REDEMPTION SONGS:
Toward a Progressive Theology of Redemption

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ABSTRACT

This project consists of three core chapters, plus a substantial introduction and conclusion. The goal of this project was to explore various theologies of redemption in both Jewish and other traditions toward the goal of the author constructing his own theology of redemption.

The project contributes to the field in several ways. First, it offers a wide ranging survey of various theologies of redemption as well as the historical development of theologies of redemption in Judaism, as well as a broad survey of progressive Christian theologies of redemption from a Jewish perspective. In the end, this project makes an argument for a theology of redemption that is rooted in the Levitical vision of holy community and notions of communal responsibility. Furthermore, this project specifically avoids the coupling of the category of redemption with Jewish ideas of messianism, seeking instead a theology that is not focused on a messianic era. This grounding in the book of Leviticus is coupled with postmodern Jewish thought to promote a progressive reading of theologies of redemption and to avoid reactionary readings that might seek a more fundamentalist reading of the same material. In particular this means that ideas of returning people, land or systems back to the way they "should be" are always thought about along with ideas of renewal, growth and change.

The thesis is divided into four main topic areas: Christian liberation and redemption theology, classical Jewish redemption theology, modern and postmodern Jewish redemption theology, and concludes with the authors own theology of redemption.

The main material used in this project are other thinkers constructive theologies, along with several biblical and rabbinic texts. Additionally, several areas of scholarship that may not be overtly theological are engaged including feminist theory, post-colonial theory, queer theory as well as critical readings of biblical and rabbinic sources. Finally, several thinkers in the field were consulted as experts.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: Towards a Progressive Theology of Redemption

In 1845, 31 rabbis gathered at the Reform Rabbinical Conference in Frankfurt, the second of such conferences, to discuss a multiplicity of issues facing their emerging movement. Among the topics of debate was the question of the role of messianism in the developing Reform liturgical tradition. "The concept of the Messiah must continue to occupy a prominent place in the liturgy, but all political and national implications should be avoided," reads a note from a committee that apparently studied the issue.[1] A discussion ensued:

David Einhorn made a point to differentiate political messianism, that is, the returning of Jews to the land of Israel and the reinstatement of Jewish political sovereignty, from a more idealistic and liberal spiritual notion. "The decline of Israel's political independence was at one time deplored, but in reality it was not a misfortune, but a mark of progress…. an elevation of our religion" he argued, articulating a major tenant of classical Reform theology. The Jew is in the world to spread truth to "the four corners of the earth." Taking a jab at Jewish traditionalists to emphasize his sense of Judaism's role in progress he adds, somewhat astonishingly, that "only the Talmud moves in circles, we, however, favor progress." Einhorn wanted to leave behind a Judaism that longed for restoration of the Biblical world and instead understood longing for the Messiah to be a longing for "a spiritual renaissance and the unification of

[1] Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: a Documentary History*, 2 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 183.

all men in faith and in love through the agency of Israel."[2] As part of the same discussion Samuel Holdheim declared:

> The wish to return to Palestine in order to create there a political empire for those who are still oppressed because of their religion is superfluous. The wish should rather be for a termination of the oppression, which will improve their lot as it has improved ours…. But messianic hope, truly understood, is religious. It expresses **either a hope for redemption and liberation from spiritual deprivation and the realization of a Kingdom of God on earth**, or for a political restoration of the Mosaic theocracy where Jews could live according to the Law of Moses" (Holdheim clearly favors the former).

In the end, the following resolution was adopted:

> The messianic idea should receive prominent mention in the prayers, but all petitions for our return to the land of our fathers and for the restoration of a Jewish state should be eliminated from the liturgy.[3]

What is striking to me is not the particular conclusion that the early reformers reached—it makes good sense given the liberal and idealistic worldview this group tended to maintain—but rather, that they maintained a commitment to messianism at all and that they had the sense that redemption was possible, even beyond the new freedoms given to them by Germany, which they lovingly referred to as the Fatherland. It seems to me that they could have just as easily declared themselves redeemed by Germany, and removed any reference to eschatology from their prayer book, but instead they found ways to integrate eschatological thought into their evolving theology and practice. Furthermore, they apparently felt a need to theologize their vision of human progress in a way that was rooted in certain traditional Jewish notions of redemption.

Indeed, at a moment of tremendous and perhaps unprecedented Jewish power and freedom, a moment not so different from our own in the United States, the early reformers choose to maintain a perhaps questionably rational element of faith: a

[2] Ibid, 184.
[3] Ibid, 185.

spiritual commitment to a world of love and justice, a world that could behold the "unification of all men in faith and in love." This was and is a bold vision, regardless of how tragically wrong they were about the Jewish future in Germany or the need for Jewish political power to combat anti-Semitism. Rooting themselves in their best understanding of Jewish tradition, they crafted a progressive theology and practice that would accept nothing but the complete and real liberation of all people as its final aim, suggesting that real redemption was not only their good life in Germany, but also "a termination of the oppression" faced by others. And perhaps most importantly, it seems that they had absolute clarity of vision and a sense of moral truth: The role of the Jew in the world is to bring about justice for all people. Their anti-Zionism was not rooted in any kind of animus towards their fellow Jews, but rather grounded in the firm belief that Torah—that our stories and legends, our audacious vision of community—has something unique, compelling and important for "the four corners of the earth," that is, for human society.

I think that we contemporary liberal Jews struggle to be as bold and courageous, to articulate with clarity that our liberal tradition has a clear message, that it is actually *not* just a collection of mismatched voices, nor is it circular like Einhorn claims in his rather derogatory comment about the Talmud. Rather, as Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."[4] For me as a Jew and as one who stands on the precipice of rabbinic ordination, so does Torah.

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[4]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Keep Moving from This Mountain" (sermon, Temple Israel of Hollywood, Los Angeles, CA, February 26, 1965), accessed March 3, 2014, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/MLK%20Temple%20Israel%20Hollywood.pdf.

Rooted in this notion I embarked on this project to construct a progressive theology of redemption. I wanted to articulate for myself in clear Jewish religious terms what I think I already firmly believed: that the pursuit of justice is not merely the interest of a few Jews on the "social action" committee of a synagogue or the focus of liberal Jews who don't like religion but are "culturally Jewish." Rather, I wanted to find a way to teach others and myself how the relentless effort to heal, repair, improve, make peace and nourish love *is* the practice of Judaism. Like those early reformers in Germany, I too think that things can still be radically transformed in the world, even if our American Jewish experience is currently one of relative power and comfort.

