hope lies in a vision of all the territory west of the Jordan River as somehow more than one state but less than two, under conditions of true equality. Already there are groups within what remains of the Israeli left that are thinking creatively, and practically, along these lines. One thing is certain. The demand to fully enfranchise the Palestinians now suffering under Israeli rule will eventually prove irresistible. What happens after that, no one can say. — March 18, 2015. ✧

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Barnett Axelrad

Unrepentant

Bush policy-makers hang tough at Hofstra

LAST MARCH, academics and former policy-makers during George W. Bush's presidency gathered for a conference at Hofstra University, to provide a retrospective and preliminary assessment of the Bush II years. Many of its top officials, including George W. himself, refused to attend, deeming it a "hostile environment." This is in stark contrast to previous Hofstra presidential conferences, and it says something profound about the unpopularity of the Bush administration and its alienation from the academic community.

The most memorable exchange occurred in a plenary forum involving Porter J. Goss, a former chairman of the House Intelligence Committee who resigned in 2004 to become director of the CIA, and Amy Goodman, of *Democracy Now*. During the Q & A session, Goss criticized last December's Senate committee report on the CIA's use of torture as a cherry-picked document that consisted of a series of half-truths. Goodman responded by quoting from Senator John McCain, who said that torture "damaged American national security interests and the American reputation as a force for good in the world." Goss said he respected Senator McCain and what he had sacrificed for "our country," but that McCain may not have read the report and did not have all the facts.

Goodman also asked pointed questions of John Negroponte, a former deputy secretary of state and ambassador to Iraq, who conceded that "torture is wrong," and said he had urged caution before going into Iraq. When an audience member asked why, as ambassador, he had failed to reign in death squads allegedly supported by a colonel in the US Army, Negroponte responded by denying that the officer had backed death squads, and suggested that "war is hell." Afterwards he told the *Wall Street Journal*, "Boy, I need a stiff drink after that one ... a double martini."

Carolyn Eisenberg, a professor in Hofstra's history department, responded by stating that Bush's decisions did not consider popular attitudes at the grass roots. The Bush doctrine implied the strong trampling over the weak, and she bemoaned



August 10, 2004: Porter Goss (left) speaking with the press in Rose Garden after President George W. Bush (right) nominated him to be the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

the billions of dollars spent on war which could have been used to improve conditions domestically. Eisenberg told the audience that her career studying government records has led her to see how those making decisions in the "stuffy rooms" in Washington are cut off from the plight of ordinary people, and do not consider the human cost of waging war. Negroponte seemed to agree, shaking her hand afterwards.

THE TUESDAY evening forum brought together defenders and critics of the Bush administration including Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff for US Secretary of State Colin Powell. Wilkerson said that US officials had misled the public about the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

Anand Gopal, author of *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes* (2014), subsequently recounted how, after 9/11, his worldview was similar to two panelists who were defending the Bush record. But then he traveled to Afghanistan and lived among its people, and

BARNETT AXELRAD is a pseudonym of an observer at Hofstra University's George W. Bush Presidential Conference.

developed a far more critical view. Gopal told the story of his neighbor who was picked up by US-financed state security forces, which then extorted money from his family. After being released from captivity, he became a marked man because it was known he would pay to get out; he was kidnapped and tortured again. Gopal said the US was supporting warlords in Afghanistan who are as draconian in their attitude towards women's rights as the Taliban. While circumstances had improved in some parts of the country, in the south, where most of the fighting had taken place, there was very little progress, only bloodshed and violence from the war.

Phyllis Bennis, of the left-leaning Institute for Policy Studies, followed Gopal, and emphasized that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were illegal under international law. The US did not pursue UN Security Council approval for the invasion of Iraq, and there had been opportunities for negotiation in the hand-over of bin Laden that were not pursued. Most of the 9/11 hijackers, meanwhile, were from Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Honoring international law, Bennis said, should be a barometer for measuring US intervention, as this is how it is judged around the world.

National security issues generally dominated the Hofstra conference. The Wednesday evening plenary featured 9/11 first-responders who told their stories of the horrors of that day and heroism of their colleagues. This was important especially for students who were only five or six years old at the time to hear, though the panel supported Bush and a military response to the attacks. Another panel featuring former CIA Director Michael Hayden, and two State Department lawyers who defended Bush policies on interrogation and counterterrorism, met with objections by some audience members who wanted the panelists to engage with two legal critics. However, the two, Scott Horton, of Columbia Law School, and James P. Pfiffner, author of the book, *Power Play: The Bush Presidency and the Constitution*, were allowed to respond only after Hayden and the State Department lawyers had left the stage.

