

Judaism as a Liberation Theology

Sinai and Jewish Peoplehood

Roadmap

1. A brief history of Jewish Liberation — Exodus to Revelation
2. Conceptions of Jewish Peoplehood
3. Exploring Jewish Liberation Theology

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About Me

- Chinese-Ashkenazi-American Jew
- Mitsui Collective — Founder & Executive Director
- Formerly JOFEE Fellowship Director at Hazon + time at Pearlstone Center, Teva, Camp Wise & study at Pardes, Brandeis Univ, Kibbutz Lotan, Hebrew University, Univ of Idaho, Univ of MD ...
- Areas of work & study: Jewish nature education, movement & wellness practices, diversity-equity-inclusion, landscape design ...

Conceptions of Jewish Peoplehood

How do we characterize Jewish Peoplehood?

- Tribal bloodline
- Religious
- Ethnic
- Cultural
- Political
- “Values-based”
- “Community”
- “Way of Life”

How do we define its boundaries?

- Fixed or flexible
- Hard or porous
- Immutable or evolving

Relationship to other peoples & communities?

- Competitive vs collaborative
- Opposition vs solidarity
- Oppressive vs liberatory

Conceptions of Jewish Peoplehood

Diversity * alongside * the Jewish People

Exodus & the Erev Rav — the Mixed Multitude

- Others “oppressed by the Egyptian system of feudalism and slavery who took the exodus of the Israelites as a chance to also liberate themselves.” - Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD
- Source of trouble & discord? (from “arov” — insect swarms / wild beasts)
- **Or:** “A third group of Egyptians celebrated the Pesah with Israel, and then left with them...” (Etz Chayim)
- From midrash: k’sheirim, “proper ones.” Here, erev rav = highest praise of all.
- Erev as in ma’ariv (evening prayers during blended twilight sky) or eruv “the magic string that surrounds a neighborhood “to create a symbolic community of residence or continuity of action.” (Jastrow)

Conceptions of Jewish Peoplehood

Diversity *within* the Jewish People

Who Counts?

- Books of Exodus (Shmot) & Numbers (Bamidbar)
- Counted during Exodus + at Sinai before beginning journey into the wilderness (technically “names” are counted)
- Who is part of the community?
- Exodus: 600,000 men on foot
- Numbers: Men 20 yrs+ & able to bear arms — “total of 603,550 Israelites” found fit for military service.

- Levites not included, nor erev rav, nor women
- Also counted after Golden Calf

Jewish racial & ethnic diversity today

- JOC/ISM — Jews of Color & Indigenous, Sephardi, Mizrachi
- Minimum 12-15% US Jewish population — definitely higher in some areas, likely higher in general
- Does this reflect the Jewish community we typically see?

Exploring Liberation Theology

Roots and Origins

- Movement originating out of Roman Catholicism in Latin America
- Interprets gospels “through the lived experiences of oppressed people.”
- Reorganizing of social, governmental, and economic structures so that the poor are not merely cared for, “but brought into the fullness of human flourishing.”
- Seminal defining work: Dominican Father Gustavo Gutiérrez in 1971 — *A Theology of Liberation*

Evolution

- Public health — Paul Farmer: “This is exactly what is meant by the concept of structural violence: inequity that is ‘nobody’s fault,’ that is just ‘the way things are,’ that we live with because we cannot or will not or do not know how to address the conditions that create unequal outcomes for rich and poor.”
- Black Liberation Theology
- Palestinian Liberation Theology

Exploring Jewish Liberation Theology

Solidarity

- “Liberation theology engages our spirituality in relation to our willingness to liberate people worldwide ... children, the sick, hungry, oppressed, the starving and the imprisoned. The meat of this convention is Hillel’s second question: If I am only for myself, what am I?” (Ed Asner)

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת-נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Exodus 23:9

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

Stages of Liberation

(Rabbi Toba Spitzer)

1. Taken out
2. Delivered from
3. Redemption
4. Taken to — ie “to embrace the Possibility of Becoming”

“...to be able to see beyond the constraints of this historical moment, with all of its violence and ongoing oppressions, towards a place of liberation.”

Exploring Jewish Liberation Theology

Core Questions

- Liberation of the “other” both within and beyond Jewish community
- Implications of Jewish Peoplehood and how we view the core purpose of modern Judaism in the larger context of history and contemporary challenges
- Clear racial dynamics at play in liberation theology (not the only factor, but pervasiveness of racism makes it a particularly important one)

- Deeper understanding of Tikkun Olam than just “social justice” --- theology -> practice-> action
- Relevance for coronavirus times

Characteristics

- Care for the disenfranchised — agricultural tzedakah roots
- Diverse community based on covenant over faith or bloodline
- Diaspora = globally relational
- Solidarity — we are bound in universal liberation; we are not free until all are free

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