When I first embarked on this project I was trying to find something almost magical. How would redemption work? What does it mean that the world will be utterly transformed from the way that it currently is to how it ought to be? What does it mean to maintain faith that a reality that is still tremendously horrific for so many people might "*nahafuch*[5]", might radically invert to a realm of deep love and justice?

I first began to ask these questions while sitting in Friday night services during my third year of rabbinical school. It was a more traditional service than I usually attended, and the custom of this congregation was to recite most of the *Shema* and its blessings silently. As I turned the page to *emet v'emunah*, I spent some time focusing on this prayer and its message. *Emet v'Emunah*, a praise of God as the redeemer of Israel, reads:

> We affirm the truth that He is our God, that there is no other, and that we are his people Israel. He redeems us from the power of kings, delivers us from the hand of all tyrants. He brings judgment upon our oppressors, retribution upon all our mortal enemies. He performs wonders beyond understanding, marvels beyond all reckoning. He has maintained us among the living. He has not allowed our steps to falter. He guided us to

[5] Esther 9:1

> triumph over mighty foes, exalted our strength over all our enemies. He vindicated us with miracles before Pharaoh, with signs and wonders in the land of Egypt….[6]

Growing up Reform I do not recall ever paying attention to this, in my mind, subversive declaration of God's ability to triumph over oppression. Even in rabbinical school *t'fillah* it is routinely skipped, as though it were a burdensome, lengthy and unnecessary introduction to the declaration of God's ability to redeem that we find in *Mi Chamocha,* the final part of the redemption blessing that is often the only part used in Reform services. I found myself reading over the above translation found in the Conservative siddur, *Sim Shalom,* struck with the vivid power of the language. "*Ha'podeinu mi'yad malachim, malkeinu ha'goalienu mi'kaf he'aritzim*, He redeems us from the power of kings, delivers us from the hand of all tyrants."[7] What, I wondered, is this Jewish notion of redemption, and how can I make sense of it? What are the roots of this vision of human salvation and what might a contemporary theology of redemption look like beyond vague notions of remembering that we were slaves and therefore committing ourselves to other people's freedom?

And so my search began. As I said, I began by searching for some way to understand what seemed like an idea that was almost magical: reality could be transformed, and utterly so. Egypt to the Promised Land, Haman to Esther and a Maccabee revolt were all stories that held out the promise and hope of this narrative. However, understanding this within a rational context like liberal Judaism, and of course, trying to solve the problem of theodicy both appeared elusive first.

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[6] Jules Harlow. *Siddur Sim Shalom*. (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly), 1985. 289
[7] Ibid.

As a modern Jew living after the Holocaust, I just could not accept a traditional theology of redemption wherein God was supposed to mysteriously save us at some an unknown time. I could not justify a belief that God worked in such a way and yet did not do so when we needed God most. How could I believe in a redeeming God that was not moved to action by the screams of terrified and starving children? Indeed, Emanuel Levinas suggests that any discussion of God must be able to be uttered in the presence of the millions of dead children who perished in the Holocaust[8], and that to justify God's response in terms of the potential sins that the victims committed would be "impossible and odious."[9] I fully agree. So my project became a search for understanding the role of God in redemption in such a way that would work for me and the communities that I am preparing to serve.

I first thought that I would get the most help by understanding Christian liberation theology, which seemed to me to be one of the most vibrant and effective examples of human engagement with redemption in a religious context. Liberation Theology was indeed helpful and certainly inspiring. At the same time it is difficult to account for the antinomianism that is so central to Christian thought when trying to rework Liberation Theology in a Jewish context. The same tension emerged from my studies of both Christian feminism as well as queer Christian thought. If I wanted a theology that was workable within a rabbinic framework I needed to account for *halacha*, for a notion of obligation the idea of living within an intentional community of mutual responsibility to each other and to God.

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[8] Robin Podolsky explained Levinas's post-Holocaust critique of theodicy in this way.

[9] Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 453.

Indeed, I ended up finding the foundation for my theology in what I thought would be the most unlikely of places, the book of Leviticus, enshrined in one of our most central legal documents. As a gay Jewish man, Leviticus and I have a fraught relationship, given its direct condemnation of homosexuality.[10] And yet, in my search for a Jewish theology of redemption, I discovered that law, obligation and responsibility function as critical components of a Jewish religious system. This became more and more true for me as I made my way through the sources I studied.

If I am honest this entire rabbinic thesis is a explication of a few verses in Leviticus chapter 25, which, as I explore in chapter 2 of this project, command Israel to redeem both people and land if either has to be sold because of a financial emergency. In these brief verses I found what became for me a kind of religious truth: there is nothing magical about redemption at all. Redemption is—and this is where I agree profoundly with both Rosenzweig and Levinas—bound up completely with human responsibility for the other.

Importantly, this also marks my first step away from a theology of redemption that also includes a significant eschatological foundation. To be clear, it is not that I necessarily think that there will never be that kind of final and triumphant end to suffering that both the Talmudic and early Reform rabbis seem to find inevitable. On the contrary, plugging into this Jewish vision for human potential seems critical for the project of, as one of my favorite poetry teachers in college put it, "imagining freedom." I have, however, concluded that a strong emphasis on the end of the world and a

[10] I realize that not everyone agrees that Leviticus is discussing homosexuality as we understand it today. This is my reading of Leviticus, though a full explanation is not appropriate in this project. I share this view and my approach to this text with Rabbi David Ellenson. His explains this further in his essay "Laws and Judgments as a Bridge to a Better World" *Torah Queeries*. (NYU Press, 2009),98.

messianic future does not serve this generation of Jews well. Rather, it seems to me that it has the potential to encourage complacency and tolerance for what is actually intolerable. Human history shows us that the notion of humanity marching towards an ever more perfect society is not always workable or realistic—we are, it turns out, more human than that. There is suffering and pain and difficulty. The unthinkable occurs and we are forced to think and live it. Our reality is one of great joy and also of barely making it. For me this means that what Jews need is a theology that can account for this truth of human existence. I wrote this rabbinic thesis so that I could begin constructing a theology that puts redemption within reach and make it ours here and now. I wanted a theology of redemption that calls out and invites us to respond to the suffering other.