Overall, many of the talks at the conference were stimulating. Economist Dean Baker gave an excellent overview of Bush's fiscal policies, and emphasized that many in the administration tried to rewrite history by claiming the 2008 financial crash came on suddenly, when the structural problems in the economy that helped precipitate it, including the housing bubble, were known beforehand, but ignored or dismissed on the assumption that the "market will inevitably correct itself." Baker went on to criticize the financial bailout, stating that it could have been im-



May 5, 2006: President George W. Bush (right) shakes the hand of Porter Goss (center) after the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency announced his resignation. The President thanked him for his service and said of Director Goss, 'He honors the proud history of the CIA.' Looking on (left) is Ambassador John Negroponte, Director of National Intelligence.

plemented by imposing much stricter regulations and conditions which would have led to the redistribution of wealth and curbing monopolistic control of the economy by the large financial houses that were bailed out. Alas this was not to be.

University of Tulsa Professor Jeremy Kuzmarov's talk dealt with privatization of warfare during the Bush administration and its contribution to the failure of US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. He observed that democratic standards in the US have eroded as companies that profit from war increasingly finance the major political parties and shape public opinion. This analysis dovetailed with that of Ste-

phen Zunes, professor of Middle East studies at the University of San Francisco. Zunes contrasted the high-minded rhetoric of Bush administration officials about promoting democracy with its support for Ahmad Chalabi in Iraq, as well as its support of autocratic regimes, such as that of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. In response, Daniel Kurtzer, a former US ambassador to Israel, suggested that Zunes consider the strategic reasons why the US government supported autocracies like Egypt, though his defense was unconvincing to some in the audience, since one of Egypt's central strategic contributions during the Bush years was to serve as a venue to which terrorist suspects were shipped to be tortured under the rendition program.

ALL IN ALL, the conference's organizers did well in bringing together former policy-makers and academics for three days of academic debate and exchange. More topics, however, could have been covered, including Bush's environmental and drug policies, for example, which were not discussed in any depth. But the main story of the event was the absence, through no fault of the organizers, of many top Bush officials, including Bush himself. This is a sad reflection of the polarization of US society and alienation of the Republican Party from intellectual life owing to the extremism of many of its positions.

Still, the conference provided a good beginning for a historical assessment of Bush's presidency. It is imperative though to move beyond assessment, as Amy Goodman urged, and to hold Bush administration officials accountable for preemptive war, rendition, torture and the suspension of constitutional liberties, which, she argued, have unfortunately continued under Obama. Accountability is the first and most important step towards ensuring that the abuses for which the Bush administration was responsible are never again repeated. ☆

Jack Ross

Discovering American Jewry's Dissenting Tradition

THE BOOK I began work on over four years ago, a complete history of the Socialist Party of America, has at long last been released by Potomac/University of Nebraska Press. This, my second book, coming just shy of my thirtieth birthday, is the culmination of a long intellectual journey of discovery that began in my adolescence — a quintessentially Jewish journey.

My great-grandfather on my father's side emigrated at the age of fourteen, once he was old enough to be jailed for his involvement with the Jewish Socialist Bund. In New York, he became a founder of the International Jewelry Workers' Union and an unsung rank-and-filer of the Socialist Party. My mother's parents were never members of the Socialist Party, but had many friends who were, having met on the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, in Pittsburgh.

The critical point of departure for my intellectual journey was just after 9/11, as I became enamored with the libertarian polemicist Justin Raimondo and discovered that his seemingly half-crazed notion about the Trotskyist roots of neoconservatism was very much true. It turned out my father knew several of them through the Young

