

Hope into Practice: Choosing Justice Despite Our Fears

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

—Anne Frank

“There’s a new Jewish identity,” says activist leader Cecilie Surasky, one that is “multigenerational, multiethnic, multisexual, a united front against bigotry and xenophobic nationalism, and for all forms of equality.”

¹ Our recovery is in no way isolated from global movements for justice, peace, and environmental sustainability.

Drawing on the (Ashkenazi) Yiddish concept *doikayt*, “the right to be, and to fight for justice, wherever we are,”² we use our Jewishness as a social justice platform.³ Speaking out against crimes targeting our people, we speak out just as strongly against crimes committed in our name. For us, activism is putting hope into practice.

Tikkun olam (mending the world) spills out of Jewish prophetic and mystical traditions: the prophet Micah asks us to do justice, love mercy; Leviticus says to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the sixteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Luria created the cosmology myth of regathering holy sparks—to restore the world.⁴ Today, Rabbi Alissa Wise speaks of *Mussar*, the ethical thread in Judaism she links with “radical responsibility.”⁵ One of our most compelling thinkers, medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides, taught: people should not oppress each other, individually or collectively, nor should one people occupy another.⁶

Doikayt was a guiding principle of the Jewish Socialist Bund, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz reminds us. It means coalition-building, big-time, for universal equality: addressing anti-Semitism and racism, including anti-Arab/Muslim bigotry, including marginalizing of Jewish minorities. Also organizing to stop scapegoating of immigrants, hate crimes against queers, violence against women—plus ending economic injustice, corporate greed, abuse of Palestinians.

Paraphrasing Rabbi Tarfon: We do not need to complete The Work in this lifetime, but neither can we refuse to do our unique part.⁷ My friend Henri Picciotto told me that his father taught him as a boy in Lebanon, “In Judaism, the synagogue is just a building. The rabbi is just a person, a teacher but still just a person. The essence of being a Jew is to strive to do the right thing.”

Our ongoing strategy: visibility, compassionate resistance, creative visioning. “We are activists, and we do not keep silent,” insists Kaye/Kantrowitz.⁸ “We recognize the...range in what gets categorized as anti-

Semitism: from ignorance to extermination and everything in between, including conspiracy theories, stereotypes, hate crimes, Christian Zionism, rampant Christianity, and ridicule of Jewish identity or culture...It is...essential to resist anti-Semitism and simultaneously to oppose...injustice inflicted on others.”⁹

Jewish liberation means choosing justice, *tzedek*, in spite of inherited fear—also truly valuing our Jewish-woman-selves.

So what’s Jewish self-love got to do with it?

*“It is simply impossible to struggle successfully against hatred outside ourselves, while ignoring its messages within.”*¹⁰ —Alice Miller

If we’re hanging on to feeling that something’s wrong with us, it can blind us to seeing how beautiful we are, make us doubt ourselves, limit the impact of our change-making. Brush those messages aside (Feh!); leap into who we can be. When our outrageous Jewish woman’s/genderqueer life-force is unleashed, what can possibly stop us?

Absolutely, let’s intertwine self-love with social justice, braiding through both a “strategy of generosity.”¹¹ When we resist self-loathing or fear, and act anyway, it boosts our self-esteem, our gutsy-ness—whether we are working-class, Mizrahi, however-hyphenated. It’s a natural step to use that confidence to intervene against police brutality or attacks on undocumented workers...to fight Israeli seizure of Palestinian land, nuclear energy, or the roll-back of abortion rights.

Learning to feel good about who we are, to disregard the inner critic, is an ongoing practice; and then we’re more likely to feel loving towards others.

¹² To treat each other respectfully—even when we’re exhausted, broke, discouraged. Even when we feel betrayed. When our calls aren’t returned or our e-mails aren’t answered, when the printer breaks, when there’s no food in the fridge and the laundry piles up...when a lover leaves us, or the baby is sick, or we’re having hot flashes, or our boss doesn’t get it that organizing this event comes first and our job responsibilities will have to wait. Let’s remember, we have similar fears and needs. Leadership trainer Akaya Windwood asks, “What if we...stopped nit-picking at each other, and...lifted each other up instead?”¹³

Ultimately, deciding to act—both for ourselves and for other groups—counters both our internalized victimization and the mistreatment of others, benefitting our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our world...and us. Realizing that even though we aren’t perfect (who is?), we are enough; loving ourselves is an everyday project, after all. Valuing ourselves, we’re more effective allies, can take bigger risks for world-changing. It’s a deepdown inside-outside process.