This thesis is divided into three main research chapters as well as a concluding constructive chapter. In the first chapter I explore Christian theologies of redemption. I don't make the choice to dedicate the first chapter of a rabbinic thesis to Christian thought lightly. This chapter takes a particular look at theologies of liberation and redemption in the context of Christianity because a great deal of important work has been done in the field, and in an American context, it seems nearly impossible to speak of progressive theologies of redemption without examining how various peoples have taken up this project within the dominant and hegemonic Christian framework. Indeed, this might be said for Western civilization, in which Christian thought seems to be inextricably linked to nomic narratives of power, social change, values and morals. Furthermore, it must be said that much of the political and analytical tools with which many kinds of progressive theologies, and indeed progressive politics writ large,

emerge from a Christian context, or at least a context deeply informed by Western Christian thought, values and cultural moorings.

In charting such a course, I implicitly acknowledge that Jewish theology is not constructed in a vacuum, and at the same moment I affirm the need to explore these theologies so that certain boundaries of a Jewish theological praxis might be delineated. This project is not particularly anxious about identifying some kind of purely Jewish theology of redemption and yet, at the same time, it will seek to, in the end, emerge from and operate within a clearly Jewish space. Certainly a goal of this project is to construct a certain kind of Jewish space in the midst of a complicated, and at times deeply Christian terrain. In other words, I want this to be something that Jews can use.

The second chapter dives deeply into classical Jewish sources, especially the book of Leviticus and the traditional liturgy. It is in these early sources that I, as I mentioned earlier, root my theology. This chapter includes a close examination of the use of the Hebrew word for redemption גאל in the Torah as well as an analysis of etymology. What is perhaps most striking from an etymological perspective is the move from a very physical and present idea of redemption to a notion that is bound up in Jewish eschatological thought. In the Torah there appears to be a notion of redemption that is deeply rooted in the idea of returning people and land to their proper place in the cosmos, while in later texts Jewish messianism plays a prominent role in theologies of redemption.

The third chapter explores modern and postmodern Jewish ideas of redemption with an eye toward highlighting possible connections to classical sources. In particular I explore the work of Franz Rosenzweig and Emanuel Levinas as examples of modern

thinkers that can contribute my own thinking on redemption, and feminists Rachel Adler and Tamar Ross and postmodern thinkers. I read all of these thinkers for the ways in which they contribute to a theological discourse that brings together the conservative Levitical notions of redemption with progressive Judaism's vision of *Tikkun Olam*. This chapter sets the stage for my constructive work that concludes the thesis.

When those early reformers were discussing the role of the messiah as they met in Frankfurt, they imagined a Judaism that pointed toward a more holy and whole future. They articulated a vision of justice that could not be tamped down by apathy or despair. They also understood that human beings have a role in making such a world a reality. My theology is one that attempts to ground their vision more fully in a foundation of law and justice. God's holiness is preset among us when we act as our best selves in the direction of one another.

CHAPTER ONE: Redemption and Liberation in Western Christianity

As part of the process of constructing a progressive theology of redemption, it will be important to examine some of the many incarnations of what might broadly be called Christian theologies of liberation and redemption. While a full scale survey of the field is beyond the scope of this project, three particular theological movements are closely enough related to the development of a Jewish theology of redemption to justify exploring in this thesis: Latin American liberation theology, American Christian feminist theology and American queer theology.[1] In this chapter I will explore the critical tenets of these theological movements and will do so with an eye toward how they might inform, limit or otherwise impact my own theology.

It's worth noting that I explore these theologies not only out of academic interest or necessity, but also out of deep respect and honor for the work that has been done before me. Many religious people from a variety of communities, both presently and in the past, take up the project of carving out a theological home in a tradition that might otherwise be experienced as oppressive. This re-imagining of reality is brave and sometimes dangerous, and I offer gratitude and appreciation for those that dared to step forward at moments when the stakes were much higher than they are for me. It is in this radical tradition that I seek to locate myself, and so it is in this tradition that I begin this first chapter.

[1] I do not mean to imply that these are the only theologies worth exploring, there are certainly others that might be important as well, such as African-American liberation theology.

A theme that each of the theologies that I explore in this chapter share is that they maintain a goal of using a religious framework to change the material and spiritual conditions of peoples lives, and they all assert a certain ownership over their traditions in the service of their projects. That being said, they certainly emerge from very different situations and worldviews, and seem to relate to theology as a category in fundamentally different ways. For example, when Gustavo Gutierrez writes that liberation theology "has its origins in the premature and unjust death of many people" he is articulating a material focus for his theology, that is, that liberation theology emerges out of an urgency and necessity to save lives, and for his case in particular, in a context of extreme poverty.[2] This differs from Rosemary Radford Ruether's assertion that "feminist theologians seek to reconstruct the basic theological symbols of God, humanity, male and female, creation, sin and redemption, and the church, in order to define these symbols in a gender-inclusive and egalitarian way." [3] While one might very well argue that Radford Ruether's assertion has important material implications, the project seems, at its roots, to be about the accessibility to God for Christian women (and in later feminist theology for all people); that is, in a certain way, it aims to save the Church from the evils of patriarchy, while liberation theology seeks to use the Church and sacred text to empower poor people to save themselves from or engage in struggle against the violence of extreme poverty. Queer theology strikes out on yet another course, though building upon a feminist foundation, it seeks to, among other things,

[2] Gustavo Gutierrez. *The Power of the Poor in History* (London, SCM, 1983), p. 57
[3] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

highlight and uplift the "queer" nature of sacred narratives, religious experience and ritual. Queer theology asserts that theology is itself "strange, for it sought the strange."[4]

To further complicate the matter, it is critical to mention that presenting these theologies as discrete and as having non-overlapping goals (as I have just done) is entirely problematic. When feminist theologians, for example, invent theologies that understand women as being in control of their own bodies rather than the possession of the men around them, they are, without question, rooting a theology in "the unjust death of many people" as Gutierrez so eloquently articulated. The same can be said for queer theologies that construct ways for religious communities to read the queer body as sacred, clean and that which has its place in the church. Having a place of belonging in the church articulated through theology is radically different from being burned alive, or even the spiritual death that can occur from being shut out from one's place of narrative sustenance. And finally, one can only imagine that the process of developing a theology of liberation as a poor and disenfranchised person is also, fundamentally a process in which one can "reconstruct the basic theological symbols of God, humanity, male and female, creation, sin and redemption, and the church" as Radford Reuther writes about feminist theology. In other words, it is critical to emphasize the ways in which these traditions overlap in specific ways. Indeed, those places of overlap may very well prove to be among the most fertile grounds for reaping the harvest of new religious thought.

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[4] Gerard Loughlin, ed., "Introduction: The End of Sex," in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 7.