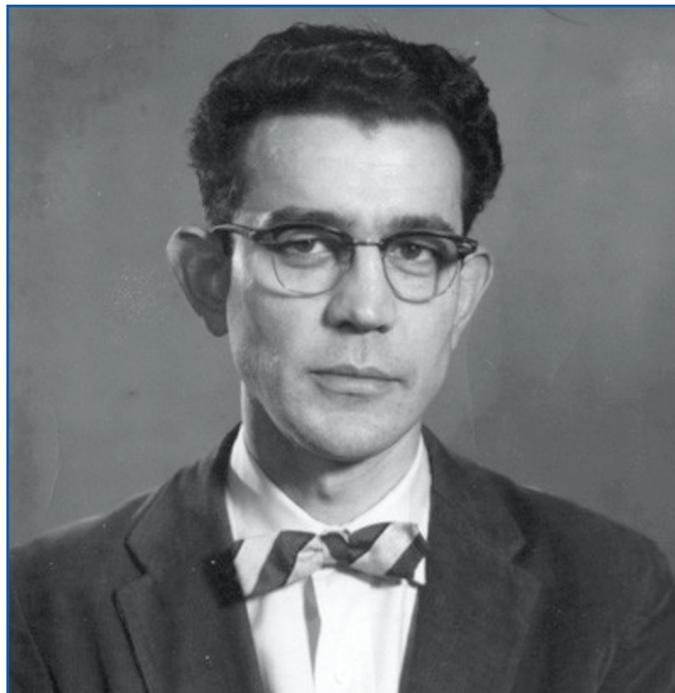
People's Socialist League. In other words, the much-storied New York Jewish intellectual tradition (which Carol Kane assured the young Alvy Singer, in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, was a wonderful cultural stereotype to be reduced to) was my birthright.

Yet I was also seized by what appeared to be its polar opposite, which was represented by the lore of the so-called "Old Right" (popularized by Raimondo among others) in the libertarian movement that was galvanized by Ron Paul in 2008 and 2012. At the same time, I also recognized how so many of the figures lionized in that narrative, such as John T. Flynn, Oswald Garrison Villard, and Harry Elmer Barnes, were really Norman Thomas Socialists. From the incomparable writings of Bill Kauffman came a more candid acknowledgment of this, and of the deep rootedness of authentic American radicalism in the old, weird America.

As a young adult I retained my awe and respect for Judaism and Jewish identity, even as I came of age in the salad days of neoconservatism. Nagging at me through the long march to the

Iraq War, and the Second Intifada and its aftermath, was the apparent discrepancy between the love of the old America and any kind of positive Jewish identity, which appeared irreconcilable to being unambiguously on the side of peace and nonintervention.

The major revelation was discovering the subject of my first book: Reform Jewish anti-Zionism, as organized in the American Council for Judaism (ACJ), whose existence had been almost



Consigned to American Jewry's 'memory hole': Rabbi Elmer Berger, of the American Council for Judaism.

JACK ROSS's books include *Rabbi Outcast: Elmer Berger and American Jewish Anti-Zionism* and *The Socialist Party of America*. His articles have appeared in *The American Conservative*, *Daily Caller*, *Tikkun* and *Mondoweiss*.

totally lost to Orwell's "memory hole," and which I had to one degree or another been looking for throughout my intellectual journey: American Jews who resisted the Zionist revolution in American Jewish identity, bound up in the sacred story of American nationalism following the Second World War. I only first learned of the existence of the Jewish Peace Fellowship in researching that book, particularly of the extraordinary figure of Rabbi Abraham Cronbach, who was a leader of both the ACJ and JPF.

The other founder of the JPF, Rabbi Isidor Hoffman, was a devoted friend and supporter of Norman Thomas and his presidential campaigns, holding Thomas in such high regard that he once allowed this Presbyterian minister, rather than a Classical Reform rabbi, to make the anti-Zionist case to the Columbia Hillel he faithfully served. Past accounts of anti-Zionism usually emphasized the differences between pacifists, Bundists, and the ACJ; or between the ACJ and Judah Magnes. Others very misleadingly portrayed the ACJ as somehow "right-wing." But what some might characterize as the drift from right to left, particularly of the ACJ's most controversial leader, Rabbi Elmer Berger, is really better understood as being from establishment to anti-establishment.

With my earlier background I was uniquely well-suited to recognize that the ACJ and its fellow travelers were really best understood as the Jewish cohort of the "Old Right" that was really more of the Left, chronicled by Bill Kauffman, which ranged from Lessing Rosenwald, the most prominent Jewish supporter of the America First Committee and an unyielding opponent of the Zionist domination of American Jewish philanthropy that created what we now know as the American Jewish establishment, to Irving Reichert, the leading Reform rabbi of San Francisco, who was an outspoken voice for labor radicalism, opposed intervention until Pearl Harbor, and was afterward no less unyielding against internment of Japanese Americans.

