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How to Split the Sea: Antisemitism and Social Change

by April Rosenblum

It's very hard to move forward in a struggle for justice if a part of you always has to watch your back. If the Israelites had been forced to watch for the soldiers at their heels, instead of focusing on the way forward, can you imagine the bottleneck at the Red Sea?

Yet in a world that hasn't yet defeated antisemitism, this is the tension faced by Jews fighting for social justice. And it's not only *our* collective potential as justice workers that is hampered by antisemitism. Wider social justice movements suffer greatly as well. Whenever progressive movements get confused, and take part in antisemitic thinking, they are held back from building a real vision for social change.

For this dynamic to shift, Jewish communities – starting with those of us who are passionate about social justice – will have to play a central part in a sea change in the culture of the Left.

I grew up in the Left; that much I've always known. In Philadelphia, the activist community of which my parents were part was small enough that Democrats and radicals of all stripes worked together in coalitions to fight nuclear power, U.S. intervention in Central America, the advance of the arms race, and police brutality in our own backyards.

Yet it wasn't until I'd long been an activist myself that I realized I had grown up squarely inside a Jewish community. Looking back at photos from my 1980s childhood, I can tell now that the warm, smiling, dark-eyed activists I felt so safe around shared more than just politics with my family; they shared Jewish ancestry and backgrounds – be it the fairly recent religious heritage of my mother's side or the secular culture of my father's. But our being Jews was one thing that rarely got discussed around a table that was otherwise full of questions and penetrating conversations. Why is that?

Lots of factors are responsible for why Jewish identity often goes unspoken and unclaimed by activists in social justice movements; the rightward drift of parts of the organized Jewish community; the pressure for Jews to fit into the American mold of religion, not ethnicity, which isolated thousands of Jews who once would have been at home in secular Jewish communities; the general effects of assimilation.

A factor less often identified is antisemitism. During peaks of antisemitism, Jews have sometimes had to cope by laying low – such as after World War II, when American Jews shuddered over the execution of the Rosenbergs, fearing that it might signal the start of

wider targeting of Jews. Times like these have impacted Jews' ability to be politically active and their willingness to identify themselves as Jewish in their activism. When McCarthyism hit, Rifke Feinstein of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations remembers, "whole communities of us [Leftist, Yiddish-speaking, secular Jewish schools and organizations] just tried to go underground, to disappear. But when it was over and we poked our heads up, no one else was there."

But if attacks from the outside world are bad, antisemitism that Jews have periodically encountered inside our own movements has in some ways had an even greater impact on our morale. Each time that the Left engages in or tolerates antisemitism, a generation of Jewish activists is affected. Many pull back from progressive activism, as did countless American Jews who had lovingly defended the Soviet Union for its social advances, after revelations emerged about targeted anti-Jewish violence and repression there. Those who feel ready to stay in the Left after such events are often the ones who identify less strongly as Jews. No wonder, then, that by the time I was born, my mother could find dozens of Jews to hang out with, but few who reflected with her on being Jewish. Water, water, everywhere – but not a drop to drink.

The cycle adds to itself. The more antisemitism pushes out those of us who are appalled by it, the less those of us who are left know how exactly to stand up against it. When, around September 11th, I first started to encounter antisemitic behaviors in the movements I cared about, I found myself speechless – and worse, so did my gentile friends, whom I trusted to speak out against harm to me, just as we worked to support one another to speak out against racism wherever we encountered it. Seeing my friends go silent inspired me to embark on a long-term effort to figure out why social justice movements have such a spotty track record when it comes to antisemitism, and what it will take to change that.

Opening a Path for Our Movements

In 2005-2006, I interviewed activists from across the U.S. – both Jewish and non-Jewish – who had made progress toward bringing understanding of antisemitism into the rest of their social justice work. I taught a nine-month training for non-Jewish activists to build their skills as allies to Jews, traveled to Latin America to observe more overt antisemitism firsthand, gave talks to synagogues and activist groups, and created a pamphlet for mass distribution to activists.

I found that social justice movements have had trouble understanding antisemitism partly because it looks different from the oppressions with which they're familiar. Oppressions like racism against people of color enforce inferiority on their target groups in order to disempower them. Anti-Jewish oppression, on the other hand, can make its target look extremely powerful. It does so by drawing upon charges that have been evolving since the earliest days of Roman-era anti-Jewish theology: charges that Jews are mysterious, or act secretly behind the scenes; that we have abnormal or supernatural amounts of power;

that we are disloyal to the societies we live in, cause a disproportionate amount of harm in the world, are wealthy or greedy, or that we are the “brains” behind the action.

Antisemitism’s job is to make the systems that create injustice invisible. It protects unequal power structures, diverting anger at injustice toward Jews instead. The process goes something like this:

- Jews are isolated, especially from other exploited groups - people who might normally be expected to team up with us and defend us in times of danger.
- Other oppressed groups are encouraged to channel their anger at Jews, which keeps them from identifying and fighting the real sources of their exploitation).
- Jews are targeted for violence or other forms of attack; sometimes intentionally by local governments; other times, spontaneously at the grassroots of society.
- In search of some protection, Jews are pressured to cooperate with those in power, to stay quiet, and not to challenge the status quo, for fear of greater targeting.

Considering the pressures exerted on Jews, it’s a wonder and a source of pride how really powerful we *have* been in fighting for social change.

In a world that’s very difficult to change, antisemitism makes things seem easy to solve. It invites people to fix their gaze on an imagined group of greedy, powerful Jews at the root of the world’s problems, and redirects their vision right past the systems that actually keep injustice in place: capitalism, weapons dealers, oil companies, you name it... and the overwhelmingly non-Jewish people in power who benefit from systems of inequality.