Latin-American Liberation Theology

Liberation theology per se has its roots in Latin American Christian, and especially Catholic, thought. More precisely, it emerges out of the experience of oppression of the Latin American poor, and the engagement with those living in extreme poverty and often under military dictatorship on behalf of certain Catholic priests, missionaries and others working in various kinds of capacities for churches or Christian movements.[5] Liberation theology is, at its core, a reaction to extreme poverty and conditions of utter humiliation and degradation among Latin America's most poor and vulnerable, as well as the Church's historic collusion with oppressive regimes that were part of creating the conditions for destitution. Both a populist movement of lay people as well as a courageous and new theological approach from clergy, liberation theology asserts, in the words of one of it's founding fathers, Gustavo Gutierrez, that it is "a way to understand the grace and salvation of Jesus in the context of the present and from the situation of the poor."[6]

Also important to understanding the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America is the larger global political context in which it emerged. Liberation theology in its earliest stages was deeply linked to socialism, with leading liberation theologians suggesting that socialist economic policy be viewed as the praxis for the preferential option for the poor that the movement envisioned. Indeed, Villa-Vicencio notes that in

[5] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 66

[6] Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, trans. Judith Condor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19.

April 1971 a group of Latin American priests gathered in Santiago, Chile and "declared themselves to be in unequivocal support of socialism and the 'peoples' revolution."[7] In the meantime, the official papal response to this newly emerging theological movement was an aggressive "attempt…to break [liberation theology's] association with Marxism." Even as and despite the fact that the church—in part as a reaction to the demand for a theology of liberation—articulated support for the poor in apolitical terms, "liberation theologians rejected the Vatican initiative and continued to engage questions concerning salvation, the preferential option for the poor and social justice through the promotion of socialism over capitalism."[8] Villia-Vicencio writes:

> Marxist undertones were present in the writings of most liberation theologians with some affirming a more uncritical espousal of Marxism than others. Gustavo Gutierrez rejects what he calls 'naïve reformism' insisting that the Church in Latin America needed to 'break its ties with the present order,' making itself 'one with the poor,' and dedicating itself to the 'revolutionary cause.' Indeed he later writes that "only by overcoming a society divided into class…by eliminating the private appropriation of wealth created by human toil, can we build the foundation of a more just society. When asked in 1985 whether liberation theologians could support a more welfare-oriented capitalism as a basis for preferential option for the poor, Gutierrez replied: 'I don't know any who do.'[9]

It is no accident that liberation theology and socialist thought were and are deeply connected. The experience of the poor and politically disenfranchised is central to understanding liberation theology. One might say that the central project of liberation theology is, as Cooper writes, "to counter economic and political poverty."[10] The "preferential treatment of the poor" as it is called in the foundational Medellin

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[7] Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Liberation and Reconstruction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, trans. Judith Condor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 156 .

[8] Ibid, 157

[9] Ibid

[10] Thia Cooper, ed., *The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies: Models for the Twenty-First Century (new Approaches to Religion and Power)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

Document and later widely used by liberation theologians, is not new in Christian thought, but liberation theology re-imagines the notion in a contemporary context radically opposed to what it calls "material poverty" and roots itself in an interpretation of the Gospels that understands care and empowerment of the poor as central to the teachings of Jesus.[11]

A good example of this is the way that Gutierrez reads Matthew, chapter 25:31-36 as a sacred text within which liberation theology can root its praxis. The text is a parable, which depicts Jesus sending those who fed and cared for the poor (depicted as lambs) to "eternal life" and condemning those who were not charitable (depicted as goats) to "eternal punishment." Important in this scriptural parable is Jesus's teaching that feeding the poor becomes transfigured as feeding Jesus, a concept that is taken up by liberation theologians as a central praxis of the movement. I will briefly summarize the story here:

Speaking to those who are being sent to "eternal life" Jesus says, "for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." Confused, the righteous (the lambs) reply "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?" To this Jesus responds "Truly I tell you, *whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me*."[12]

In the parable, feeding, clothing and otherwise providing for the needs of the poor becomes a religious act that has the power to enact a cosmic transformation on the parties involved. Through the act of earthly charity, the Godhead itself is fed through

[11] Gustavo Gutierrez, 28
[12] Matt. 25:35, 37, 40

sacrifice of one's own possessions. Through this sacrifice one attains eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, eternal life in the presence of God, and on earth children of God that are in need have their needs met. This, in a way, becomes an act of grace.

As a result of the rising grassroots movement that later became known as Liberation Theology, the Conference of Latin American Bishops held meetings in 1967 at Medellín, Colombia that resulted in the articulation of some official doctrines of liberation theology.[13] Among other important developments, out of this conference emerged the notion of a distinction between different types of poverty. Section II entitled "Doctrinal Motivation" of the document that emerged from this conference explains these distinctions. Below I have included excerpts that highlight the Bishops's way of thinking about poverty that comes to be a defining feature of Latin American liberation theology:

> We must distinguish:
> a) **Poverty, as a lack of the goods of this world necessary to live** worthily as men, is in itself evil. The prophets denounce it as contrary to the will of the Lord and most of the time as the fruit of the injustice and sin of man.
> b) **Spiritual poverty** is the theme of the poor of Yahweh. **Spiritual poverty is the attitude of opening up to God**, the ready disposition of one who hopes for everything from the Lord. Although he values the goods of this world, he does not become attached to them and he recognizes the higher value of the riches of the Kingdom.
> c) **Poverty as a commitment**, through which one assumes voluntarily and lovingly the conditions of the needy of this world in order to bear witness to the evil which it represents and to spiritual liberty in the face of material goods, follows the example of Christ who took to himself all the consequences of men's sinful condition and who "being rich became poor" in order to redeem us.
>
> In this context **a poor church**:
> a) **Denounces the unjust lack of this world's goods and the sin that begets it;**
> b) **Preaches and lives in spiritual poverty,** as an attitude of spiritual childhood and openness to the Lord;
> c) **Is herself bound to material poverty.** The poverty of the church is, in effect, a constant factor in the history of salvation.

[13] Thia Cooper, 2.