BUT MOST SIGNIFICANT was my discovery, completely exhumed from the archives, of the old Jewish Socialist allies of the ACJ, led by William Zukerman and his widely read *Jewish Newsletter* of the 1950s. (I recently co-authored a profile of Zukerman and his circle of supporters with Michael Kaplan, who wrote his New School senior thesis on Zukerman, for the special supplement on Open Hillel published by *Tikkun*. We hope that both that piece and the thesis can eventually be fashioned into a lengthy scholarly article.)

A large number of veterans of the Jewish labor and Socialist



The Jewish Newsletter's William Zukerman.

movements were active as supporters of the *Jewish Newsletter*: Jacob Panken, one-time Socialist elected judge and candidate for mayor of New York; J.B.S. Hardman, a leading intellectual force of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers; longtime ILGWU leader Louis Nelson, and longtime Workmen's Circle leader Nathan Chainin. Gentile supporters included such radical and pacifist eminences as Norman Thomas, Dwight Macdonald, and Roger Baldwin. Indeed, this discovery while casually perusing the Norman Thomas Papers was what reawakened in me the conviction that I must write the history of the Socialist Party.

The *Jewish Newsletter* was the galvanizing force unifying the American Council for Judaism, the Jewish Peace Fellowship, the binationalists, the Jewish Labor Bund and other Socialist survivors, and even a few right-wingers and libertarians into what I broadly define as American Jewry's dissenting tradition. What ultimately brought

these disparate factions together was that they were the Jews who loved and mourned the old America. Whatever their exact attitudes about Zionism, they could not abide an American Jewish identity bound up in the sacred story of Jewish nationalism – the Holocaust followed by literal redemption in the founding of the State of Israel – as it inevitably merged with the sacred story of American nationalism.

As the research for my history of the Socialist Party progressed, I found that contrary to conventional assumptions, the memory of ethical humanism and pacifist dissent in the 1930s was, if anything, most loyally affirmed by its Jewish supporters. In a highly poignant metaphor, it was Rabbi Isidor Hoffman who was charged with the sad duty of formally announcing and carrying out, shortly before the death of Norman Thomas in 1968, the liquidation of his activist organization, the Postwar World Council, which originated in the prewar Keep America Out of War Congress. It was Judah Magnes, in his final speech in Jerusalem pleading for reconciliation with the Arabs before fleeing for his life, who bore the prophetic witness that none of the American Old Right would have dared: "If there was one victory as a result of the last war, that was the victory of totalitarianism, even among the democracies which were once liberal."

It must be said that a major reason why the memory of this dissenting tradition was all but completely eradicated was because it was resolutely anti-Communist, and the legacy of American Communism has dominated as a "usable past" for the past generation of Jewish radicals. The legacy of this forgotten, broadly humanist, non-Communist Jewish Left, which was as far as can be from a dreary dress rehearsal for neoconservatism,

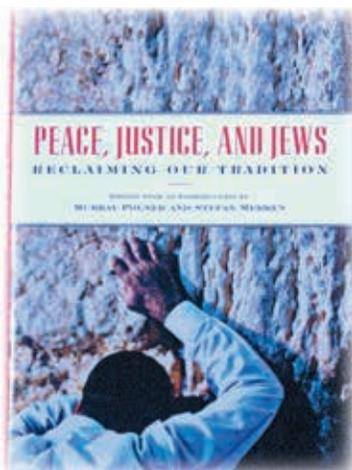
is precisely what distinguishes the Jewish Peace Fellowship on the present scene.

In researching my history of the Socialist Party, my greatest discovery of an entirely new source was the unpublished memoir of Judah Drob, which I hope at some point to publish online.¹ The son of a rabbi from Conservative Judaism's founding elite, Drob became an important leader of the Young People's Socialist League in the 1930s, crediting his conversion to the aforementioned John T. Flynn. He remained a devout Jew to the point of faithfully observing the Sabbath until, at the end of the decade, he married the daughter of a Methodist minister. In his invaluable testimony to his times and cause — avowedly antiwar, anti-Communist, and anti-Zionist, all without apology half a century later — Judah Drob gives a most poignant reflection on the Jewish dissenting tradition:

