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Rabbinic Dissent:
Utilizing Biblical Text in the Modern Realm

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Abstract

In a time of extreme political polarization, an increasing number of rabbis and other religious leaders are finding themselves at the intersection of faith and politics. They are using their platforms to discuss laws and policies that national and local governments are enacting, and they are engaging in various forms of social, political, or intellectual "dissent." This thesis explores the various definitions of "dissent" and how its presence throughout Jewish history culminates in a modern progressive rabbinic dissent which uses biblical dissent as a means for contextualizing modern issues. By investigating how modern rabbinic figures, individuals like Rabbis Sharon Brous, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aryeh Cohen, and others are engaging and repurposing biblical dissent narratives in the context of modern dissent, this thesis discovers both the impact and limitation of using biblical dissent in this way.

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Introduction: Dissent, Jewish Dissent, and Progressive Rabbinic Dissent

Most English-speaking Jews are familiar with the popular expression, "two Jews, three opinions," which implies a Jewish propensity for holding diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives and a willingness to vocalize those perspectives publicly. This idiom, while often employed jokingly, elucidates a kernel of truth – that many Jews take it upon themselves to speak out against what they believe to be incorrect, unjust, or inconsistent with their values. Starting with the Hebrew Bible and continuing throughout Jewish history, Jews have understood spirited disagreement, and specifically dissent, as an integral part of textual study, social responsibility, and political engagement. As 20th century theologian and peace activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in an essay published after his death, "Dissent is indigenous to Judaism."[1]

The following chapter will work to define the concept of "dissent," and explore how its diverse appearances throughout Jewish history culminate in a modern progressive rabbinic dissent which uses the lens of biblical dissent as a means for contextualizing modern issues.

Descending from the Latin verb *dissentere*, meaning to differ in sentiment, *the Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term "dissent" in various ways, including difference of opinion or sentiment, disagreement, and the action of thinking differently. Academic and political scientist Dr. Barbara J. Falk, through an exploration of various case studies involving dissent, deepens this umbrella of meaning, writing, "Dissent implies both the possibility and the opportunity to engage with and criticize the status quo—literally, to

[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Dissent," in *A New Hasidism: Roots*, ed. Evan Evan Mayse and Arthur Green (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 174–75.

"speak truth to power"… Dissent should be intentional, not accidental; critical rather than laudatory; public rather than private."[2]

Falk argues that within authoritarian states dissent acts as one of the only methods for non-violent change and political evolution, while in democracies it functions as an essential safeguard for civil liberties.[3] She also contends that while dissent often takes the form of non-violence, through peaceful agitation, protest movements, and advocacy around policies for social change, in extreme cases it can also rely upon or devolve into violence. As she states, "Dissent…is part of a larger continuum that includes not only private rebellion, traditions of public passive resistance and civil disobedience…but also violent sub-state activism as well… Dissenters were called terrorists early and often… In short, dissent and violence have, in the past and in the present, been regular bedfellows.[4]

Adding to the complexity of this term, American legal scholar Cass Sunstein, in his book, *Why Societies Need Dissent*, frames dissent as an antidote to three distinct social phenomena: conformity, social cascades, and group polarization. He argues that vulnerability to conform is influenced by those who display power and the seemingly "unanimous views of others"; that people are influenced by the social cascading of similar behaviors or actions by a group of people over time; and that deliberative groups – from juries to political parties – often end up taking polarizing positions because of in-group thinking. (Sunstein, 2003, 10-11) Just as Sunstein's work shows the ways in which disparities in political, social, and economic power incite dissent, it also explores the ways such inequities depress it. "Even in

[2] Barbara J. Falk, "The History, Paradoxes, and Utility of Dissent:," in *Dissent! Refracted*, ed. Ben Dorfman, Histories, Aesthetics and Cultures of Dissent (Peter Lang AG, 2016), 24-25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4dpq.4.
[3] Barbara J. Falk, "Learning from History: Why We Need Dissent and Dissidents," *International Journal* 64, no. 1 (2008): 235.
[4] Falk, "The History, Paradoxes, and Utility of Dissent:," 29.

democracies, disparities in power play a large role in silencing dissent—sometimes by ensuring that dissenters keep quiet, but more insidiously by ensuring that dissenters are not really heard. Social science offers relevant lessons here; it shows that members of low-status groups—less educated people, African Americans, sometimes women—carry less influence within deliberating groups than their higher-status peers. In the actual world of deliberation, powerless dissenters face an array of obstacles to a fair hearing."[5]

American historian Ralph F. Young further expands the definitional scope of the word "dissent" in his book *Dissent: The History of an American Idea*. He writes that dissent "is speaking out and protesting against what *is* (whatever the *is* is), most often by a minority group unhappy with majority opinion and rule." Young suggests that dissent exists throughout the political, religious, and cultural spheres, manifests in various forms and methods, and is employed with the intent to achieve a variety of diverse goals. He writes that there are several possible stages of dissent, starting with disagreement and escalating to action, advocacy, and in extreme cases, "outright conflict." Some dissenters, Young believes, seek to address problems through the process of reform, while others pursue the return to policies that existed before the problem arose or demolish the problematic systems altogether and start anew. Most notably, Young writes that "dissenters often have a keen sense of history and build on the experiences and methods of earlier dissenters. It is not unusual to see dissenters quote those who have gone before as well as draw on the successful tactics and strategies of earlier dissent movements… Dissenters with a vision for the future look to the past for inspiration."[6]

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[5] Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 209-210.
[6] Ralph Young, *Dissent : The History of an American Idea* (New York: University Press, 2015), 3-6.

Falk, Sunstein, and Young present an idea and practice of dissent that is broad in scope, influenced by power disparities, comprised of various forms of engagement, and often reliant upon a rich history of earlier dissenting voices. By applying that collective understanding to Jewish history and tradition, it becomes clear that dissent within Jewish life extends all the way back to the teachings of the Hebrew bible.

In the Tanakh, dissent is employed by a variety of diverse characters with the intent to challenge what they understand to be personal, political, and/or social inequities. These characters range from those with some degree of religious and political power, including Moses, Korach, and the Hebrew Prophets, and those whose gender implicates and/or limits their access to power, such as the Hebrew midwives, the daughters of Zelophehad, Ruth, and Vashti.

Despite being a member of the enslaved Israelite people, the prophet Moses is raised with the comforts of an Egyptian as the grandson of Pharaoh, putting him in a position of unparalleled power and influence for an Israelite. By killing an Egyptian after witnessing their mistreatment of an Israelite slave, Moses dissents against majority Egyptian rule. His dissent is intentional, violent, and comes at great personal cost regarding his relationship to Egyptian royalty. Moses' dissent is also the catalyst for meaningful and lasting change in the region, as it violently disrupts 400 years of Israelite conformity and drives the narrative towards continued dissent. (Exodus 1:1 – 2:15)[7]

As a Levite – member of the tribe of priests – and a cousin of Moses, Korach is also in a position of relative political power. In challenging the leadership of Moses and Aaron, however, he and his 250 followers are actively dissenting from majority rule, as Moses

[7] The Jewish Publication Society, trans., *All Translation from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2000).

maintains the ear of God and the leading voice amongst the Israelites. Korach's dissent is intentional, public, and administered in response to what he understands to be insufficient leadership. And whether Korach's dissent comes from a place of ethical concern or selfish motives, which remains contested, the consequence for his dissent is violence, as he and his followers are swallowed up by the earth. This violence acts as punishment for Korach's dissent and a deterrent for similar cases of dissent in the future. (Numbers 16: 1-35)

The Hebrew prophets in the Bible act as mouthpieces for God's word, giving them some semblance of religious power within the Israelite community. Many of them are also in close communication with the kings that rule during their prophecy, providing counsel and offering divine wisdom. Despite their positions of influence, however, the prophets are consistently compelled by God to dissent from problematic social and political policies and practices within political and social life. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explains, "The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions."[8] The prophets dissent in a variety of ways, using both public and private means, and while some are successful in creating meaningful and lasting change, others face severe consequences for their dissent, including discountenance (Micah), imprisonment (Jeremiah), exile (Ezekiel), and being forced into a lion's den (Daniel).

Moses, Korach, and the Hebrew prophets all have a degree of power within the societies in which they live; Moses is an Egyptian prince, Korach is a member of the tribe of priests and the cousin of Moses, and the Hebrew prophets are emissaries for God who often provide political and religious counsel to kings. They are also living in a period fueled by

[8] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Peabody, MA, 2007), 12.

hegemonic masculinity and within societies that prioritize male leadership. Despite these privileges, each of these men remains a minority voice dissenting against majority rule, and while their dissenting voices employ different tactics with the intent to achieve diverse goals, the consequences for their dissent often include conflict and violence. This is not consistently the case, however, for those whose biblical dissent derives or is implicated by a gender of relative powerlessness, including the Hebrew midwives, the daughters of Zelophehad, Ruth, and Vashti.

While women in the bible tend to have less social and institutional power than their male counterparts, the Hebrew midwives maintain a certain degree of power within their role. They are responsible for the health and wellbeing of those they deliver, giving them authority within society while also making their task a dangerous one. If a midwife fails to deliver a royal baby or a commoner's baby, she is considered liable for the loss of that child, the heir to its house. The 12th century Spanish bible commentator Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra writes that the midwives described in the Torah are the administrators for all the midwives of Egypt[9], making their role all the more significant and offering an explanation for why Pharoah trusts them to carry out the task of killing every male born to an Israelite woman. (Exodus 1:15-21) These midwives fully understand the expectation of their role and the risk of disobedience, and yet they dissent from Pharoah's directive and allow the babies to live. The midwives use the power of their position to dissent from a directive they fundamentally disagree with. Their act is disruptive, intentional, and comes with a great deal of personal risk. As Susan Niditch comments in the Torah Women's Commentary, "Deeply wise in fundamental, life-sustaining ways, these women understand instinctively that Pharoah

[9] Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra, "Ibn Ezra on Exodus 1:15," Sefaria - A Living Library of Torah, c. – c.1165 CE 1155, https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn_Ezra_on_Genesis.

should be disobeyed; and with initiative, they act on this knowledge… Thus, from these women filled with a power rooted in moral reason, an ethical concern for life, and a capacity to empathize, we learn a valuable lesson in political ethics: the very weakest in society can contribute to liberation by judiciously engaging in acts of civil disobedience."[10]

After the exodus from Egypt and within the Israelite community, women maintain a lower social status then men. They do not serve in the military, and thus are not counted in any census of the Israelites; they are also prevented from owning land outside of what is apportioned to their male counterparts. The five daughters of Zelophehad, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Micah and Tirzah, dissent from what they perceive to be a discriminatory rule, advocating to Moses and the Israelites leadership to give their deceased father's land holding to them. These five women have almost no social and political power, and yet they choose to protest the status quo nonetheless. Their dissent takes the form of public petition, in which they use their political aptitude to seek reform. The daughters of Zelophehad are successful in their proposal to receive a "hereditary holding amongst their father's kinsman," and while there is a patriarchal amendment made to this ruling several chapters later in Numbers 36, their dissent continues to secure a change to the law of inheritance that will positively impact women who find themselves in similar situations in the future. (Numbers 27:11)

After the death of her husband, Ruth is given the choice of whether to return to Moab and remarry or continue to the land of Judah with her mother-in-law, the widow Naomi. Despite Naomi's protests, Ruth intentional dissents from societal expectations and continues on the journey with the mother of her deceased husband. (Ruth 1:1-19) This decision is both countercultural and also extremely dangerous, as feminist bible scholar Dr. Phyllis Trible

[10] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah A Women's Commentary* (Reform Jewish Publishing, 2008), 324.

writes, “Her choice makes no sense. It forsakes the security of a mother's house for insecurity abroad. It forfeits possible fullness in Moab for certain emptiness in Judah. It relinquishes the familiar for the strange. … Not only has Ruth broken with family, country, and faith, but also, she has reversed sexual allegiance. A young woman has committed herself to the life of an old woman rather than to the search for a husband… One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel.[11] Ruth’s dissent is different from many seen in the Hebrew bible, but no less powerful. She sees a world in which her gender is a limitation, and she intentionally dissents from that cultural norm. Her dissent is of a personal nature, and despite the possible consequences, results in a life of meaning and purpose for her and her mother-in-law.