> All members of the church are called to live in evangelical poverty, but not all in the same way, as there are diverse vocations to this poverty, that tolerate diverse styles of life and various modes of acting. Among religious themselves, although they all have a special mission to witness within the church, there will be differences according to personal charisms.
>
> Against this background, it will be necessary to reemphasize strongly that the example and teaching of Jesus, the anguished condition of millions of poor people in Latin America, the urgent exhortations of the Pope and of the Council, place before the Latin American Church a challenge and a mission that she cannot sidestep and to which she must respond with a speed and boldness adequate to the urgency of the times.
>
> Christ, our Savior, not only loved the poor, but rather "being rich he became poor," he lived in poverty. His mission centered on advising the poor of their liberation and he founded his Church as the sign of that poverty among men.
>
> The church itself has always tried to fulfill that vocation, notwithstanding "very great weaknesses and flaws in the past."-The Latin American Church, given the continent's conditions of poverty and underdevelopment, experiences the urgency of translating that spirit of poverty into actions, attitudes and norms that make it a more lucid and authentic sign of its Lord. The poverty of so many brothers cries out for justice, solidarity, open witness, commitment, strength, and exertion directed to the fulfillment of the redeeming mission to which it is committed by Christ.
>
> The present situation, then, demands from bishops, priests, religious and laymen the spirit of poverty which, "breaking the bonds of the egotistical possession of temporal goods, stimulates the Christian to order organically the power and the finances in favor of the common good."
>
> The poverty of the church and of its members in Latin America ought to be a sign and a commitment--a sign of the inestimable value of the poor in the eyes of God, an obligation of solidarity with those who suffer.[14]

What seems critical in this document is the identification of a category of poverty that is not to be extolled as virtuous but rather should be opposed as an affront to God. This is a critical break from the status-quo and represents one of the most important contributions of liberation theology to Christian thought. This thinking emerged in a post-Vatican II world in which new political analysis of first and third world development was on the rise. In thinking globally about the very local and immediate pastoral needs of their communities, Christian clergy began to include a sharp critique of first world development into their theology. As liberation theologian Leonardo Boff

[14] "Conference of Latin American Bishops Medellín, Colombia: Excerpts On Justice, Peace and Poverty from Final Document 6 September 1968," July 29, 2013, accessed July 29, 2013, http://personal.stthomas.edu/gwschlabach/docs/medellin.htm.

puts it, "the poverty of Third World countries was the price to be paid for the First World to be able to enjoy the fruits of over abundance." The document that came out of Medellin, (and several later documents from other meetings) sometimes referred to as the "Medellin Document" articulates how this analysis might be intelligible as a part of Catholic theology.[15]

As the Medellin Document indicates, the priests find a way to rearticulate traditional Christian notions of poverty in such a way as to preclude some conditions of poverty from being theologically justifiable. That is, they reject the theodicy of the Church in terms of its traditional understanding of poverty. In doing so, they, along with ecclesiastical base communities,[16] create conditions that allow for a theology of redemption, and the redemption they imagine is, at least in part, one which directly speaks to the oppressive conditions of people lives. This is not the theology that Joe Hill pokes fun at in his song "The Preacher and the Slave" when he writes "You will eat, bye and bye, in that glorious land above the sky…work and pray, live on hay…you'll get pie in the sky when you die. That's a lie!" While continuing to exalt and celebrate a "spiritual poverty" as well as the choice to "commit" to poverty and thereby commit oneself to a poor church that is doing the work of God, one can and perhaps should be moved to take action against material poverty that brings about human suffering. The Medellin Document calls such poverty "the fruit of the injustice and sin of man," and in doing so offers a religious framework and justification for organizing and activism. In

[15] Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 67-70

[16] Communities of poor and working Christians who study the Bible together, develop their literacy and at times construct liberation theology.

this theodicy, poverty is the outcome of sin, and as such, can be theologically opposed while maintaining a view of God's justice.

From a Jewish perspective, this is both interesting and also problematic. The relocating of responsibility for material poverty into the hands of human beings seems to be, as the authors note in the Medellin Document, in line with the Prophetic vision of justice. Consider the first Haftarah of Admonition in which Isaiah warns Israel of coming destruction:

> "Alas, she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt— but now murderers. Your silver has turned to dross; your wine is cut with water. Your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves, every one avid for presents and greedy for gifts; they do not judge the case of the orphan, and the widow's cause never reaches them.[17]

In this we see Isaiah placing responsibility for social injustice—perhaps "material poverty"—directly in the hands of the people, and in particular the leaders. The absence of justice, a kind of poverty of goodness, is configured as a responsibility that the people must bear. Isaiah mourns the loss of Jerusalem as a *kriah ne'ehmanah*, a faithful city, and in doing so constructs the crimes of Israel's leadership as religious transgressions, an affront to God and Torah. This is not so different from the Priests at the Medellin conference declaring that a poor church "denounces the unjust lack of this world's goods and the sin that begets it." In these ways and more, it might be said that a Jewish vision of a redeemed world, or at least a Jewish politic of justice, overlaps in important ways with the worldview of the liberation theologians.

[17] Isaiah 1:21-23

There are, however, theological issues that make Catholic liberation theology problematic for Jews and ultimately an unworkable solution for the Jew in search of a theology of redemption.

First, liberation theology is for the already saved.[18] Redemption, for Christianity, occurs in the act of faith in the Passion. Jesus sacrificed himself, God his beloved son, as the ultimate act of love for humanity, and as the ultimate redemptive act. One is therefore not in need of redemption in the classical sense because one's faith in Christ is a redemptive faith, it is a faith of salvation. Liberation theology then works to reaffirm faith in the divine and the messianic status of Jesus Christ visa via its central notion of poverty. The Christian who understands the universe through a lens of liberation theology does not see poverty, war or injustice as a lack of redemption but rather as an affront to the already redeemed world, or perhaps as that which is outside of the Kingdom of God. God through Jesus has already saved the world, it's up the world to see this or not, and it's up to the human beings to prepare themselves for eternity in God's kingdom. Engaging in the praxis of liberation theology from a Jewish perspective this is problematic: Judaism asserts that we live in a world that is still ultimately unredeemed. Despite many theological differences among different Jewish groups, we seem to agree on this principle. We know that redemption is possible; our narrative tradition of Passover, Purim, and Yom Kippur give us some sense of what both communal and personal redemption might be like, but a world in which great injustice still occurs is an unredeemed world. A theology that seeks to frame this world as redeemed is not in line with the prophetic tradition.

[18] This idea came up in conversation with Dr. Leach Hochman, profressor of Jewish thought at HUC-JIR LA Skirball campus.