Was being Jewish in any way contributory to my decision to become an active Socialist? That is not an easy question, and I have no glib answer. The Prophets'

¹ This manuscript is available in the Harry Fleischman Papers (Tamiment Library, New York University) and in the Morris Weisz Papers (Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University).

appeals for justice were powerful support for Jews who were inclined to place the highest value on this goal. The view that all humans are God's children could support an internationalist rather than a narrowly nationalist concern. The rationalism of the Talmud, which infused the branch of Judaism to which we belonged, fostered an expectation that problems could yield to logic and might have underrated the strength of emotion as a driving force in human affairs. ... However, the great majority of Jews were not radicals. Jews may have been disproportionately represented in American radicalism only during the 1920s and the late 1930s (when the movement was in severe decline), due less to any logic or realism, and more to their "stiff-neckedness," remarked already in biblical times. But the Jewish background was just as likely to produce a sense of isolation, nationalism, upward striving, distrust of outsiders, as it was to promote the socialist ideal I accepted: universal brotherhood and sisterhood, noncompetitive mutual aid, and defense of all oppressed individuals and groups. There is much that is unexplainable, or at least so far unexplained, about radical Jews, who conform to neither the world's nor to their co-religionists attitudes. ☆



Peace, Justice and Jews: Reclaiming Our Tradition

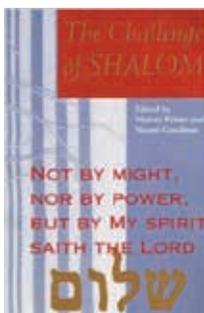
Edited by Murray Polner and Stefan Merken.

A landmark collection of contemporary progressive Jewish thought written by activists from Israel, the U.S. and the U.K.

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The Challenge of Shalom: The Jewish Tradition of Peace and Justice Edited by Murray Polner and Naomi Goodman

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Murray Polner

Teaching Students Peace and Nonviolence

CAN TEACHING peace and nonviolence to students make a difference in their lives? Colman McCarthy, who spent three decades as a *Washington Post* columnist, has certainly tried to do so in his own unique way by persuading school boards and principals to hire him as an unpaid volunteer teacher of “peace studies.” His motivation: “Unless we teach them peace, someone will teach them violence.” His new book, *Teaching Peace: Students Exchange Letters with Their Teacher* (Vanderbilt University Press), is riveting and a real gem, filled with insights gleaned from the thousands of letters he’s received from former students. In it, he explains why and how he went about it, enduring skepticism and praise, criticism and admiration.

Given that “teaching peace” encourages critical thinking, it tends to alarm timid school boards and provoke opposition from local pressure groups. Obviously it’s not easy to challenge beliefs, patriotism and legendary heroes, any one of which is guaranteed to shake up a good many people and institutions. It’s much easier and simpler to teach about wars, military and political leaders and unquestioned support for the flag than debating alternatives. Why did Japan attack Pearl Harbor? Were Vietnam and Iraq avoidable? Were there other options that might have cost fewer lives? Are Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning whistleblowers or traitors? Does capital punishment lead to fewer murders? Are we still a racist nation or have things changed since Obama’s election? And why kill animals for food?

MURRAY POLNER *co-edits* SHALOM.

McCarthy believes that teaching about peace and nonviolence at home and abroad is worthwhile. A radical pacifist and nonviolent activist, he initially volunteered in a Washington inner-city school thirty years ago. It had less than three hundred students, “no auditorium, no gym, no cafeteria, no lockers, no athletic field and for a time, no safe drinking water.” He never abandoned Woodrow Wilson High’s School Without Walls, but later he also branched out as well to privileged, wealthy suburbia, and began speaking and teaching at colleges and universities. Being free from newspaper deadlines has allowed him to teach what many Americans reject or at least believe impossible to put into play.

Teaching Peace allows us to understand how he has proceeded and how much he imparts — not by making pronouncements but rather by the Socratic method and his version of “Show and Tell.” There is no homework, no tests, no papers to write, and no grades. Reading, though, is essential, and since 1982, he has introduced thousands of students to writers they rarely encounter: Dorothy Day, Mohandas Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, Pyotr Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Dan Berrigan, Howard Zinn, Helen and Scott Nearing, Gene Sharp and more. He doesn’t lecture; rather, he explains and encourages students to ask questions and to question authority (as that hoary ‘60s slogan went): about war and peace, yes, but also the treatment of animals and women, the Cold War and our post-9/11 nation security and militarized state. While very opinionated, he says he welcomes challenges and clashes of opinions. He invites guests — corporate and public interest lawyers, pacifists and war veterans, conscientious objectors



Colman McCarthy: ‘Everyone’s a pacifist between wars. It’s like being a vegetarian between meals.’

and pro-draft people, judges, innocent men freed after years spent on death row, Nobel Prize winners, nurses and doctors who serve the poor and most vulnerable among us.