Vashti, the wife and Queen of King Ahasuerus of Shushan, dissents from her prescribed role within society and her marriage when she refuses to parade herself in front of the king and his officials in her “royal diadem.” Despite being queen and thus having some level of socioeconomic power, Vashti is a product of a patriarchal system in which wives are at the behest of their husbands. Her refusal to present herself before her king and his officials, therefore, is seen as a cardinal offense and is met with extreme consequences. Vashti’s dissent threatens the socially and politically accepted patriarchal norms and as a result she is both stripped of her title and exiled from the land. (Esther 1:1-21) Vashti’s dissent is personal, public, and intentional, and due to disparities in power, completely silenced.

The above narratives do not constitute every case of dissent in the Hebrew bible, but they do illustrate many of the diverse features of dissent described by Falk, Sunstein, and Young. Dissent often occurs in public but can also take place in private, can derive from both

[11] Phyllis Trible, “Two Women in a Man’s World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 59, no. 3 (1976): 257-258.

personal or collective aims, utilize a variety of tactics, and reap various positive and negative results. Dissent can arise between distinctive political or social groups, or from within a seemingly homogenous group. Dissent is influenced by the disparities in political, social, and economic power of those dissenting, but those disparities do not always suggest a particular outcome. Despite these possible variations, each of the above cases of biblical dissent represents an act of personal or collective resistance by an individual or group that feels disenfranchised by or fundamentally opposed to majority rule or law, and responds by, as Falk puts it, speaking truth to power.[12]

The practice of Jewish dissent continues in the post-biblical world, most notably through the discussions and disputes of the Talmudic rabbis. Despite the law often following the consensus of the majority, there is a Talmudic practice of recording minority opinions, as those opinions are also considered worthy of respect and study. The rabbis believe that there are certain boundaries beyond which dissent should not occur, including the belief in Torah and illegitimacy of idols, but within the framework of Jewish law and thought, in both *halakha* and *aggadah*, there remains ample room for responsible dissent.

As noted by author Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "Jewish tradition respects the right and responsibility of individuals to express opinions which are fully based on proper Torah authority – even when those opinions differ from those popularly held. Angel explains this through a ruling in the *Shulhan Arukh,* which states that one who dissents from their teacher is one who dissents from God, a statement implying that to dissent from a teacher undermines the status of that teacher and is therefore a betrayal. In response to this ruling, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, citing the opinion of Radbaz, argues that a student may

[12] Falk, "The History, Paradoxes, and Utility of Dissent:"

disagree with a ruling of their teacher so long as it is done in private, and thus does not openly undermine the teacher. Rabbi Hayyim David Halevy states further that a judge has an obligation to rule against their rabbi if they believe the rabbi's opinion is incorrect and they have strong proof to support their dissenting position. Rabbi Hayyim Palachi writes that "the Torah gave permission to each person to express his opinion according to his understanding.... It is not good for a sage to withhold his words out of deference to the sages who preceded him if he finds in their words a clear contradiction."[13]

Angel writes that while many of the rabbis agree with the practice of dissent, there are those who believe it should be employed judiciously. Rabbi Yosef Hayyim oí Bagdad, for example, in the introduction to his *Rav Pe-alim*, stresses the importance of humility and respect when dissenting from the opinions of the sages from a previous generation. He accepts that the great sages occasionally make mistakes but believes that one who dissents from their opinions should do so thoughtfully and with humility.[14]

Angel finds that just as this principle of dissent applies to *halakha*, so too does it apply in the realm of *aggadah*. Rabbi Hai Gaon teaches that the *aggadot* recorded in the Talmud maintain the same status as those no recorded, classifying them not as divinely revealed tradition, but rather as interpretation. Rabbi Sherira Gaon supports this claim by arguing that *aggadot*, *midrashim*, and homiletical interpretations of biblical verses constitute personal opinions and speculation from the rabbis and are therefore not binding in nature. Rabbi Abraham, the son of Maimonides, goes even further, arguing that one must not accept blindly the *aggadic* teachings of their rabbis without evaluating those teachings through their

[13] Marc D. Angel, "Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 25, no. 2 (1990): 20.
[14] Angel, 19.

own reason. This is not to say that the words of the sages and scholars are incorrect, but rather that they can and should be disputed when appropriate.[15]

While Angel does not claim rabbinic consensus about specific methods for dissenting within intellectual and academic settings, he does find that a majority of rabbis agree that dissent constitutes a legitimate and necessary aspect of Jewish law and tradition. As his article concludes, "It is clear, then, that there is room for dissent and criticism within the halakhic and aggadic systems. This dissent and criticism must be based on great reverence for our sages; on properly substantiated and argued positions; on commitment to the honor and divine origin of Torah. Dissent may not go beyond the universally accepted principles of our faith. But within this boundary, freedom of inquiry, analysis and criticism must be respected – and encouraged."[16]

The rabbis of the Talmud believed that dissent should be rooted in Torah text and tradition, and that has remained a principal part of meaningful and enduring Jewish dissent throughout history, even as Jews have assimilated into western societies and withdrawn from certain practices. In Allen Guttman's piece, *Jewish political radicals in the late 17th century*, he examines Jewish anarchists, socialists, and communists of the late 17th century who have not only dissented from the political status quo, but also from God, Torah, and Talmud. He writes that many of the famous American Jewish radicals of the time – Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Daniel DeLeon, and Abraham Cahan, were completely uninterested in faith, tradition, and text. These leaders rejected the cultural environments of Judaism and immersed themselves in the "gentile republic of learning" to secure their own creative

[15] Angel, 22-24.
[16] Angel, 26.

leadership. Unfortunately, in doing so, they also experience double alienation – separation from tradition and immersion in one that was foreign.[17]

Guttman concludes that the tactics of national assimilation and religious estrangement function to weaken Jewish communities in the modern age. He writes, "Americans of Jewish origins will undoubtedly continue to dissent. But their dissent will be directed more and more at American values rather than at political institutions… When American Jews turn in anger on these radicals for whom Torah and Talmud are as alien as they were for Emma Goldman, surely the descendants of Levi will rise to read again from Leviticus, to remind the Orthodox that they too were once strangers in the land of Egypt."[18]

Gerald Sorin, in his piece, *Tradition and Change: American Jewish Socialists as Agents of Acculturation*, also values the use of text in Jewish dissent, as he investigates Jewish socialism in the early 18th century. Sorin finds that Jewish socialists of this era were most successful at mobilizing wide-ranging support when they couched their socialism in "values of traditional culture." He cites Morris Winchevsky, a prominent Jewish socialist leader of the time, who wrote, "for almost everything I write I have to thank [Isaiah], that poet-preacher who entered my heart and mind with love for . . . oppressed people."[19]

Sorin argues that the most effective Jewish socialists were not those who had abandoned Jewish tradition and "latched on to radicalism as a 'surrogate community.'" Rather, it was the socialists who combined "Jewish ethics, religious values, and the prophetic tradition with the ingredients of an urban, industrial culture" who attracted the involvement

[17] ALLEN GUTTMANN, "Jewish Radicals, Jewish Writers," *The American Scholar* 32, no. 4 (1963): 563-570.
[18] GUTTMANN, 575.
[19] Gerald Sorin, "Tradition and Change: American Jewish Socialists as Agents of Acculturation," *American Jewish History* 79, no. 1 (1989): 37–38.

of Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[20] "Most socialist leaders knew that to mobilize wider support for modern ideologies they had to demonstrate that the new belief systems were somehow rooted in the old religious culture… They reconstructed Jewishness, expressing cultural traditions in modern form. The socialist leaders for the most part remained Jews: they stayed true to their own internalized roles, and they became role models for immigrant workers neither desirous nor capable of jettisoning the whole past on their way to becoming Americans."[21]

It's clear from the diverse displays of dissent employed throughout Jewish history that there remains a powerful lesson in utilizing text and tradition as a means of dissent. Doing so not only validates the dissent in a rich intellectual history, but also solidifies the connections between Jewish community members – past, present, and future – in deep and meaningful ways. Conversely, when dissent is not based in text and tradition, it becomes shallow and untethered. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in his essay *Dissent*, "The scarcity of creative dissent today may be explained by the absence of assets that make creative dissent possible: deep caring, concern, untrammeled radical thinking informed by rich learning, a degree of audacity and courage, and the power of the word. The dearth of people who are both rooted in Jewish learning and who think clearly and care deeply, who are endowed with both courage and power of the word, may account for the spiritual vacuum, for the state of religious existence today."[22]

The following chapters will explore a modern progressive rabbinic dissent that, building upon a rich intellectual history, utilizes biblical dissent as a means for

[20] Sorin, 39.
[21] Sorin, 52-53.
[22] Heschel, "Dissent," 175.

contextualizing modern issues. These rabbis speak out against governmental policies, communal practices, and societal realities that they view as antithetical to Jewish values and tradition, and they use biblical text, and specifically biblical dissent, as a vehicle for expressing their contemporary disagreements. Chapter two will explore how Rabbi Sharon Brous, senior rabbi at IKAR in Los Angeles, utilizes the dissent of Korach as a call to action to inspire her community to dissent against the social realities of discrimination. Chapter three will delve into the ways Rabbis Abraham Joshua Heschel, Leonard Bearman, Aryeh Cohen, and others use the dissent of the Hebrew prophets to motivate anti-war activism. The epilogue will include my contribution to this genre of rabbinic writing, a sermon in which I utilize the dissent of three distinct biblical groups – Jochebed, Miriam, and Bitya, Ruth and Naomi, and David and Jonathan – to contextualize my dissenting views on the nuclear family and countercultural models for connection.