Furthermore, and perhaps most centrally, liberation theology, like much of Christian thought, is, in certain ways, at odds with the Jewish legal tradition. For rabbinic Judaism, the world is unredeemed but Torah is still a fact of our worldview. We are the recipients of a legal tradition. The *law* provides for the poor and the needy. More precisely, the law compels *us* to provide for them, and not really to insure our own salvation (though there are elements of this theology that suggest that certain kinds of redemption will occur and have occurred when Israel upholds the law.[19]) If the law is observed there should not be people living in extreme poverty. Basic needs are provided for. The law is, for rabbinic Judaism, a liberating force, even while the tradition imagines other kinds of ultimate redemptions. For liberation theology, liberation comes through empowerment of the poor, and for those with resources, through commitment to the poor. Both involve "spiritual poverty," the "attitude of opening up to God, the ready disposition of one who hopes for everything from the Lord."

Feminist Theology

Feminist theology is a tremendously broad category, if it can be said that it is even one category at all. Feminism has impacted religious thought in virtually all of the major world traditions, and certainly the monotheistic traditions. This section is not an overview of feminist theology—that would require its own project. Rather, I will explore some ways in which American Christian feminists have interacted with and

[19] Consider Deuteronomy 11:26-28 which opens with the words "See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God…."

constructed new ideas of redemption and liberation. Furthermore I will explain the ways in which we might understand feminist theology and especially it's praxis writ large to be a theology of redemption.

Similar to my approach with liberation theology, I seek to understand ways in which Christian feminist thought might inform a Jewish theology of redemption, as well as to highlight critical points of departure.

A feminist question in Christian Feminist theology is: if Christ equally redeems women and men, why has the Christian church continually reinforced sexism in society?[20] Taking up this and similar questions, feminist theologians have both offered important critiques of Christian thought and church practice, as well as pioneered ways that Christians can use Scripture and church literature as critical source material and as a moral compass to make their case for material and spiritual change within the church. One component of Christian theology that Christian feminism builds upon is the notion of Jesus removing all differences between people, that is, through Christ social barriers will be broken. There will be nothing dividing men from women, the enslaved from the free or the rich from the poor. These are earthly, material problems that Christ will redeem people from—these divisions have no place in God's Kingdom.[21]

For some early Christians, redemption through Christ (baptism) was a inversion of Gen 1:27 (in which God created male and female), through which unity & dissolution of genders is achieved. In this way, Christ's redemptive power can be viewed as a

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[20] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The emergence of Christian feminist theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4

[21] Ibid

second creation.[22] Others reject this and assert that "although the new humanity in Christ has been assumed spiritually, physically and morally we are still in sin."[23] Full redemption without gender is in the future. This later view won out in much of official Church doctrine, but this early debate in Christian thought provides at least one important point of entry and inquiry for feminism, as Christian feminists can mine this theological tradition to support alternatives to the church patriarchy.[24]

It is critical here to address the tremendous diversity found within Christian feminism. Kwok Pui-Lan, the William F. Cole Professor of Christian Theology and Spirituality and Episcopal Divinity School writes that

> Since the 1980's, the tendency of Euro-American feminist theologians to generalize their experiences as if they speak for all women has been criticised by both white scholars and women of colour. When these feminist theologians charge that traditional male theology has left out women's experiences, they generally have in mind the experiences of middle-class white women….Euro-American feminist theology is influenced by the intellectual climate and feminist theory developed at the time. The early wave of feminist theory, produced by Sherry Ortner, Gayle Rubin and Nancy Chodorow in the 1970's, did not pay sufficient attention to cultural and historical specificity."

One of the more important intersections, in this regard, is the intersection of Christian feminism and liberation theology. Early on in feminism, women of color, Third World women, Jewish women and other feminists with non-European, Christian middle-class identities began to articulate feminist theories that spoke to issues they faced as women as well as issues of racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, classism and other issues of oppression. A critique of mainstream feminism as a body of thought that emerged from and spoke to the location of Christian, white, middle and upper class women began to emerge. Feminist women of color, for example, also spoke of the

[22] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: a Theological History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 2.
[23] Ibid, 3.
[24] Ibid, 3.

struggle against racism that they shared with men of color, as well as the ways in which white feminist women were complicit in societal racism. This complicated feminism in important ways as new voices carved out space for feminist theory that spoke to communities with intersectional identities.

On the changes that emerged in feminist theology as women of color and third world women's voices joined the conversation, Kwok Pui-Lan writes:

> Feminist theology has become a global movement as women with different histories and cultures challenge patriarchal teachings and practices of the church and articulate their faith and understanding of God. Feminist theology is no more defined by the interests of middle-class European and American women and by Eurocentric frameworks and mid-set. Its scope has been much broadened to encompass the theological voices of women from the Third World and from minority communities in the United States. These newer theological partners have created new names for their theological movements, utilized new resources as theological data, challenged established norms of interpretation, and raised significant questions about the production of theological knowledge. [25]

One example of the impact of these changes that Kwok cites is in the treatment of sin. Reflecting on work by Valerie Saiving, she discusses the ways in which the Christian sins of "pride, disobedience or egotism" are not really women's sins because "these experiences reflect the experiences of men who enjoy more power in society than women. " Rather, the argument continues, "women's problem or sin is the failure to assume responsibility, sloth, the lack of ego and triviality." Pui-Lan points out that these categories "locate sin primarily in the individual without placing it in the larger contexts of the social and political." This is problematic in that it reflects a white-middle class orientation and "not the majority of women of colour, who have to assume crucial responsibility for the survival of their family and community."[26]

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[25] Kwok Pui-Lan "Feminist theology as intercultural discourse," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23

[26] Ibid, 30.

I would argue that much of the feminist theological discourse that emerged as a critique of the Western, white and middle-class features of early feminist theology has served and continues to serve as a redemptive theology of its own. The voices of critique helped open up the space of feminist theology on a global scale in a way that was able to account for many more differences among women. In a sense, this was and continues to be a *tikkun*, a repairing of something that was not right.

Ultimately, I think it can be said that one of the meta-projects of Christian feminism is the redemption of women within Christianity, or perhaps more broadly, the redemption of the Church from sexist oppression. While contemporary feminist theology emerged along with second wave feminism in the 1960s, Radford Ruether notes that a first wave feminist theology "arose in conjunction with the abolitionist movement against slavery. In this context one finds some of the first systematic efforts to challenge the sexist paradigms of Christian theology that upheld the ideology of male domination."[27] This history provides for a rich framework for thinking feminism with a Christian context. Finding redemption of women within Jesus's redemptive power rearticulates Christianity as a feminist movement, or at least as an anti-sexist movement.