McCarthy has always had critics. In a Maryland high school two students wanted his course dropped. “I do recognize that it is a fairly popular course,” one of them told *The Washington Post*, “but it’s clear that the teacher is giving only one side of the story. He’s only offering facts that fit his point of view.” McCarthy answered, “I never said my views are right and theirs were wrong. In fact, I cherish conservative dissenters. I wish I could get more of them in.” The course was given a green light.

“We adopted a motto for the course. Instead of [merely] asking questions, be bolder and question the answers. What answers? Those that say violence. Those that say if we kill enough people, drop enough bombs, jail enough dissenters, torture enough prisoners, keep fighting fire with fire, and not with water, we’ll have peace forever.” That’s vintage McCarthy — no middle ground with war and violence.

In one of the letters he received, Meredith Beardmore wrote that she and her classmates were invited to hear Andrew Card, George W. Bush’s chief of staff, speak. Should she attend and miss his class? McCarthy held nothing back.

“If you want to subject yourself to a governmental functionary working for a president who believes that violence is necessary and moral, then go hear Andrew Card. I’d bet that halfway through his gab, you’ll ask yourself, ‘Why am I wasting my time here?’”

Mika Lesevic wrote to McCarthy about her US Marine Corps boyfriend who was off to yet another tour of duty in Iraq. She described her awakening to “first love, first war, and first real pain of life.” When he returned home, deeply troubled, “a mere shadow of the person he used to be,” she told McCarthy that not until he had organized a class on war veterans did she began to understand what the war had done to her Marine. McCarthy, angry, berates our “presidents and congressional warlords [who] believe they must dispatch the young to preserve the American Empire.” He goes on to describe another Iraq/Afghan war-veteran student who told him never to ask what he did there. And then, words of advice for Mika: “With your boyfriend — ‘my Marine’ — take whatever time you need to make a decision.”

In another class he introduced Vicki Schieber who spoke against the death penalty, hardly a unique topic, until McCarthy told the students that her daughter, Shannon, a former McCar-

thy student, was raped and killed in her Philadelphia apartment in 1998.

Mitchell Caspell became a vegetarian and turned against the death penalty. He says McCarthy gave him a “foundation and many ideas to refer to in the future,” adding, “And I will never accept an explanation without questioning it ... without questioning and thinking for myself.” To which McCarthy pens a lengthy response best summed up this way: “It’s true. If you want to make a difference start to be different.”

Bill Britton teaches in a Massachusetts prep school and was asked to set up a peace center. McCarthy says he’s never heard of a school system, public or private, hiring a full-time peace studies teacher. As a result, “schools produce docile and obedient people readied not to question the country’s economic and military policies — as they likely would if they took three or four years of peace studies.” And then his “I-can’t-not-say-this” moment comes when he tells Britton that he was working with Washington’s Woodrow Wilson students to change its school name because Wilson was “racist, militaristic, sexist.” He suggested a new name: Pete Seeger High School.

Laurie Chin writes that McCarthy has “inspired me in so many ways. My degree from Colgate in peace and conflict studies is really because of you.” She enclosed an invitation to her graduation ceremony.

A letter from Yurina Osumi arrives. Her mother was born in Hiroshima and she expresses her horror of war, nuclear or otherwise. “It’s springtime in Washington,” McCarthy responds, “which means that the city is awash in the beauty of the hundreds and hundreds of Japanese cherry blossom trees — gifts from your country to ours long before we were enemies. During World War II, talk was heard that the trees should be chopped down. Calmer minds prevailed, for once.” He then sends his greetings to one of her teachers. “I’m sure you are teaching him a lot, as you have me.”