In an increasingly polarized and political society, a greater number of Jewish clergy are wading into the waters of public dissent through their sermons, opinion-editorials, and speeches. They are asking their communities to pay attention to the laws and policies that national and local governments are enacting, and encouraging them to participate in programs and initiatives that align with their communities' core values. The goal of this thesis is to investigate how these modern Jewish dissenters are repurposing and recontextualizing biblical dissent to bring a Jewish and biblical voice to modern issues. Through exploration, this thesis hopes to uncover what using biblical dissent in a new setting adds to the contemporary Jewish dissenting voice, and how it impacts that voice's reception.

A Cry for Humanity through the Narrative of Korach

One of the most well-known and popular cases of dissent in the Tanakh takes place in the book of Korach (Numbers 16:1-18:32). In this narrative, Moses' first cousin, Korach, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram, descendants of Reuben, gathers 250 community members to challenge Moses' leadership and the granting of priesthood to Aaron. They claim that Moses and Aaron "…have gone too far. For the entire community is holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst." (Numbers 16:3) Moses is distraught at these charges but responds by suggesting a "spiritual dual" of sorts, in which each party presents offerings of *k'toret*, a priestly incense, to God in the hopes of being named 'High Priest.' Moses attempts to reason with Dathan and Abiram, but they will not appear before him. "We will not come! Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us? (Numbers 16:12-13) Moses makes one final attempt to dissuade the dissenting group from participating in what he knows will be a suicidal test, but to no avail. After the presentation of incense by each party, God opens a chasm in the earth that swallows Korach and his following. "And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korach's people and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them, and they vanished from the midst of the congregation." (Numbers 16:32-33)

The Torah itself is brief in its discussion of Korach's rebellion, but makes clear that he and his followers, including Dathan and Abiram, are dissenting on several fronts. First, the people are dissenting against Moses as the political leader of the Israelites and emissary to God, as he promised to lead them to a better life and instead relegated them to a life in the

desert. Second, Korach is dissenting against what he perceives to be nepotism, as Moses has appointed his own brother Aaron as High Priest, preserving the religious leadership within his immediate family rather than sharing it with the other Levites. Finally, Dathan and Abiram are dissenting against the leadership structure writ large, as they are descendants of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and believe that should warrant their leadership amongst the Israelites.

These multiple dissent narratives, woven together throughout the story, are politically and religiously motivated, as the dissenters argue that the power and leadership structures are unequal and not benefitting them. There is also a possibility that Korach's dissent, as distinct from that of Dathan and Abiram, is self-motivated. The text begins, *v'yikach Korach,* literally translated as "and Korach took," which several biblical commentators, including the 11th century French commentator Rashi, the 12th century Spanish philosopher Maimonides, and the 12th-13th century Tosafists who authored the Daat Zkenim, understand to mean that he separated himself from the rest of the community with the goal of attaining the priesthood for himself. Regardless of his motivation, Korach and his followers' dissent is intentional, public, and administered in response to what they perceive to be insufficient and problematic leadership.

While the medieval rabbis largely legitimize dissent as an intellectual concept and principal, many of them fundamentally disagree with the way it shows up in this particular story. A number of midrashim[23] understand Korach's dissent as a direct afront to God and his subsequent punishment as justifiable given the nature of his crimes. One such midrash describes Korach as challenging his cousin's authority on issues of *halakha*. He asks Moses,

[23] "'Midrash Numbers Rabbah 5:5,' 'Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3,' 'Midrash Sifrei Devarim 12:12,'" accessed February 26, 2024, https://www.sefaria.org/texts.

"In the case of a *tallit*, which is all blue, what is the rule about it being exempt from the obligation of *tzitzit*?" Moses responds, "It is obligated to have *tzitzit*." Korah laughs at his cousin, remarking, "If a garment of another sort is absolved by a single thread of blue wool, this garment, composed entirely of blue wool, cannot absolve itself?" Korach challenges Moses further, asking, "if a house is filled with Torah scrolls, does it still need a *mezuzah* on its doorpost?" Moses replies that, indeed, it does. Korach challenges this logic: "The entire Torah, consisting of 275 chapters, does not absolve this house, but the [two] chapters in the mezuzah absolve it?" Moses replies, "It is obligated." (Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3) This midrash not only describes Korach as a man who seeks to humiliate Moses, but also as someone who does not fully understand or appreciate the laws that God has bestowed on the Israelites, and therefore cannot feasibly lead them.[24]

The medieval rabbis recognize Korach's dissent as so problematic that they create a dichotomy in which Korach is on one side and the rabbinic sages Hillel and Shammai are on the other. In *Misnhah Pirkei Avot*, the rabbis classify which types of *machlokot*, or spirited debates, are defensible, and which are not. "Any *machlokot* for the sake of Heaven will have enduring value; But any *machlokot* not for the sake of heaven, will not have enduring value. What is an example of a *machlokot* for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of one not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and all his company." (Pirkei Avot 5:21)[25] As American historian and bible scholar David Biale explains in his piece, *Korach in the Midrash: The Hairless Heretic as Hero*, "the distinction that the rabbis make is between one who dissents and then accepts majority rule and one who

[24] "Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3," Sefaria - A Living Library of Torah, accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.sefaria.org/texts.
[25] Sacks Rabbi Lord Jonathan, trans., *The Koren Pirkei Avot* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2015).

persists in dissension. The latter is a violation of a negative commandment. But the very terms on which the rabbis place Korach outside the tent are rabbinic: his heresy is of the type that one might expect of an obstreperous student.[26]

The 11th century biblical commentator Ibn Ezra is one of the only early rabbinic voices to take a different approach, arguing that Korach's dissent occurs much earlier in the biblical narrative, following the chapter in which the Levites replaced the first-born males in serving as priests. Bible scholar Rabbi Michael Hattin notes, "…the earlier arrangement ensured that many households in ancient Israel had direct involvement in the ongoing service. The election of the Levites effectively recast the service as less 'democratic,' for now a particular group would have exclusive right to ministering in the Mishkan."[27] While Korach himself is a Levite, Ibn Ezra's commentary suggests that his dissent may have been on behalf of all the firstborn men who were disenfranchised by this change in leadership structure. (Ibn Ezra on Numbers 16:1) In her piece, "Dissent Is Not a Dirty Word," JTS professor Michal Raucher notes that "most later commentators reject Ibn Ezra's assertions, intent on painting Korach as the paradigmatic rebel whom we can unanimously reject. They justify punishing Korach, the other dissenters, and their entire families because they see this challenge to authority as deeply problematic."[28]

This debate over Korach's dissent, and specifically its impetus and value, has continued throughout Jewish history. During the 18th century Haskalah movement, Jews began to rebel against both the rabbis and rabbinic tradition. The opponents of this secularization referred to the rebels as Karaites, referencing the early medieval opponents of

[26] DAVID BIALE, "Korah in the Midrash," *Jewish History* 30, no. 1/2 (2016): 19.
[27] Rabbi Michael Hattin, *PASSAGES: Text and Transformation in the Parasha* (Urim Publications, 2012), 274.
[28] Michal Raucher, "Dissent Is Not a Dirty Word - Jewish Theological Seminary," accessed October 27, 2023, https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/dissent-is-not-a-dirty-word/.

rabbinic law, and as "the congregation of Korach." These opponents of enlightenment saw the dissenting voices as a modern manifestation of Korach's dissent, as Biale writes, "It is perhaps not surprising that those seeking to defend the tradition had little choice but to reach for an archetype from within the tradition to label those trying to divorce themselves from it."[29]

Regardless of Korach's motives, be they selfish or selfless, his dissent continues to capture rabbinic intrigue and spur debate. Many rabbis of the 21st century use his failure as a teaching tool, a means by which to explore how and how not to engage in political, religious, and cultural dissent. But there are some who, like Ibn Ezra, take a different approach. Raucher, for example, compares Korach's dissent to grassroots organizers who risk their lives to combat tyrannical governments. She writes, "Korach and his followers supported a system where each family had access to the Mishkan. They rose up against the leaders who had implemented a change that removed power from the people and placed it in the hands of just one family. This was seen as so threatening to ancient Israelite society that Korach and his followers had to be eliminated. And as long as we continue to vilify Korach, we persist in reinforcing an unjust hegemony. All over the world, from Baltimore to Damascus, people are fighting against unjust governments and brutal leaders. They are fighting against a system that has marginalized them by nature of being born into the wrong families. In many cases, the earth is swallowing them alive, and soon we may have no record of their existence because the system they are fighting is much more powerful. Don't let what happened to Korach happen to these heroic dissenters. Remember, we were once dissenters too."[30]

[29] BIALE, "Korah in the Midrash," 27
[30] Raucher, "Dissent Is Not a Dirty Word - Jewish Theological Seminary."

Even more recently, in an episode of the *Pardes Parshah Podcast* entitled, "Korach 5783: Was a Different Conversation Possible?" Rabbi Zvi Hirschfield and Sefi Kraut, faculty at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, explain Korach's dissent in the context of failed political leadership. They state, "Whatever the motivations of the [dissenters] are…most people want to be taken seriously and…feel as though the people in charge care about their perspective. And if that means sitting down and taking the time…and hearing suggestions that other people have… Dathan and Abiram and the 250, they need to be heard, and they need to know that the people who are currently in charge care about what they think."[31]

One of the most significant modern rabbinic applications of Korach is by Rabbi Sharon Brous, Senior Rabbi at IKAR in Los Angeles, who has specifically taken to using Korach's dissent as a means by which to contextualize her own dissenting opinions. Between 2017 and 2021, Brous delivered several sermons in which she expressed dissenting opinions about the issues of institutional and political power and systemic discrimination, specifically utilizing the dissent of Korach as a means by which to apply biblical grounding to these modern issues.

In 2017, in a sermon titled, *I really Wanna Know: Who Are You?* Brous spoke to her congregation about the rabbinic attempts to justify God's cruelty towards Korach and his followers. She explained that "…either God is cruel and vindictive and irrational or there is a hidden meaning in Korach's message…[which] we the readers need to uncover, in order to understand and justify the very harsh punishment that Korach received. There are a

[31] Rabbi Zvi Hirschfield and Sefi Kraut, "Korach 5783: Was a Different Conversation Possible? | Elmad Online Learning Torah Podcasts, Online Jewish Learning," accessed November 20, 2023, https://elmad.pardes.org/2023/06/korach-5783-was-a-different-conversation-possible/.

tremendous number of rabbinic attempts to do just that. Because obviously the rabbis can't live with option one, that God is cruel and impulsive and vindictive."[32] Through an examination of Korach's political calculus, Brous sets up a means by which she and her community can discuss modern political leaders and their sometimes dangerous influence within society.