In this thinking we again find resources as well as problems for Judaism. To explore this, let's take a look at a powerful quote from Radford Ruether:

> Redemption cannot be something fabricated for the sake of the world, but is the possibility for human beings, women and men, to be themselves the birthplace of the divine. To attend this phenomenon is to recall feminist theology to its most demanding dogmatic task--to articulate the coming of God in the world today[28]

[27] Radford Ruether, *Companion to Feminist Theology*, 6.
[28] Ibid, 131.

In this quote Radford Ruether describes redemption as "articulating the coming of God in the world today."

On the one hand, from a Jewish perspective, we might say that there is a certain beauty and elegance in this notion. There is nothing really anti-Jewish about the idea that God's nearness is redemptive. It is also possible that Judaism could, at least metaphorically, think about human beings being "the birthplace of the divine" if by this one means that, for example, that we are messengers of certain kinds of truth, such as we see demonstrated in the prophetic tradition. However, missing from this is, again, the legal framework that both Torah and the rabbinic tradition assert as central for justice and ultimately for redemption. Consider the words of Radford Ruether in contrast to the conclusion of Rachel Adler's essay on renewing *halakha* in her book *Engendering Judaism*:

> Together we can regenerate a world of legal meaning that fully, complexly, and inclusively integrates the stories and revelations,
> the duties and commitments of Jewish women and men.[29]

Importantly, calling for a nearness to God and a loss of all identity is, implicitly, a rejection of Torah. Christianity calls for faith in God over law and the command of Torah. In this way, the Torah itself becomes a symbol of the old patriarchy that is rejected through baptism. Through baptism one becomes one who "articulates the coming of God in the world today." The inversion of the Hebraic creation story in favor of Christ who undoes the kinds of divisions articulated in Genesis becomes a rejection of Judaism and the rabbis, or at least of our system of law.

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[29] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: an Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 59

But we are law people, and Jewish women and men will not be redeemed from sexism through baptism, as powerful and important as that metaphor might be for Christian feminists doing (important!) work to reclaim liberating trends in their tradition. Judaism requires its own, indigenous theology of redemption, and in later chapters I will explore how Jewish feminism already provides us with a strong foundation with which to construct this theology.

Queer Theology

Queer theology, as this project will understand it, emerges out of queer theory and, by extension, post-modern feminism. While it certainly draws upon gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender studies, it is precisely not GLBT studies that it ultimately responds to, but rather, as David Halperin puts it, the "positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of his or her sexual practices…."[30]

Drawing upon queer theory, Christian queer theology (and almost all queer theology is, at this point, Christian) seeks to highlight as well as reimagine the ways in which Christian thought, narrative and ritual might be understood as a theologically (and by extension politically and socially) subversive. I will focus on two primary ways that queer theology operates as a redemptive theology within Christianity. First, it reads certain texts, especially Scripture (but other "texts" as well such as historic Christian art) as being or at least being readable as queer. It does so toward the goal of

[30] As quoted in Gerard Loughlin, ed., "Introduction: The End of Sex", 9.

subverting the myth of a universal normative sexuality and gender. Secondly, queer theology, much like liberation theology and to some extent feminist theology, emphasizes Jesus's love and focus on the outcast and downtrodden. In queer theology, this becomes a celebration of the strange and different in society, and an affirmation of the position of the outsider as a religiously and theologically sacred position.

In the anthology *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Gerard Loughlin begins the introduction by relating the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee found in John 2:1-11. The story is well known as the story of Jesus turning water into wine, but Loughlin does not focus on this and instead asks "who was the bridegroom to whom the steward spoke in his amazement that the best wine had been kept until last, when everyone was drunk?" Loughlin then proceeds to explain how one might read the story as a marriage not between the actual couple—they are not important enough to even be named in the story, but rather, as a marriage between Jesus and the guests, or even as a marriage between Jesus and John. He notes that "in a sense, the wedding is not about the couple getting married, but about a engagement or even marriage between Jesus and those who believe in his divinity."[31] He then goes on to note that certain medieval stories go as far as to tell of John leaving his wife to wed himself to Jesus as a disciple, and points to art that depicts this marriage. Other traditions speak of give Jesus "giving suck like a nursing woman, feeding Christian souls with the Eucharistic blood from his side."

Without diving into the nuances of the text work that Loughlin does in his work, we can still see where he is going with this. Jesus and the early Christians—his

[31] Ibid,1.

disciples, who adorn countless stained glass windows and whose bodily images represent some of the most celebrated sacred art on earth---can be understood, even need to be understood, as outsides, as non-normative, as *queer*. In this sense, the Church is founded on a strange love between men, providing an important point of entry into Christian thought for gay and lesbian people. Furthermore, if one were to argue that these were celibate relationships, Loughlin points out that celibacy itself is a deviant sexuality: the church makes room and even holds up those who reject normative sexuality by embracing a totalizing rejection of human sexuality. [32]

This reading of Christianity offers a redemptive narrative to those find themselves targeted by oppressive uses of sacred text. When a gay man is called a sinner for loving who he loves and for not being "normal," queer theology can provide a framework that celebrates and affirms difference and rejects an attempt to universalize the particular experience of heterosexuality. [33]

This leads to the second focus of queer theory that I will discuss, which is the more broad attention it pays to the outsider in society. In this sense, Christian theology becomes understood as queer in its radical love for the outcast. The good Christian, one who walks in the path of Christ, is one who embraces—one who loves—those who are not to be loved. Christian love is a forbidden love that becomes ritualized and sanctified because it is a love of the forbidden. Stories of Jesus ministering to the poor and the outcast become material evidence in the case against heterosexism and attempts to eradicate queer people from the Church.

[32] Ibid, 9.
[33] Ibid, 10.

When one understands Jesus as radically loving the outside, Christ comes to represent a radically unstable and dynamic identity in which the human fantasy of the normal and stable, the ideal of what is human is challenged and expanded by an image of a god-human that is both deeply mortal and yet radically divine, even ideally divine. By "becoming a part of this queer body that our own bodies--and their identities--are set upon a path of transfiguration, resurrection, and ascension: a baptismal path of eternal transformation."[34]

I think that one of the problems facing Judaism when it comes to the canon of Christian queer theory is its difficulty in dealing with the politically immediate.

Seeming to borrow from Christian feminism, queer theory imagines a messianic future in which all identities are understood as constructed and in some ways slip away as we experience a total liberation through Christ. Loughlin notes that in this future all identity will be "washed away in baptismal waters." All will radically become one with Christ.[35]

I don't think that GLBT or queer oriented Jews share this vision for the future—and certainly not for the present. In classic Jewish messianic thinking, Jews are gathered in Israel and a restoration and renewal of Jewish life will take place. Again, we have our legal tradition to contend with, and the traditional laws that govern human sexuality are, for queer people (and we could call all of us queer, feminists, liberals, GLBT people, etc), unlivable. However, I don't think that most queer Jews are ready to throw out the entire vision. A return to a place of order and laws of justice, a restoration of a now broken community, a much deeper and active engagement with

[34] Ibid, 12.
[35] Ibid, 13.