Perhaps McCarthy’s book might have been strengthened had he shown himself wrestling with a few doubts — if he has any — or the frustration of being a passionate peacemaker in a nation historically addicted to war and violence. Even so, I remember a sign held by an intrepid woman at Bush and Kerry presidential rallies in a Manhattan neighborhood in 2004. It read, “Justice Takes Time.” After reading *Teaching Peace* I wouldn’t be surprised if she had been one of Colman McCarthy’s students. ☆

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Mary Anne O’Neil

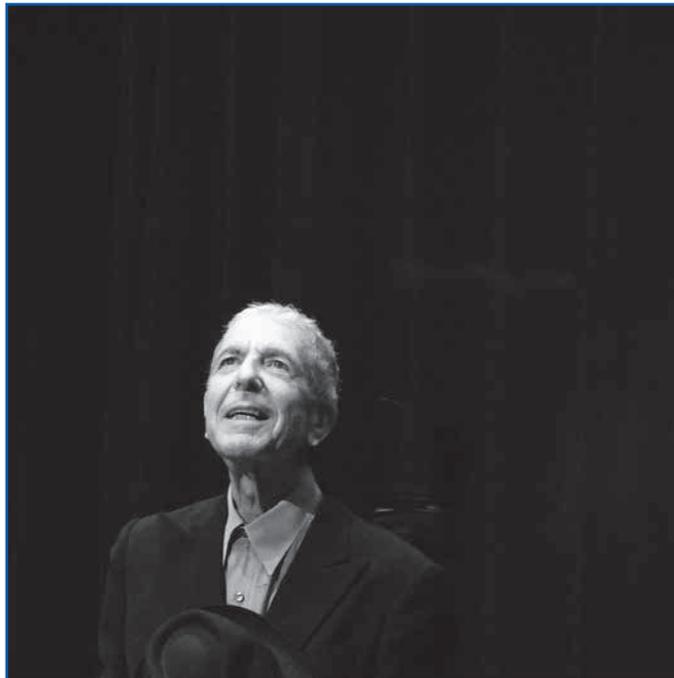
Leonard Cohen

The Bible, the Song, and Reconciliation

RECENT BIOGRAPHIES of Leonard Cohen have attempted to explain how this shy Canadian poet-turned-songwriter achieved celebrity after the age of seventy. Sylvie Simmons’s *I’m Your Man. The Life of Leonard Cohen* traces Cohen’s development from his first concert in New York in 1967, where his discomfort before the audience required three attempts to perform a single song, to the worldwide concert tours he has undertaken since 2008, which are famous for their length and for the singer’s humility before his audience and musicians. In her concluding chapter, “A Manual for Living with Defeat,” Simmons praises Cohen for overcoming unhappy love affairs, depression, drug and alcohol dependency, financial woes, as well as his dislike of appearing before a public, to become a generous artist who never runs out of energy to write songs or please his audience.

Cohen has not only changed his life but also the subject

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‘[W]e inhabit a biblical landscape, and this is where we should situate ourselves...’

matter of his poetry and songs. His early lyrics, with their emphasis on the artist’s unhappiness, alienation, and the ephemerality of love, earned him the title Duke of Doom at the start of his career. Beginning in 1985 with the album *Various Positions*, however, Cohen’s songs express more positive sentiments — the possibility of reconciling our physical and spiritual natures, the peace that comes from surrendering to a higher power, the joy that derives from admitting our human limitations. In many of his recent, more optimistic songs, Cohen incorporates stories and symbolism from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. A contemporary audience, largely secular, may not recognize such biblical allusions, but Cohen is quite purposeful in using them. In a 1993 interview entitled “I am

the little Jew who wrote the Bible,” he said that “we inhabit a biblical landscape, and this is where we should situate ourselves...That biblical landscape is our urgent invitation... Otherwise, it’s really not worth saving or manifesting or redeeming or anything, unless we really take up that invitation to walk into that biblical landscape.”

The most obvious example of a song that depends on the Bible for its meaning and emotional force is Cohen’s most popular composition, “Hallelujah.” Versions of the song have been recorded over two hundred times by artists as varied as U2 and Bob Dylan since Cohen originally sang it in 1985. The

song has served as musical backdrop for episodes of popular television series, most notably *ER* and *West Wing*, and is frequently heard during liturgical services, marriages, and funerals. A recent YouTube video shows an Irish priest singing “Hallelujah” to a bride and groom as they exchange wedding vows. At a celebration of life I attended in a Catholic Church, children sang “Hallelujah” to honor their deceased father. Cohen’s own performance of the song is always the high point of his live concerts.