In the sermon, Brous uses midrash Tehillim 1:13 to explain the tactics by which these rabbis attempt to justify Korach's punishment. This midrash is a continuation of the incomplete speech Korach makes to the Israelites in the Torah, beginning with the verse, "and Korach gathered the whole community against them at the Tent of Meeting (Numbers 16:3) It shares a story of a widow and two orphans, two of the most vulnerable people in ancient Israel, and the ways in which the law, enforced by Moses and Aaron through scripture, continually disenfranchises them. As the widow ploughs her field, Moses repeatedly comes to her to impose rules about how she can do so and what portion of her crops need to be left for the poor, ultimately forcing her to sell the field and purchase two lambs to clothe herself and her children. But as soon as the lambs give birth, Aaron comes and demands the firstborn as an offering to God. He also demands the first sheerings as an offering. Ultimately, the widow decides to slaughter the animals to feed her family, but Aaron comes and again demands a portion of the animals as offerings. The midrash ends with the woman in tears, as she has nothing left to give or support herself and her children. Korach exclaims, "he took [the portions] and went on his way. She left weeping, as did her two daughters. Such is the way of these [men], who taunt [others] and hang [their claims] on

[32] Rabbi Sharon Brous, *I Really Wanna Know: Who Are You? - June 24th, 2017 - Shabbat Korah* (IKAR, Los Angeles, 2017), https://ikar.org/sermons/i-really-wanna-know-who-are-you/.

the Holy One, Blessed be He. [They have done] so much [harm], yet they still continue [to provoke] the Holy One, Blessed be He." (Midrash Tehillim 1:13)

This midrash, Brous explains, is perhaps a way for the rabbis to express Korach's misrepresentation of scripture, or his attempt to display Moses and Aaron as cruel and heartless leaders. The midrash is a tactic, she claims, for the rabbis and for more contemporary readers of Torah to justify the punishment that Korach receives from God. "My struggle with this text…is that we go into [it] knowing what we need the outcome to be… We can't allow the outcome to be that God is cruel and vindictive and impulsive so we need the outcome to be that Korach is in some way cruel and lacking in compassion and disingenuous and so we find evidence for it in the way that we read."[33]

Brous uses the remainder of this sermon to discuss the practice of populism, which she describes as a movement intent on uniting the underserved against the powers of the social elite. Brous reports that populist leaders, those who claim to represent the views and concerns of the people, often treat their political opponents as if they are in opposition to the people's needs, similar to the way in which Korach reacts to Moses and Aaron's leadership. Brous claims that, like Korach, populist leaders often do damage to the people they claim to support and endanger democracy in the process. Ultimately, she presents the community with two distinct avenues for understanding the text. Either Korach is a populist leader, who, as the rabbis largely suggest, is concerned primarily with his own power and influence within the Israelite community. Or perhaps "Korach sees what Moshe and Aaron do not see… Korach understands and hears the voice of humanity, calling us to recognize and to empathize with the reality of the impact that our laws and our systems are having on real

[33] Brous.

human beings' lives… Korach wants us to see what we wouldn't normally see. He wants us to see pain and suffering. He's begging us to be more fair. He wants the world to be just. And he is punished…not because he is so wrong, but because we are not actually ready to see the truth yet."

Brous concludes by admitting that she is not sure which one of these two options Korach represents, but that she believes in the human capacity to hold both realities. "Maybe our tradition is calling out to us from thousands of years ago and warning us to be very wary of those who claim to speak to the masses while taking away their healthcare and engaging in cartoonishly evil acts that hurt those masses the most, and at the very same time, calling us to keep our eyes out for the widow, and the orphan, the people that we are least likely to see and least likely to hear, calling us to recognize and seek out the human toll of our laws, even those laws that are put in place for all the right reasons."

This sermon uses the story of Korach as a biblical foundation for its modern rabbinic dissenting view. First, Rabbi Brous is dissenting against contemporary political leaders who claim to represent the people while enacting policies that directly disenfranchise them, as one could argue Korach, Moses, and Aaron do in the biblical text. Second, Brous is dissenting against a legal system that does not serve the most vulnerable, those like the widow and orphan who are disenfranchised by Moses and Aaron in Midrash Tehillim. Lastly, Brous is dissenting against the widely held and historic understanding of Korach by giving her congregation permission to understand him as both a populist leader and also an individual with an eye towards equity for his community. Brous uses Korach as the foundation for which to dissent against modern laws and practices that are antithetical to her values, but in doing so, she also dissents against the widely held understanding of Korach as a dissenter.

One year after delivering this sermon, Rabbi Brous once again preached on *Parshat Korach*, this time with a focus on what she perceives to be an unjust American immigration system, one that allows for the separation of migrant children from their parents at the southern border of the United States. Brous quoted the then Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders who had said, "It is very Biblical to enforce the law. That is repeated a number of times throughout the Bible." Brous responds by clarifying that there is no law requiring the separation of children from their parents, and "if there were such a law, we would be obligated to violate it." Just as the sages taught that Shabbat prohibitions must be suspended in cases where a human being's life is in danger, Brous implies that we too should understand certain laws as being more important than others.[34]

Her sermon examines several cases of lawful action, both within the United States during the civil rights movement and Nazi Germany, that are antithetical to her understanding of human decency and justice. She argues that while something may be considered lawful, that does not make it just, and "…one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." Looking to the Torah text, Brous cites a number of dissenting voices, including the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, who dissent against the unjust law of Pharoah that requires them to kill every baby boy born to an Israelite. She also mentions Moses' mother Yochebed, who dissents from the law demanding that she drown her baby boy, and Pharoah's own daughter, an Egyptian living within the palace, who dissents from the law that one must not give sanctuary to a Hebrew child, as she not only welcomes Moses into her home but into her family. As Brous shares, "the heroes of our Biblical narrative are not the ones who follow immoral laws, [but] those who willfully violate them. Because as

[34] Koren Talmud, trans., "Talmud Masechet Yoma 85a," Sefaria - A Living Library of Torah, accessed February 26, 2024, https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma,_Korach.2.

much as Judaism commands us to adhere to a strict legal system, our tradition insists that we simultaneously cultivate and honor our moral intuition. While there is, ideally, alignment between legality and morality, we are taught that when there is not, we do what is just and right."

Brous then briefly cites the biblical story of Korach, whose rebellion against a political and legal system ends with the wrath of a vengeful God consuming him and all his following. This time, she does not attempt to discuss the motivations for Korach's dissent, but rather uses his rebellion as a platform from which to better understand the fight against an unjust immigration system. "…the Midrash [a possible reference to Midrash Tehillim 1:13, which she used in the previous year] subtly and subversively fills in the gaps of the narrative by telling us that his [Korach's] protest was in fact a desperate cry against a legal system that strips the humanity from the most vulnerable in the camp. This is a failure in the system, that Korah exploits for his own political gain, but is, nevertheless, an unquestionably legitimate claim. This much is clear: when the law is callous to the human experience, the law becomes the enemy." Brous provides multiple avenues for understanding Korach's dissent, but also legitimizes it as a fair response to a legal system that is not serving the needs of the people. She equates the injustice against the people, those that Korach is seemingly fighting for, to the injustices present in the American immigration system; similarly, she implies that just as Korach's claim is legitimate, so too is it legitimate to speak up in our time against unjust immigration laws and practices.

Brous' call to action in this sermon is as follows: "We recognize that we are living…in a State of Moral Emergency, and we must call it what it is. Our government can persist in this inhumane behavior only if good people remain silent. And so, we stand…We

stand with the immigrants, the refugees, and asylum-seekers, with the children, and with their parents. We declare: Not here. Not now. Not in our name."

This sermon utilizes the biblical dissent of not only Korach, but also the Hebrew midwives, Yocheved, and the daughter of Pharoah, to inspire a modern dissenting movement against an unjust immigration system. Rabbi Brous is clear that she hopes her community will stand with her in this dissent, motivated by the dissenting views and actions of their biblical forebears. As she concludes, "…this is the fight of our lifetime. Today, once again, we are being called to rise up and drive a spoke into the wheel of injustice."[35]

Several years after sharing this sermon with her community, Rabbi Brous delivered what would perhaps be here most significant piece on *Parshat Korach* to date, in a sermon titled, *Can't You See? The Whole Community Is Holy*. She begins by explaining that there is a meaningful difference between the way the story of Korach is often read and what the text actually says, for Korach clearly expresses, "*kol ha'eidah kulam kedoshim,* the whole community is holy." (Numbers 16:3) She claims that the failure in this *parshah* is not in Korach's desire for power but rather in Moses' inability to hear what he is truly saying when he comes forward and presents a narrative that Moses is unfamiliar with. Had Moses brought his dissenters closer rather than pushing them away, she argues, perhaps the story could have ended with far less bloodshed.

This sermon once again employs Midrash Tehillim 1:13, as it exemplifies Korach's desire for Moses to hear the "voice of the desperate, the voice of the invisible, [and] the voice of the marginalized." In addition, Brous utilizes the dissent of the daughters of Zelophehad, which takes place several chapters later and for whom a much more favorable conclusion is

[35] Rabbi Sharon Brous, *Morally Bound to Disobey - June 16, 2018 - Shabbat Korah* (IKAR, Los Angeles, 2018).

reached. These five dissenting women, who dissent against a discriminatory law that prevents them from inheriting their father's land after his death, not only convince God to exempt them from this law, but also for the Israelite leadership to change the law for every generation of women who come after them. As Brous suggests, after the "bloodbath" in *Parshat Korach* it is possible that God evolves in understanding and begins to appreciate that a different response to dissent is warranted. It is worth noting that Brous leaves out the fact that just a few chapters later, in Number 36, the ruling in favor of Zelophehad's daughters is amended to require that they marry men from within their father's ancestral house in order to ensure the land holdings remain within that house. (Numbers 36:1-13) This, some would argue, cheapens the win of Zelophehad's daughters and further entrenches an unjust, patriarchal legal system.

Specifically, as Brous delivers this sermon amidst the fifth anniversary of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting in Orlando, the largest anti-LGBTQ+ hate crime in American history, she focuses on the need for contemporary society to hear and support members of the queer community amidst a deluge of anti-queer legislation being introduced and passed through state legislatures. She argues that society is weakened by the creation of spaces and the passage of legislation that silences marginal queer voices. In doing so, "we build generation after generation of walls that perpetuate the same narrative. Rabbi after rabbi reading the story of Korach and blaming him, instead of asking the question about Moses, and his own ability or inability to hear and to see, and what might have happened if we had gone another way."

While Brous once again acknowledges the different perspectives on Korach's motivation, she implies that, just as queer voices have historically and systematically been

silenced and ignored, so too has Korach's. "It is absolutely possible that Korach was…an insurrectionist scaling the walls of power…but it's also possible that he is a voice of humanity, and that what he was calling Moses to recognize is exactly what all of us need to recognize today. That there is an impact from our laws and our long-held assumptions and our norms. There is an impact on real human beings. And maybe what we need to do is learn how to open our eyes and our hearts, to be uncomfortable, to see pain and suffering that we were not trained to see, to see beauty and color and light that we were not trained to see. Our tradition sees him as the former, but I think that we can, and we must see him as the latter."