That's the nature of anti-Jewish oppression: To cover up the roots of injustice. To make people think they've figured out who's really pulling the strings. This is one of the biggest reasons why it's important for social justice movements to figure out and confront anti-Jewish oppression, for the movement's own sake: because anti-Jewish oppression is designed as a way to keep people from understanding where the power lies. And it works.

To make things more complicated, antisemitism tends to move in cycles, allowing Jews to succeed in the good times. Attacks come in waves, yet each time things calm down and Jews are able to blend in or succeed in society again, it gives the appearance that antisemitism is 'over.' Prior to attacks in Germany and medieval Spain, for instance, Jews were among the most successful and well-aculturated minorities. Without understanding this, social justice activists tend to see Jews as a group that’s “made it” in the U.S., and antisemitism as something that went out of business in the 1940s.

Yet the signs are clear that antisemitism is a real and present danger - most visibly outside the U.S. Take Russia, where parliament members fought to have all Jewish organizations banned in 2005 on charges that Judaism is anti-Christian, extremist and inhumane, that Jews ritually murder Christian babies, and that "the whole democratic

world is under financial and political control of the international Jewry.” Or consider Malaysia, where prime minister Mahathir Mohamad declared in 2003 to a world summit of Muslim leaders that "the Jews run this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them," and "have now gained control of the most powerful countries.”

Then there’s the street-level violence targeted at individual Jews, from the now-famous case of Ilan Halimi, a 23 year-old working-class Moroccan Jew tortured to death outside Paris in January 2006, to the many lesser-known people, like Mordechai Molozhenov, stabbed and beaten into a coma in the Ukraine in 2005. And while we remain relatively safe in the U.S., it’s hard not to be unnerved by a hit film restaging the “Passion plays” which sparked annual Easter massacres of Jews in medieval Europe, or theories arising amid growing public disenchantment with the Iraq war that it was fought for Jewish or Israeli interests.

How to Split the Sea

Social justice movements are not immune to the antisemitic ideas that affect our wider society – as anyone can tell you who’s had a progressive friend forward conspiracy emails which place Jews or Israelis behind 9/11, or has taken part in vital work to prevent war against Iran, but has been scoffed at for raising concerns about the antisemitism Iran’s government promotes, or has worked in coalition against an inhumane politician and overheard derisive references to the leader’s Jewishness.

But our movements are also fertile places for change and improvement. I saw it firsthand as I interviewed Jews and non-Jews who have found creative ways to push the conversation forward – leading seminars at activist retreats, forming trouble-shooting teams to confront people with antisemitic signs at local demonstrations, joining forces with Arab-American colleagues to teach an “Antisemitism and Anti-Arabism” course at a local community college, designing progressive *tashlich* services over the high holidays at which Jewish activists reflected on what they want to change in the Jewish community, while gentile activists reflected on the need to resist antisemitism.

The first thing required to defeat antisemitism in social justice settings is for us to *stay in the movement* – no matter how difficult it gets. We can make this easier by building teams of Jewish social justice workers with mutual concern about antisemitism, who support each other to keep bringing up the issue, and to stay involved in our movements when this struggle gets annoying or downright frightening.

At the same time, we must evaluate and discard some of our first instincts and time-worn tactics against antisemitism. One of our most common desperate measures is to rush to stop the spread of antisemitism by exerting whatever power we can muster from above. I’ve seen this play out on campuses, for instance, in efforts to get professors fired, student groups’ funding cut, or events cancelled by performers or speakers we fear are antisemitic. Methods like these are doomed to fail, because antisemitism is built on a vision of Jews as all-powerful and in control. Tactics that clamp down on others perpetuate the cycle of antisemitism, compounding our situation instead of protecting us.

The same goes for our common response of “circling the wagons” to refute and suppress criticism of Israel – a natural response for many of us when we are afraid of attacks on Jews. When we foster an atmosphere in which Jews or gentiles who criticize Israeli actions fear being automatically labeled as antisemites, we engage in a form of *lashon hara* that cuts us off from people who could in fact develop into our true allies.

We cannot defeat antisemitism by ourselves. We *can* do it by reaching out to non-Jewish allies from all backgrounds and ask them to be a part of changing our movements and our world by educating themselves and standing up against antisemitism. And that, in the end, may be our most formidable task. Not because people will say no – many are honored to be asked, and plenty recognize that it is in their own interests to free social justice movements from false ideas of who has power and where problems stem from – but because it’s so hard for us to ask.

In a world where Jews have faced sometimes unspeakable brutality, it can feel impossible to ask for allies. To risk believing that somebody might actually show up – that feels as preposterous as it must have to stand at the edge of the Red Sea and weigh the benefits of walking in, in the hopes that it would open.

But the midrash tells us that the sea opened because one Israelite did just that: walked in. As hundreds of thousands of Israelites stood between an army and an unmoving sea, one man, Nachshon ben-Aminadav, stepped forward and began to move into the water. I imagine him lurching tentatively forward, conscious of the stares of disbelief he was drawing, and recognizing that these steps that looked so foolish were the only way forward; going deeper and deeper, until the waters reached his nostrils and – suddenly! – broke open.

It feels crazy to ask for allies when they haven’t exactly always shown up when we’ve needed them. Seas just don’t *open*. But for us, as for our ancestors at the water’s edge, there’s only one way forward. So...

Deep breath...

Deep breath...

Go.

Parts of this essay were adapted from excerpts of the pamphlet “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere: Making Resistance to Antisemitism Part of All of Our Movements”(April 2007).

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