And we get it, feeling hopeful feels better. Celebrating victories, no matter how small, we dust off our joy. Supporting one another to be our fullest Jewishly visible selves, we cherish each other, also ourselves—yes, cherish. We can do this. Challenging internalized Jewish oppression strengthens our communities: with empathy for Jewish insecurities,

understanding how fear is manipulated by some Jewish and Christian leadership, we build better bridges, helping our people heal, fueling societal transformation. Young Israeli protest leader Daphne Leef articulated the “new discourse” they were creating, after bringing half a million into Tel Aviv’s streets for weeks in 2011, replacing: “the word ‘charity’ with the word ‘justice’...the verb ‘to wait’ with the verb ‘to change’...the word ‘alone’ with the word ‘together.’”¹⁴

Jewishness: a platform of social action

“If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand Utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”¹⁵—Howard Zinn

We’re talking Jewish-positive, loud and proud. “Many of us complain about the lack of leadership,” says cultural historian Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon.¹⁶ “If you are missing something, it is the sound of your own voice.”¹⁷ Speaking out wherever we are; as Chip Berlet urges, raising “hell in the streets and in the suites.”¹⁸

Taking action—fighting back, working across differences, or launching new visions—taps into our power, helps alleviate despair, and creates conditions for others to empower themselves. Radical historian Howard Zinn reminded us it is everyday people like ourselves, ordinary but persistent and determined, who achieved some of the most profound change, despite overwhelming odds. On the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination, Senator Barack Obama had the same idea: “Dr. King once said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. But what he also knew was that it doesn’t bend on its own. It bends because each of us puts our hands on that arc and bends it in the direction of justice.”¹⁹

Realizing how massive the problems are, “sometimes we think that we have to be massive people.”²⁰ Not true—though “activism is hard,” cautions Letty Cottin Pogrebin, taking “hours, days, nights of dogged effort.”²¹ Like what we’ve seen in Cairo, Tunisia, Madison (WI). More than just signing one petition, activists “organize hundreds of thousands” of others to sign it, then mobilize folks “to show up...at the office of the person with the power to effect change.”²² Small actions piled together lead to big ones, build a movement.

Also key, as veteran change-maker Barbara Smith points out, “Successful organizing depends a lot upon the quality of the relationships we build.”²³ Echoing Smith, new-ish activist Rachel Brown reflects about a successful Philly protest: “The most important thing I learned was that my anxiety about stepping forward had been misplaced, because it had never been about me. I could never have willed the demonstration into being; I was only laying the groundwork to make it possible. In the end our success was built entirely on people’s relationships, and the support of activist

networks doing...parallel work for justice.”²⁴

At Occupy Wall Street, Naomi Klein noted her favorite sign: “I care about you.”²⁵ “Let’s treat each other,” she suggests, “as if we plan to work side by side in struggle for many...years to come.”²⁶ Also remembering, it is in relationship with each other that minds and hearts change.

Jews have helped change hearts and minds—and laws—as abolitionists and suffragettes, labor agitators, freedom riders in the Civil Rights Movement, antiwar mobilizers, playwrights and music-makers, whistleblowers, leaders in women’s and gay liberation and the ending of South African apartheid. Historian Aurora Levins Morales says we’ve been “disproportionately present in movements for social justice wherever we have landed.”²⁷ Today, in Jewish groups and as Jews in other organizations/coalitions, we’re tackling breast cancer and transphobia and sexual abuse, strategizing for better schools and bike lanes, marching to end wars and poverty and the death penalty. We’re rapping for indigenous rights, exposing unexamined Christian dominance. Our clergy block streets on behalf of same-sex marriage, our synagogues are going green.

Sometimes this translates to defying policies of power brokers who happen to be Jews, who own the sweatshops or nursing homes or drug companies, or who run Jewish institutions. Sometimes it means challenging Jewish conspiracy theories from Right or Left. Jews have also launched a vibrant new wave of activism to end the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, what Cecilie Surasky calls “the Jewish civil rights cause of this era”²⁸—combatting violations of rights that were institutionalized as international law after World War II, in response to Nazi crimes.

And hardly a surprise, another “disproportionate number” of Jewish social justice leaders are women.²⁹ In the early 1900s, it was especially Jewish women who championed rights of prisoners and prostitutes, migrant workers, women and children. A personal hero of mine from the 1960s-’70s, feminist firebrand Bella Abzug, funny/loud/boat-rocking—and the first Jewish woman elected to Congress—helped launch Women Strike for Peace. This group mobilized 50,000 women who poured into the streets, a significant factor in adopting the Limited Test Ban Treaty.³⁰ Abzug also supported the Equal Rights Amendment, and in 1974 introduced the first federal gay rights bill.

Writing in 2007, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz pointed out: “Since the Civil Rights movement, Jews are commonly assumed to have moved to the right, but this shift—to the extent that it exists—is sharply gendered. I do not hear the same sarcasm, pessimism, rejection, and dejection in the voices of leftist Jewish women of my generation—or of the generation of women now in their twenties and thirties.”³¹