In this sermon, Brous utilizes the dissent of Korach and the daughters of Zelophehad to dissent in two distinct ways. First, she dissents against the passage of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, such as legislative bans against trans-affirming healthcare for minors, participation in same-gender youth sports, and curriculum that includes queer and gender expansive topics, in state legislatures around the country. Second, she dissents against the historical and systemic silencing of dissenters, those who speak from the margins and from whom society rarely hears. She challenges her community to not only advocate for queer people, but to see them as a part of a community that is holy, and to get to know their stories. "If only Moshe had looked to Korach and said *ma lach*, *ma lecha*, *ma lechem*, tell me about you. How much bigger, how much better, how much more beautiful could our tradition and our community and this world be?... This is an invitation into a different kind of space creation, a time and space in which we actually see one another…with love…in which we allow ourselves to learn, to make mistakes, to get it wrong, and then to try again. But we guide ourselves and we hold one another with love."[36]

[36] Rabbi Sharon Brous, *Can't You See? The Whole Community Is Holy* (IKAR, Los Angeles, 2021).

In each of these three sermons, Rabbi Sharon Brous explores the contemporary world and its challenges through the lens of biblical dissent, and specifically utilizes that dissent as a means by which to contextualize her own modern dissenting opinions. Her sermons embody many of the features of dissent described by Barbara J, Falk, Cass Sunstein, and Ralph Young; they are public, non-violent forms of resistance aimed at building opposition towards the status quo, challenging the realities of conformity and group polarization. Most notably, as Young writes, her sermons embody "a keen sense of history and build on the experiences and methods of earlier dissenters."[37]

The rebellion of Korach, in consultation with Dathan, Abiram, and the 250 community members, remains one of the most significant forms of biblical dissent in the Jewish canon. By using this story, along with other biblical cases of dissent, Rabbi Brous is grounding modern rebellion in Jewish history and tradition. Through the words and actions of biblical dissenters she is crying out for humanity to hear the voices of the oppressed: the widow and the orphan, the asylum seeker and the refugee, members of the Queer community, those who have been relegated to the fringes of society. She is challenging her congregation and the Jewish community to be wary of the laws and political leaders that claim to serve the people's needs while simultaneously pursuing their own selfish agendas. She is calling on society to dissent, just as Jews have done for generations, all the way back to one of the most controversial Jewish ancestors, Korach.

[37] Young, *Dissent : The History of an American Idea*, 3-6.

Anti-War Activism Through the Words of the Prophets

Many of the Hebrew prophets have been made famous by their fiery and passionate rhetoric, words that continue to be drawn from in sermons and political speeches to this day. One of the most iconic lines of prophecy in the twenty-first century was made famous by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his 1963, "I Have a Dream" Speech. The verse from the prophet Amos, as Dr. King translated it, reads, "…justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24) This speech also contains references to Isaiah 40: 4-5 and several New Testament passages, utilizing their imagery and fervor to animate the fight for civil rights and justice for African Americans.[38]

Despite being well known for many of their incendiary one-liners, the prophets are also deferential figures, acting as God's envoys to kings and the people they rule. The prophets use their prophecy to question sinful behavior, argue against injustice, and challenge nobles and commoners alike to live lives worthy of God's providence. Characterized by provocative speech that differs from those around them, the Hebrew prophets consistently dissent from that which is immoral or antithetical to the words and laws of God. Their dissent takes place in both private and public forums, and while some are successful in achieving meaningful and lasting change, others face severe consequences, including persecution and ridicule, for their actions.

As Rinah Lipis Shaskolsky explains in her piece, *The Prophets as Dissenters*, reaction to the prophets was inconsistent. "The earlier seers were respected as holders of official positions and had no trouble with the people. Elijah and Elisha gained popular

[38] Lesli White, "4 Bible References in MLK Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech | Bible Verses in I Have a Dream Speech - Beliefnet," accessed February 1, 2024, https://www.beliefnet.com/inspiration/articles/4-bible-references-in-mlk-jrs-i-have-a-dream-speech.aspx.

support mainly because of a widespread belief in their supernatural powers to heal and to perform miracles… The later prophets, however, enjoyed no such immunity from popular hostility. Hosea was called a madman (Hos. 9:7); Amos was suspected of being a Judean agent who had come to Israel to stir up trouble (Amos 7:12); Micah's discourses were interrupted by angry crowds (Micah 2:6); and, of course, Jeremiah, was at various times in his career derided as a false prophet (Jer. 17:15; 28:10-11; 43:2), accused of defecting to Babylonia (Jer. 37:13), tried for treason (Jer. 26:11), thrown into the stocks (Jer. 20:2), left in a pit to die (Jer: 38:6), and finally dragged forcibly to Egypt by refugees escaping the Babylonian invasion (Jer. 43:6).[39]

Despite the risk to their reputations and lives, the Hebrew prophets are compelled by their relationship with God to speak truth to power, utilizing the words of prophecy to inspire those around them to be better, kinder, and more generous human beings. Their dissent, based not in personal ideology but rather in the words of a living God, is distinct from that of other dissenting characters in Torah. Some of the prophets are resolute in their mission to spread God's prophecy, but others do so apprehensively or even under duress. While this complicates the source of their dissent, rabbis throughout the generations have nonetheless revisited and utilized their words as a means to contextualize and amplify their own dissenting voices. One of the most illustrative of these rabbis was Leonard I. Beerman, Rabbi Emeritus of Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, who often drew from the prophets to animate his work around various social justice issues. As he preached in 1983, "Liberal Jews have always…found in the prophets' teaching something of our sense of Judaism as a changing,

[39] Rinah Lipis Shaskolsky, "The Prophets as Dissenters," *Protest and Dissent in Jewish Tradition* 19 (1970), https://www.proquest.com/docview/1304352890?fromopenview=true&pq-origsite=gscholar&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals, 28.

dynamic, growing religion…the prophets were disturbed that the Jews of their time were not serving God in the correct way, were not building a better society. Amos…complains that they abuse the poor. Isaiah says that their rulers are not doing justice. Habakkuk criticizes the strong, the powerful for taking advantage of the weak. This all sounds very much like what is going on in our time, sounds very much as if it were talking at the things Jews ought to care about and try to help change. 2,500 years after the prophets, Jews still believe that God cares how we treat one another and that how we treat one another, individually and collectively, should be an important integral part of our religious duty as Jews."[40]

While the Hebrew prophets preach about numerous injustices in the name of morality and service to God, they are perhaps most outspoken about war and militarism. The prophets are privy to many conflicts between Egypt and Mesopotamia, internal battles between the communities of Babylonia and Assyria, and violent tensions against sedentary and migratory peoples of the Near East who threaten the empires of the day. They watch power inflect and corrode humanity, and they comment on it in a variety of ways. Some of the prophets, including Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Joel, and Obadiah, speak about the necessity of war as a means by which to reset the world order and rid humanity of Israel's enemies. They associate militarism with God's wrath and argue that some warfare is necessary. Other prophets, like the often-quoted Isaiah, include passages that heavily critique warfare and argue for a peaceful approach to political and military discrepancies. The famous antiwar activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel seems to favor the latter prophetic approach, as he writes in his book, *The Prophets*, "When the prophets appeared, they proclaimed that might is not supreme, that the sword is an abomination, that violence is obscene. The sword they said,

[40] David Myers, ed., *The Eternal Dissident: Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman and the Raical Imperative to Think and Act* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 63.

shall be destroyed… The prophets, questioning man's infatuation with might, insisted not only on the immorality but also on the futility and absurdity of war."[41]

Like Heschel, many contemporary thinkers have taken to utilizing prophetic speech that best aligns with their cause, sometimes cherry-picking verses or simply ignoring contradictory passages. Professor Ismar J. Peritz of Syracuse University, in the editorial, *The Prophets' Vision of A War-Free World*, does this when discussing a prophetic verse that is found in both Isaiah (2:4) and Micah (4:3) that reads: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again know war." Peritz comments, "Here is a vision of a world in which the constructive and peaceful implements of agriculture have taken the place of the destructive weapons of war; in which an international good-will has done away with the need of the R.O.T.C.; and in which economic conditions speak for a prosperous and safe democracy… It is not at all improbable that the prophets who were keen observers of events…had anticipated our conclusion that "war is hell"; that it brings with it famine, pestilence, and death; that it undermines the social, economic, and moral structure of society; and that if unchecked it will bring annihilation; and that they came to see, as we are beginning to see, that the only hope to averting a universal catastrophe is the cessation of war."[42] While Peritz is correct in her assessment of Micah and Isaiah's usage of this verse, it is worth noting that it also appears in the book of Joel in the opposite manner. Prior to a battle between Israel and "the nations," Joel preaches, "prepare for battle; arouse the warriors; come and draw near. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let even the weakling say, I am

[41] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 203-204.
[42] Ismar J. Peritz, "THE PROPHETS' VISION OF A WAR-FREE WORLD: Editorial," *Christian Education* 13, no. 2 (1929): 101–102.

strong." (Joel 4:10) By omitting this latter usage of the famous prophetic verse, Peritz downplays the diversity of prophetic viewpoints on warfare and implies that "the prophets" are a monolith on the issue when in fact they are not.

The Hebrew prophet's views on war and violence have captured rabbinic curiosity for generations, and many rabbis of the 20th and 21st centuries have taken to using the specific verses in which they dissent from war as a means by which to contextualize and fuel their own anti-war activism. Perhaps the most famous of these dissenting rabbis was Abraham Joshua Heschel, who consistently employed the prophets in his anti-Vietnam War activism. Heschel first joined the antiwar movement in 1965 after experiencing an inner turmoil that led him to determine that the assault on North Vietnam by the United States was evil. After joining a protest rally organized by a local committee of clergy, Heschel proposed a national religious movement to end the war. In November of that year, he participated in a teach-in with more than 500 members of clergy, and in January of 1966 the National Emergency Committee of Clergy Concerned about Vietnam (CCAV) was founded, with Heschel elected as one of its three co-chairs. Heschel used his knowledge of Christian and Jewish sources to give religious credence to the antiwar effort and was a vital part of organizing clergy to contact political leaders, draft position papers, and teach about the war.[43] In many of his public speeches and interviews, Heschel drew upon the Hebrew prophets, utilizing their words to animate his efforts. In his book on Heschel entitled, *Spiritual Radical*, Professor Edward K. Kaplan goes so far as to say that "during the Vietnam War, Heschel emulated [the prophet] Isaiah, denouncing the U.S. government's arrogance and moral apathy of most

[43] Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 299-301.

Americans."[44]

On January 31, 1967, in Washington D.C., Heschel offered a group of concerned clergy and lay people a meditation on the words of the prophets, beginning with Ezekiel 34:25-31: "Ours is an assembly of shock, contrition and dismay. Who would have believed that we life-loving Americans are capable of bringing death and destruction to so many innocent people? We are startled to discover how unmerciful, how beastly we ourselves can be. So, we implore Thee, our Father in heaven, help us to banish the beast from our hearts, the beast of cruelty, the beast of callousness." Heschel continues to draw on the words of Ezekiel by expressing the value of human life and the need to protect it at all costs. "When a person is sick, in danger or in misery, all religious duties recede, all rituals are suspended, except one: to save life and relieve pain."