“Hallelujah” is based on the life of David, the psalmist-warrior king of Israel. The first stanza speaks of David’s ability to please the heavens with his music. The second recalls King David’s sin of adultery with Bathsheba, while the fourth stanza imagines the singer standing like the Psalmist David before God, “the Lord of Song,” devoting himself to praise of the divinity. The third stanza turns from David to the Ten Commandments, with Cohen admitting that he has transgressed the prohibition against taking the Lord’s name in vain. The three stanzas Cohen added in 1988 allude to the dove, the sign of the termination of God’s anger in the Noah story, rather than to David. However, the repetition of the word “Hallelujah,” which in Hebrew means “Praise the Lord,” and appears in Psalms more than anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, returns the listener at the end of every stanza to the shepherd-king, the sinner yet priest of ancient Israel.

Alan Light, who has written a book on the history of Cohen’s song, believes that the refrain rather than the lyrics accounts for the success of “Hallelujah.” However, simply repeating “Praise the Lord” has no meaning unless it is linked to a circumstance worthy of praise. The reasons for praise are what we find expressed in the stanzas, where Cohen concentrates on two struggles: his uncertainty over the value of music in general, and his songs in particular; and the conflict between erotic love and love of God. In every stanza, he finds a way of overcoming his doubts and fears by meditating on examples drawn from the Bible. The question he poses to God in the first stanza, “But you don’t really care for music, do you?” is resolved when he remembers that David, whom he calls “the baffled King,” composed the psalms although he had no guarantee they would please the deity.

The second stanza, which evokes the sexual transgressions of David and Bathsheba, as well as of Samson and Delilah, suggests that even sin can lead to greater understanding of the human-divine relationship. Cohen explains this idea most clearly in a stanza added in 1988, in which he shows us the “holy dove” joining a couple as they make love. Human love becomes thus a reflection of divine love. Language undergoes a similar redemption in stanza three, which assures the listener that “There’s a blaze of light/ In every word/ It

doesn’t matter which you heard/ The holy or the broken Hallelujah.” As an artist of faith, his duty is not to question but to praise, or, as he says in the final stanza, to “stand before the Lord of Song/ With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.”

Cohen’s frequent allusions to the Bible should come as no surprise considering his upbringing. He is the grandson of a rabbi and was raised in the Jewish faith, which exposed him to the rituals, music, and literature based on Hebrew Scripture. His Irish nanny brought him to Mass in the churches of Montreal, where he sang Latin hymns

while gazing at the crucifix and statues of the saints. His upbringing in two religions enables him to celebrate Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the holy men and women of Catholicism along with David, Samson, and the prophets. Cohen has also practiced Zen Buddhism for many years, even becoming a Buddhist monk and spending several years away from the public at Mount Baldy Zen Center, in southern California, during the mid-1990s. Buddhism has certainly influenced his lyrics, and its presence in no way undermines either the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Scriptures.

“Come Healing,” from the 2007 album *Old Ideas*, is perhaps the best example of a work that combines Buddhist meditation with Judeo-Christian religious themes. The refrain that alternates between “Come healing of the body/ Come healing of the mind” and “Come healing of the reason/ Come healing of the heart” expresses the artist’s desire to live fully in flesh and soul. Although Cohen states that “...none of us [is] deserving/ The cruelty or the grace,” he nevertheless recognizes the general human need for repentance and calls his song a “penitential hymn.” The first example of penitence he offers is taken from the Crucifixion (“The splinters that you carry/ The cross you left behind”), while the images of darkness yielding to light in stanza six could come from the creation story of the first chapter of Genesis or from the beginning of the Gospel of John where Jesus is called “the light of men” that penetrates the darkness. The references to the “Altar” and the “Name” of stanza eight recall Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac as well as the Catholic mass, Yahweh as well as the name of Jesus. Through songs such as this one, Cohen tells us that there is no conflict between the religions of the East and the West. All are paths to inner peace, understanding of our mortal condition, and sources of consolation.

The beauty of Cohen’s lyrics has often provoked comparisons with Bob Dylan. Both are, fundamentally, poets who have succeeded in turning their poems into popular music. But the religious impulse in Cohen’s work is much stronger and more constant. His songs demonstrate the common ground of Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism. His best loved songs work toward a reconciliation of the human and the divine. ✧