Heschel's meditation then turns to Isaiah 1:15, stating, "Your hands are not clean… In the sight of so many thousands of civilians and soldiers slain, injured, crippled, of bodies emaciated, of forests destroyed by fire, God confronts us with the question: Where art thou?" [45] A few paragraphs later Heschel cites a later passage of Isaiah, saying, "We call for a covenant of peace, for reconciliation of America and all of Vietnam. To paraphrase the words of the prophet Isaiah (62:1): For Vietnam's sake I will not keep silent, For America's sake I will not rest, Until the vindication of humanity goes forth as brightness, and peace for all men is a burning torch."[46] In this passage of text Isaiah uses synonymous parallelism: "For the sake of Zion I will not be silent, for the sake of Jerusalem I will not rest." Zion is parallel to Jerusalem, and the prophet is speaking about the need for his people to experience safety and

[44] Edward K. Kaplan, 212.
[45] Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Michael Novak, *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* (New York, N.Y.: Associated Press; Behrman House, Inc.; Herder and Herder, 1967), 49.
[46] Brown, *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience*, 51.

security; by using this text, Heschel is not only dissenting against the Vietnam War, but also suggesting that Vietnam is parallel to America, and that his people, living in both countries, deserve nothing less.

In the latter half of his meditation, Heschel focuses on the moral indecency of war, quoting the prophet Hosea in his anger. "Militarism is whoredom, voluptuous and vicious, first disliked, and then relished. To paraphrase the prophet's words "For the spirit of harlotry is within them, and they know not the Lord" (Hosea 5:4).[47] Finally, Heschel references the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer traditionally recited on Rosh Hashanah, concluding, "This is the demand of the hour: not to rest until…we succeed in reaching the people of Vietnam as brothers… It is not for man to decide who shall live and who shall die, who shall kill and who shall sigh. May no one win this war; may all sides win the right to live in peace."[48]

Heschel's usage of Jewish text, and specifically the Hebrew prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Hosea, is notable, as they too spoke out against violence and war. Isaiah and Hosea in particular, often preached against militarism, reminding people of the horror of battle (Hosea 10:14), arguing for peaceful leadership (Isaiah 9:5), decrying wicked rulers (Isaiah 14:5, 11), and demanding care and consideration be paid to the poor and the needy.[49] It is worth noting that while Heschel focuses on the prophets' antiwar sentiments, they also spoke about war in other ways. The most common name for God in the book of Isaiah is "the Lord of Hosts" i.e. armies, serving to highlight the providence of God over all human warfare. There are also many verses in Isaiah that speak of war as a fact of reality rather than critiquing it from an ethical perspective. When these prophets were dissenting against war, however, they often

[47] Brown, 56.
[48] Brown, 61.
[49] Brown, 206-207.

experienced anger and backlash, and Heschel was regarded in a similar manner. While he did have many supporters, "the Orthodox rabbis, closest to his observance, either rejected political protest, or upheld the governments prosecution of the war. A Majority of JTS faculty [where he taught] disassociated themselves from Heschel's involvement."[50]

In spite of the challenges he experienced, Heschel continued to dissent, using the prophets as his star witness. Their biblical dissent provided a Jewish textual framework for his modern dissent, giving his antiwar activism an underpinning of Jewish values and tradition. In an interview between Heschel and James Finn for Finn's book, *Protest, Pacifism and Politics, Some Passionate Views on War and Non-Violence*, Heschel draws on the wisdom of Isaiah 32:17 as he explains the tantamount need for peace in the modern world. "The human situation is terribly complex. Consequently, it requires not only just no wars, it means cultivating peace, cherishing, peace, building peace. There's an old prophetic statement: 'peace is the fruit of righteousness and of goodness and of compassion.' In other words, the way to build peace is to build it with continuous wisdom, active justice, and generosity. Peace is just something that comes about by itself, when there are no battlefields. The truth is that there are continuous tensions in human relations – private, public, national, international – and unless there is a continuous spiritual effort to make our ultimate insights real potent. There'll be no peace. There will only be preludes to wars, which may be prolonged preludes, because of the power of deterrence."[51]

Heschel was not the only modern rabbinic thinker or activist to use the Hebrew prophets in this way. Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, Professor at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic

[50] Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 299.
[51] James Finn, *Protest: Pacifism & Politics - Some Passionate Views on War & Nonviolence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 159.

Studies of the American Jewish University and one of the founders of *Jews Against the War*, also found a great deal of power in utilizing the prophets' words to animate his antiwar efforts. Cohen's research and scholarship continue to reside at the intersection of Talmud, ethics, and social justice activism, and he spent much of his rabbinic career engaged in antiwar activism.[52]

In a memo from Rabbi Cohen to President Barack Obama in 2009 entitled, *Aryeh Cohen on Waging Peace*, Cohen explains the relevance of the prophets to the peace movement. He begins by sharing, "I, like millions of other Americans, was initially attracted to your candidacy by your opposition to the war in Iraq and, more broadly, by your way of seeing the role of the United States in the world." Cohen clarifies that while the United States was currently engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the fight to end terror, he believes it should be much more invested in perpetuating peace. "Jewish tradition is not essentially pacifist. However, the fact that nations wage war does not cause the tradition to celebrate that fact. The opposite is true." Cohen rationalizes this claim by explaining that in the first half of the prophetic books of the bible (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), terrible wars are waged, and territory is captured. The second part, he writes, known as the Later Prophets, "is a critique of the power politics and the associated injustices and waging of war of the first part. Joshua kills and burns his way into and across Canaan, and the book of Judges recounts the cycles of sin, occupation, violence, and military salvation of the decentralized tribal Israel. But the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah put the poor and the widow at the center of their concerns, and exhort Israel to justice and pace, to turn swords into plowshares."

[52] "Rabbi Aryeh Cohen | American Jewish University," accessed February 4, 2024, https://www.aju.edu/faculty/rabbi-aryeh-cohen.

Cohen writes that rabbinic Judaism adds to the story of the prophet Joshua a narrative of the Israelites suing for peace before laying siege, and that this transforms the previously violent King David into a sage and scholar. He claims that from a comprehensive reading of Jewish tradition one can deduce that "war is a theological problem for Judaism; that the world was not created so that nations should war against each other." One could argue that this conclusion is an imperfect assessment of the Jewish literary canon, and that numerous biblical texts supporting and/or acknowledging the essential nature of war create avenues for weakening it. Be that as it may, Cohen utilizes specific prophetic texts to boost his argument against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, concluding with Isaiah (58:8) as a means by which to beseech Obama to prioritize peacemaking over violence and warfare. "We have never tried this way, the way of waging peace. We do not know what solutions will be found on that path. It is sure, however, that in that direction is found change and hope. "Then shall your light burst through like the dawn."[53]

Cohen's dissent is distinct from Heschel's, in that he did not simply utilize the words of the prophets to help contextualize his antiwar activism, but their textual structure as well. Cohen believed that the structure of the book of Prophets – illustrated by him as beginning with the realities of violence and war and ending with a critique of the power structures that cause such realities – illustrated a need to transition from warfare to peacemaking. Cohen concluded by drawing from Isaiah 58:8, the climax of a speech in which the prophet is shaming the people for their selfishness, accusing them of using ritual fast days to amplify their own voices and agenda rather than the betterment of the world. It is only through a fast of selflessness, Isaiah explains, one that weeds out wickedness and prioritizes the oppressed,

[53] Aryeh Cohen, "Aryeh Cohen on Waging Peace," *Tikkun* 24, no. 1 (2009): 42–43.

and one's light shall burst through like the dawn. (Isaiah 58:1-8) Cohen, like Heschel before him, draws from the specific prophetic text that elevate his perspective about war and peace, and excludes the others. In doing so he paints a broad and somewhat incomplete picture of the prophetic view on war, but also positions his dissent as a continuation of the dissenting voices that have existed throughout Jewish history.

Rabbi Peter Knobel, emeritus rabbi at Beth Emet The Free Synagogue in Evanston IL, and internationally renowned scholar and social justice advocate, also found prophetic speech to be relevant to his dissent from nuclear war and proliferation. On April 30, 2014, at the United Nations Headquarters, Knobel delivered remarks at the "Nuclear Weapons and the Moral Compass" Trusteeship Council Chambers. He begins with a complete repudiation of nuclear warfare, stating, "Nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war is an anathema to any right-thinking human being who is concerned about the future of humanity, our planet and its fragile ecosystem." He then grounds his dissent in the heavily quoted Isaiah 2:4, which he translates, "And he shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

Using a combination of poetry from the famous Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai and references to the Jewish ethical principal of *bal tashchit*, wasteful destruction, Knobel argues that "nuclear weapons are immoral; therefore, we must work together to eliminate them." He concludes his remarks by imploring the world's leaders not to unleash a *mabul eish*, a flood of nuclear fire, upon their enemies simply because they have the capacity to do so. Instead, returning to the words of the prophet Isaiah, he stresses, "we must work assiduously to dismantle every nuclear arsenal and prevent proliferation. It is time to beat our nuclear

swords into plowshares and not stop beating until they are musical instruments."[54]

Following Pope Francis' unequivocal call for nuclear disarmament as part of the Holy See's "Nuclear Disarmament: A Time for Abolition" in 2014, the Global Security Institute hosted an event featuring leaders in the Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, Muslim, diplomatic, and interfaith communities.[55] This event, which took place on April 9, 2015, at the United Nations headquarters in New York, once again featured remarks from Rabbi Peter Knobel. This time, Knobel begins not with the prophet Isaiah, but with Jeremiah. "The prophet Jeremiah warned, 'from the smallest to the greatest, they are all greedy for gain. Priest and prophet alike, they all act falsely. Saying 'shalom shalom v'ein shalom', peace, peace when there is no peace.' Nuclear deterrence is a false peace. Genuine peace can only be achieved when omnicide, the ability to destroy creation, has been removed as a possibility, and we join with the psalmists in saying to one another, 'how good and how pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in harmony.'" This passage from Jeremiah (6:13-14) warns of the destruction that occurs when nations choose violence and aggression over peace.

Knobel quotes Brandeis University Professor Reuven Kimelman, who writes, "for the deterrent to be affective, it must be the immoral intent to use them…for Isaiah it is not enough to desist from going to war, nations must also cease the education for war. Training for war itself may make war irresistible. The Isaianic policy of swords into plowshares however entails not just the replacement of the sword with the plowshare, but the beating of the sword into a plowshare that is the conversation of the means of destruction into the means

[54] *Destroying Our Self-Destructive Power* ("Nuclear Weapons and the Moral Compass" Trusteeship Council Chambers, United Nations, 2014), https://gsinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/s3/uploads/attachment/70/Knobel_Remarks.pdf?1400087341.
[55] Jonathan Granoff, "The Moral Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons - Global Security Institute %," Global Security Institute, June 25, 2015, https://gsinstitute.org/the-moral-campaign-to-abolish-nuclear-weapons/.

of construction. Creating an economic alternative to the arms industry is thus an imperative of realist disarmament. The essence of this biblical perspective is that we must change the paradigm. It is enough to destroy weapons of mass destruction, but to change the way people think, so war is not an option, and then all can thrive and prosper." This represents a different approach from Knobel's usage of Isaiah 2:4 in the previous year; during that address he used the verse to ground his opposition to nuclear weapons in Jewish tradition, while in this speech he uses the ethos of the prophet Isaiah to demand that society change the way it addresses war and violence at a rudimentary and educational level.

Knobel continues by referencing Isaiah 58:1-8, as Rabbi Aryeh Cohen had, expressing: The Hebrew prophets remind us that society is judged by how it treats the weakest members of society. True religion requires action which translates ritual into transformative action. On Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, a twenty-seven hour fast, we read the words of Isaiah. 'Is such a fast I desire? A day for people to starve their bodies. Is it bowing the head like a bullrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes. You call that a fast? A day when the Lord is favorable. No this is the fast I desire, to unlock the feters of wickedness, untie the chord of the yolk, to let the oppressed go free. To break every yolk, to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home, and when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin. They shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing spring up."[56]

Knobel's usage of Jeremiah in his second set of remarks is significant, not only because of the prophet's opposition to war (Jer. 4:7, 51:7) and warnings about national violence (Jer. 10:10; 25:17, 31) but also because of the consequences for his dissent.

[56] Peter Knobel, *Nuclear Disarmament: A Time for Abolition* (Moral Compass initiative, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=G5KdgIEbfBQ.

Jeremiah experienced social rejection, and his prophecy was often considered contentious and irascible. Priests and prophets even called for his death.[57] Knobel often found himself at odds with the majority, especially on the topic of nuclear proliferation. In 2015 he joined almost 450 rabbis in signing a letter in support of the Iran Nuclear Deal to curb the arms race for nuclear weapons in the middle east[58], but over 1200 rabbis signed a letter opposing it.[59] Despite these challenges, Knobel continued to express his dissent on nuclear weapons and war until his death in 2022.

In the months since the October 7, 2024, attacks in Israel by Hamas terrorists that killed 1400 civilians, and the subsequent Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip, many rabbis have come out against continued bloodshed. Almost 300 rabbis, as of this writing, have signed on to a movement entitled, *Rabbis4Ceasefire*, which advocates for a ceasefire in Gaza and release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian political prisoners. Like Heschel, Cohen, and Knobel before them, these rabbis also utilize Jewish text and tradition to ground their dissenting voices, arguing that the Jewish value of protecting human life should motivate both American and Israeli activity during this heightened period of violence. At a protest at the United Nations on January 9, 2024, as Palestinian deaths in Gaza surpassed 23,000, more than 30 rabbis gathered to demand a ceasefire. "Rabbi Alissa Wise, founder of Rabbis for Ceasefire, quoted the prophets Isaiah and Micah: 'They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up swords against

[57] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 157-177.
[58] Ameinu Staff, "440 Rabbis Urge Congress to Support Nuclear Deal With Iran - Ameinu," August 17, 2015, https://ameinu.net/news-and-opinion/letters-from-leadership/rabbis4thedeal/, https://ameinu.net/news-and-opinion/letters-from-leadership/rabbis4thedeal/.
[59] "Sign Petition: A Responsibility to Do Better on Iran Deal - US Rabbis' Letter," accessed February 5, 2024, https://www.thepetitionsite.com/369/312/306/american-rabbis-speak-out-a-responsibility-to-make-a-better-deal-with-iran/.

nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore.'"[60] In an interview with Democracy Now, Wise shared that her stance, which has been heavily criticized by the Jewish establishment, is rooted in Jewish values. "Our obligation as rabbis is to ensure that Jewish people are part of the most profound and sacred obligation in Jewish tradition, which is saving lives. And that is the root of our call for ceasefire."[61]

Rabbi Brant Rosen, another member of Rabbis for Ceasefire and one of the co-founders of the Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council, delivered remarks on December 18, 2023 in support of the Committee on Health and Human Relations endorsing a ceasefire resolution in Gaza."[62] Like Wise, he too drew from prophets, utilizing the words of Zechariah 4:6. "Another central precept of Judaism is the prophetic injunction, "Not by might and not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." This sacred imperative is what compels us to reject Israel's militarism or to affirm in any way that Jewish state power will keep Jews safe. If there was ever any doubt, the events of the last two months should make this abundantly clear. It makes us all less safe – Jewish and Palestinians alike. And make no mistake: if this nightmarish war should spread through the region, it will endanger the safety and security of us all. This why so many of us in the Jewish community are literally taking to the streets, calling for an immediate ceasefire and return of all hostages."

Wise and Rosen, along with the rabbis who are calling for a ceasefire, represent a minority of the North American rabbinate. In December of 2023, over 700 rabbis signed a letter explicitly critiquing those who call for ceasefire, stating "the majority of pro-Israel

[60] Matt Shuham, "HuffPost: Rabbis Stage Protest, Call For Cease-Fire Inside United…," Jews For Racial & Economic Justice, January 9, 2024, https://www.jfrej.org/news/2024/01/huffpost-rabbis-stage-protest-call-for-cease-fire-inside-united-nations.
[61] "Jewish Leaders Organize to Halt Israel's Bombardment of Gaza," Democracy Now!, accessed February 5, 2024, https://www.democracynow.org/2023/11/15/rabbi_alissa_wise_gaza_ceasefire.
[62] Brant Rosen, "Lifting Up the Torah of Ceasefire in Chicago City Hall," https://rabbibrant.com/.

Americans, especially clergy of all denominations, believe that a ceasefire before the eradication of Hamas leadership and a return of all hostages, is a grave danger to global security.[63] Their dissent, like that of the prophets whose words they employ, is not without significant risk.

In each of the above cases, modern rabbis explore the contemporary world of warfare and violence through the lens of prophetic dissent, and specifically engage that dissent as a tool by which to contextualize their modern dissenting views. They ground their dissent in that of their ancestors, using public forums like sermons, speeches, and rallies to dissent against the status quo of war. The dissent of Rabbis Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aryeh Cohen, Peter Knobel, Alissa Wise, and Brant Rosen, like the dissent of the prophets before them, was not without its challenges. They each faced varying amounts of backlash, criticism, and in some cases, exclusion from segments of the Jewish community for their views. Despite the challenges, these rabbis, through the words and experiences of prophetic dissenters, cried out against the violence and bloodshed they viewed as antithetical to their values. They accepted the risks, just as the prophets were forced to do, and challenged others to join them in the fight for a more peaceful future. As Rabbi Nahum Ward-Lev explains in his book, *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets: Then and Now*, "It takes wisdom and courage to face squarely the depth of injustice and structural oppression in the current societal order and to call out that the status quo is fundamentally immoral and unsustainable. We all need wisdom and courage to face the full truth of our situation and to take bold action in the face of entrenched powers to bring about systemic change."[64]

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[63] Gabby Deutch, "430 Rabbis Push Back against Jews Calling for Cease-Fire: 'Not Representative,'" Jewish Insider, December 8, 2023, https://jewishinsider.com/2023/12/200-rabbis-push-back-against-jews-calling-for-cease-fire-not-representative/.
[64] Nahum Ward-Lev, *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets: Then and Now* (Orbis, 2019), 22.

Conclusion: The Need for Reflective Dialogue

In 2017, Rabbi Sharon Brous delivered a sermon in which she asked, "Why do we unroll the *sefer Torah* and parade around the sanctuary every week, reciting these words and repeating these stories? For nostalgia's sake? To recall old family tales? We read these sacred narratives to discern what it means to be Moses, Aaron, and Miriam in a world of Pharaohs. What it means to be Tamar, when you are invisibilized by a misogynistic legal system that undermines your very humanity. How to hold grief and anguish, like Hannah; how to fight back against injustice like Abraham, even when you are but dust and ashes… We must reclaim religious leadership as moral leadership. It is faith leaders who can bring inclusion, forgiveness, equity and equality, justice, and love to the forefront of the national conversation"[65] Within these words Brous validates the purpose of this thesis: to explore the intricate relationship between biblical dissent and modern rabbinic activism and investigate how contemporary rabbinic figures draw upon ancient narratives to address pressing political, social, and intellectual issues.

As we investigate the practice of applying biblical dissent to modern contexts, however, it becomes essential to critically evaluate its impact on both the texts themselves and the broader socio-religious discourse. While modern rabbinic actors harness the persuasive power of biblical dissent narratives to advance their dissention, their selected interpretation and framing raise questions about authenticity, integrity, and the potential distortion of sacred texts. The examples within this thesis demonstrate how modern rabbinic dissent often operates within a framework of subjectivity, in which certain voices and perspectives are amplified while others are marginalized or completely ignored. Rabbi Brous,

[65] Rabbi Sharon Brous, "What You Call Politics, We Call Torah," in *No Time For Neutrality: American Rabbinic Voices From An Era Of Upheaval* (Michael Rose Knopf, 2021), 265–71.

for example, draws inspiration from biblical narratives like Korach and the daughters of Zelophehad but fails to mention complexities and inconsistencies within the text and broader interpretive tradition that might weaken her argument. Similarly, the rabbis of chapter three largely cite the words of a few specific prophets who dissent from war, while disregarding or completely erasing the remainder of the prophetic corpus, prophets who speak of war and violence in more neutral or even supportive ways.

The impact of modern rabbinic dissent extends beyond the sermon or speech itself, impacting the perceptions and understandings of contemporary audiences. When biblical narratives are employed without nuanced interpretation, there usage has the potential to perpetuate misconceptions and oversimplifications about the texts and their historical contexts. This raises questions about the responsibility of rabbis who engage with scripture authentically and ethically, and how these texts can be conscientiously utilized in a modern context.

Rabbinic interpretation has always involved some degree of selectivity and contextualization. For example, when Miriam and Aaron dissent against Moses' choice to marry a Midianite woman and question his unique relationship with God (not completely dissimilar from Korach's dissent), Miriam alone is stricken with leprosy. (Numbers 12:1-10) Despite the biblical text mentioning nothing of Aaron's punishment, Rabbi Akiva, a leading sage of the first century, writes that because the text says, "Adonai was angry with them," that Aaron was also stricken with leprosy. Rabbi Yehudah Ben-Betaira disagrees, arguing that either the Torah conceals this truth and Akiva reveals it, or Akiva is "slandering a righteous man." (Talmud Shabbat 97a)[66] In the context of modern rabbinic dissent and

[66] "Masechet Shabbat 97a," accessed February 29, 2024, https://www.sefaria.org/texts.

advocacy, however, the stakes are heightened, and the potential consequences of misrepresentation or distortion demand consideration. While the modern political usage of biblical dissent has the potential to validate and animate, it also comes with the risk of minimizing and even perverting the text itself.

Dissent, as defined by the research of Dr. Barbara J. Falk, Cass Sunstein, and David F. Young, is heavily reliant upon a rich history of earlier dissenting voices, and this means that rabbis will likely continue to use the words and messages of biblical dissenters to animate and inspire action around contemporary causes. But as they do so, it is imperative that they also engage in reflective dialogue about the ethical dimensions of such an act. As we continue to navigate the intersections of religious text and modern activism, let us remain mindful of the profound responsibilities that accompany the task of interpreting and applying biblical text in the pursuit of a more just and equitable future.

Epilogue: A World of Countercultural Possibilities

In previous chapters, I have explored the ways in which contemporary rabbinic dissenters, individuals like Rabbis Sharon Brous, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and others utilize biblical text, and specifically, biblical dissent, as the foundation for their own modern dissenting opinions. The following is my contribution to that same genre of rabbinic writing, a sermon in which I dissent from the classically accepted nuclear family model of relationships and invite listeners to imagine something radically different. In this sermon, I build my dissenting argument upon the biblical dissent of three distinct groups: Jochebed, Miriam, and Bitya, Ruth and Naomi, and David and Jonathan. While I offer several definitions of the word "dissent" in previous chapters, this sermon, like that of other rabbinic dissenters, does not represent them all. As a public form of critique against the social norm, this sermon most closely reflects the definition by academic and scholar Barbara J. Falk, who writes that "Dissent implies both the possibility and the opportunity to engage with and criticize the status quo—literally, to "speak truth to power'"[67]

[67] Falk, "The History, Paradoxes, and Utility of Dissent:, 24-25"

"What relationships would you want if you believed they were possible?" This question, posed by *New York Times* journalist Ezra Klein in a recent podcast episode of *The Ezra Klein Show,* intrigued me. Not because of the question itself, but rather its implication: that perhaps there are relationships in society that seem impossible, but in fact are not. And that should we explore these relationships, they might help us to fulfill our needs for intimacy, connection, and happiness.

But what makes particular relationships seem impossible while others appear ordinary? According to author and social scientist Rhaina Cohen, who joined Klein on the podcast and has written extensively about this topic, it is the societal acceptance and stigma associated with different relationship structures that impact whether people feel safe pursuing them. Intimate male friendships, for example, are often incorrectly perceived as romantic in nature, resulting in a population of straight men who have fewer close friends than their female and queer counterparts. Similarly, single adults with roommates are frequently considered juvenile, causing people to live alone when they might otherwise be fulfilled in a co-living arrangement with peers. These and other enduring biases have triggered what Cohen describes as a "loneliness epidemic," a withdrawal from deep and meaningful relationships that have profoundly harmed people's emotional lives and their sense of connectedness to the world around them.

Throughout the show, Klein and Cohen discuss the "experiment of relationship" as one that has existed throughout human history, and they invite us, as the modern actors in that experiment, to "open the relational apertures of our lives" and imagine a world of more

countercultural possibilities for parenting, intimacy, aging, friendship, and even romance.[68] If anything was possible, what relationships might we want, benefit from, and choose to invest in?

One of the most significant relational connections in the *Tanakh* takes place between the women that raise our prophet, Moses. We read that his birthmother, Jochebed, after concealing him from the murderous Egyptian regime, puts him in a wicker basket and sends him floating down the Nile. His older sister, Miriam, watches over the basket until it is discovered by the daughter of Pharoah, who immediately recognizes that it contains a Hebrew baby. Miriam suggests that the daughter of Pharoah utilize a Hebrew wetnurse, so she pays Jochebed to nurse the child through his infancy, and when he is old enough, *וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן the daughter of Pharoah makes him her son*. (Exodus 2:1-10) In a midrash, the rabbis give Pharaoh's daughter the name, *Bityah* "daughter of Yah," explaining that Adonai came to her and said: *Moses was not your son, and yet you called him your son. You too, are not my daughter, and yet I call you my daughter.* (Vayikra Rabbah 1:3)

These three women, through their rejection of Pharoah's laws and the expectations of their surrounding communities, create a radical form of co-parenting that allows each of them to support and nurture this child in the ways they are able: Jochebed saves and nurses him, Bitya raises him, and Miriam watches over him and helps guide him throughout the Exodus from Egypt. Their relationship is countercultural, by both Egyptian and Israelite standards, and yet somehow it works. Moses grows up without a father but with three mothers, perfectly embodying the proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child." As Amherst College Professor of

[68] Ezra Klein, "Opinion | What Relationships Would You Want If You Believed They Were Possible?," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2024, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-rhaina-cohen.html.

Religion Susan Niditch writes, it is through a "conspiracy of enterprising women who collaborate with each other across ethnic, class, and religious lines [that] the future leader of the Exodus is spared—and with him the entire people Israel."[69]

I wonder what it must have felt like for Jochebed, Miriam, and Bityah to be in relationship across caverns of difference, how challenging it must have been to conceal their arrangement and what sacrifices each of them must have made along the way. Jochebeb and Miriam are forced to watch Moses being raised in the house of their oppressor, relegated to roles unbecoming of their familial relationship to this child. And Bitya not only disobeys her father's decree by allowing a Hebrew baby to live, but also takes on the risk of sanctioning its continued relationship to its birthmother and sister, the Hebrew slaves who had originally defied him. The connection between these three women is complicated, and potentially fraught, and yet somehow, it works. Their story reminds me of a relationship Rhaina Cohen writes about involving a pair of contemporary mothers, Natasha, and Lynda. At 36 Natasha decided to have a child on her own, and her friend Lynda offered to be her birth coach. But when Natasha had an emergency c-section, everything changed. Lynda was the first person to hold and nurture the newborn Elaan, sleeping in the same bed as Natasha and waking up every three and a half hours to feed him. In the early years of Elaan's life Lynda played a very active role, and when the two women realized that she was acting more like a co-parent than a friend, they began the long and arduous journey to validate that role legally.[70]

In many ways Natasha and Lynda are the modern-day Jochebed, Miriam, and Bitya, women who are fighting against social stigma and through personal and legal obstacles in

[69] Susan Niditch, "Another View," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss (Reform Jewish Publishing, 2008), 324.
[70] Ezra Klein, "Opinion | What Relationships Would You Want If You Believed They Were Possible?"

order to make necessary and important relationships work. These mothers understand the challenges and risks associated with being in countercultural relationships, and yet they make the active choice to pursue them anyway.

Another biblical example of such a choice takes place in the book of Ruth, when two widows find themselves adrift in a world controlled by men. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, instructs her to find a new husband to take care of her, but in one of the most compelling cases of biblical dissent, Ruth rejects this directive: "Wherever you go I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may Adonai do to me, if anything from death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17) This declaration is exceptional, as biblical scholar Phyllis Trible explains, "Not only has Ruth broken with family, country, and faith, but she has also reversed sexual allegiance… One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men."[71] Their connection persists throughout the remainder of the narrative, and even after Ruth remarries and bears a child, we read that this child is considered יֶ֣לֶד־בֵּ֔ן לְנָעֳמִ֑י *a child in the line of Naomi* (Ruth 4:17), a testament to the connection Ruth has with her mother-in-law. These two women live in a time and a society where proximity to men is all but necessary for survival, and yet they choose to prioritize their relationship to one another. Of course, we can't know exactly why, and yet we see glimmers of that same relationship in the souls of widows today who choose to grow old together rather than attempting to remarry, or lifelong female friendships that outlast any romantic relationships with men.

[71] Phyllis Trible, "God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality," *Fortress Press*, 1973, 173.

Our biblical foremothers and their contemporaries offer us concrete examples of what relationships outside of or in addition to compulsory coupledom can look like, but they aren't the only ones. Men in the bible also challenge traditional relationship structures, cultivating deep and emotionally intimate friendships that support them in a myriad of ways. The friendship of King David and Jonathan, for example, is described in the book of Samuel as a covenant, a sacred partnership between two individuals who, as the text reads, "bind their souls to one another." (1 Samuel 18:1) The Talmud teaches that the love between these two friends was everlasting (Pirkei Avot 5:16) and after Jonathan's death, David weeps for him, declaring *נָעַמְתָּ לִי מְאֹד נִפְלְאַתְךָ אַהֲבָתְךָ לִי מֵאַהֲבַת נָשִׁים you were most cherished to me, and your love for me was greater than the love of women* (II Samuel 1:26). A friendship like theirs was countercultural at the time, and there were multiple failed attempts to break their trust in and devotion to one another.

This reminds me of the ways in which our modern western society, as opposed to some middle eastern, African, and Asian communities, actively discourages young boys from holding hands with their friends, instead teaching them to center their relationships around masculine activities like athletics. Klein and Cohen explain that while physical intimacy is one of the essential building blocks for connection, in western society it is often interrogated as being romantic in nature, which discourages them from being vulnerable with friends and causes them to seek emotional comforts exclusively from their parents and female partners. And this is a problem that is getting worse, not better. In 1990, more than half of American men reported having at least six close friends. But in 2021, over 30 years later, only a quarter

of men said the same. To make matters worse, 15% of men in 2021 reported having no close friends at all, a five-fold increase from the number in 1990.[72]

The most repeated commandment in Jewish tradition is *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18). It is our most sacred task to be in sacred relationship with one another, and yet so often we struggle to do so. A recent Meta-Gallup survey of more than 140 countries found that nearly one in four people, over a billion human beings worldwide, feel very or fairly lonely. The highest rates of loneliness were reported in young adults, ages 19-29.[73] Our socially accepted models for connection aren't working. As David Brooks writes, "…the nuclear family has been crumbling in slow motion for decades… [and] Americans are hungering to live in extended and forged families, in ways that are new and ancient at the same time."[74]

The co-parenting structure shared by Jochebed, Miriam, and Bitya; the lifelong partnership of Naomi and Ruth; the intimate and enduring friendship of David and Jonathan – these relationships are countercultural, but they are also profoundly practical. They address the human desire for partnership and connection, they combat loneliness and isolation, and they help to make these men and women's lives fuller. Their challenges to the societal expectation of compulsory coupledom are not unlike those occurring in our own time. People who are queer, of color, non-monogamous or polyamorous, single, aromantic, or coupled but unmarried are also continuing to dissent from societal expectations of what intimacy and connection look like. They are fighting for the ability to form and cultivate relationships that

[72] Ezra Klein, "Opinion | What Relationships Would You Want If You Believed They Were Possible?"
[73] Gallup Inc, "Almost a Quarter of the World Feels Lonely," Gallup.com, October 24, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512618/almost-quarter-world-feels-lonely.aspx.
[74] David Brooks, "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake," *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-nuclear-family-was-a-mistake/605536/.

society insists are unorthodox, and are steadily chipping away at the barriers, both legal and societal, that make diverse relationships inaccessible for so many.

It's time that we, as a broader society, embrace the examples of our biblical and contemporary dissidents, opening our hearts and minds to the possibilities of new models for connection. It's time that we fully prioritize practicality over familiarity, allowing ourselves to explore relationships that place meaning, fulfillment, intimacy, and friendship at their center. It's time that we make the countercultural a part of our culture, embracing deep and intimate friendships, diverse parenting arrangements, and even romance that defies conventional labels. Because the "experiment of relationship" only works when we experiment, when we tear down the societal and legal barriers to imagination, and give our souls the freedom to connect. When we fully open the relational apertures of our lives, and give ourselves the permission to answer that central question: "In a world of possibilities, what relationships do we want?"

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