Torah—these all seem to be things that would need to be a part of a queer Jewish theology of redemption.

There are important parts of queer theory that we will need as we work to construct queer Jewish theology, which is only now in its infancy. For example Daniel Boyarin has done important work using queer theory, feminism and gender studies to think about Jewish masculinity in a way that emphasizes the importance of Jewish gender archetypes that stands in contrast to Western hegemonic notions of masculinity.[36] Work like this is critical in constructing a Jewish theology of redemption that will work for queer people—and be queer itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined three theological movements that seek to offer a religious framework for redemption to particular communities. The work that the theologians that constructed them have done is critical and important work that anyone working on theologies of liberation and redemption needs to be in conversation with.

These Christian movements have been able to be of great service to oppressed people, and have worked to allow Christian thought the serve as an empowering and liberating force.

Judaism is not without this kind of work, especially in the area of Jewish feminism. I think we are ready for a broad theology of redemption in progressive

[36] Daniel Boyarin, *Contraversions*, vol. 8, *Unheroic Conduct: the Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)

Judaism that draws upon the work of Jewish feminists, queer Jews and other Jewish activists, but that helps answer questions and provides resources where Christian theology cannot for those of us who seek to "turn it, and turn it…. reflect on it and grow old and gray with it." [37]

[37] Pirke Avot 5:22

CHAPTER TWO: Redemption in Classical Judaism

Take note of our affliction and make our struggle Yours.
Redeem us swiftly for Your Name's Sake,
For You are the mighty redeemer.[1] (Weekday Amidah)

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One of his kinsmen shall redeem him,
Or his uncle or his uncle's son shall redeem him,
Or anyone of his family who is of his own flesh shall redeem him…(Leviticus 25:48)

Redemption in Judaism is an immense and dynamic theological category. In this section I will explore various ways that our ancestors constructed theologies of redemption through examination of certain classical texts ranging from the biblical to the medieval periods. In particular I will examine examples of theologies of redemption in the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic liturgy, as well as the work of Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (Maimonides).

This chapter will not be exhaustive. Redemption is a one of the core theological categories in Judaism; It would surely be possible to glean new and significant ideas about redemption from nearly every period of our history and all of the major literary works that make up the Jewish literary corpus, not to mention the many different religious movements throughout our history. From anti-rabbinic Karaites to Sabatians to contemporary Haredi Jews on the West Bank to goddess worshiping Jews in San Francisco, it is possible to argue that every Jewish religious community—and probably secular communities as well—engage in thinking about redemption, even if they don't

[1] *Mishkan T'filah* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007), 84.

call it that. Judaism is a rich and dynamic tradition without universally agreed upon boundaries, and this truth imposes certain limits on this project and forced choices to be made. In other words, I am looking at certain parts of our tradition and not at others, because one could literally look to everything in search for traces of theologies of redemption.

I look at examples from the Tanakh, rabbinic literature and the work of Maimonides, and in the next chapter at modern Jewish thought, Jewish feminism and queer Jewish thought, because these are parts of the tradition to which I, as a thinker, as a student and as a future rabbi, feel deeply connected. They are also elements of the tradition that help to connect theologies of redemption with the work of creating a more socially just world, another factor that helped me determine where to focus.

Redemption in the Hebrew Bible

As is the case in the biblical world, there is not one clear theology of redemption that one can point to, but rather, a collection of narrative traditions that span various themes, times and locations.

There is, of course, the grand national redemption of the Israelites from Egypt which becomes a kind of archetypal theme that tends to follow this narrative: The Israelites are in some kind of danger (as God's chosen people) and God delivered them to safety from this danger to a kind of idealized state. This journey is repeated again in the book of Esther, and also in less grand narratives, such as the episode with Balak, who ends up blessing rather than cursing Israel.

Significantly, we can understand the prophetic texts in particular as outlining a cycle of pain and loss followed by a promise of restoration & renewal, operating on the political and national level in and around an era of Jewish sovereignty. We find one of the more prominent examples of this idea in the cycle of summer haftarah readings that move from readings of affliction and condemnation, peaking at Tisha B'av, followed by the sweet and gentle readings of consolation that begin with those important words, *nachamu, nachamu ami,* comfort, oh comfort my people.[2]

There are, of course, stories of redemption on the micro level that also point to later national redemption. Consider the tender (at least by some readings) scene of Boaz and Ruth on the threshing floor[3], or perhaps Joseph's dream interpretation that lead him out of bondage and into the palace. Both of these are examples of individuals experiencing redemption in their own lives, and their individual redemption portends national redemption for People Israel. It is through Ruth that we eventually get King David who defeats Israel's enemies, and of course, through Joseph the entire drama of the Exodus starts to take shape.

There is also, beyond the micro and national, the deeply universal redemptive moment of God's promise to Noah as the waters of disaster recede and order is restored, in which God promises to never again bring destruction as God did with the flood. This redemptive moment illustrates the possibility of bringing a sense of

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[2] Isaiah 40:1

[3] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, Bilingual ed. (Philadephia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), 44. In their commentary on the Book of Ruth 2:20, Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky note that the word *Goel* "refers to a person responsible for a relative, and to God in relation to Israel. God as a redeemer acts to rescue Israel (as in the Exodus narrative; see "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm," Exod. 6:6, a passage recited during the Passover Seder).

restoration to the entire universe, harking back to the sense of abundance, possibility and innocence we encounter in the earliest days of our story in Eden.

To begin, let us take a closer look at Redemption in the Hebrew Bible, and in particular, try to get a sense of what biblical authors might have had in mind when using the word גאלה.

גאלה and its Discontents

The root *GAL* (גאל), in relation to the idea of redemption, appears approximately 73 times in the Hebrew Bible.[4] In particular, we find the word used on multiple occasions in the book of Leviticus in a series of regulations relating to Israelites being in indentured servitude or selling off their property to pay off debt (and both seem to be understood as a last resort):

> But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land. If your kinsman is in straits and has to sell part of his holding, his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his kinsman has sold. If a man has no one to redeem for him, but prospers and acquires enough to redeem with, he shall compute the years since its sale, refund the difference to the man to whom he sold it, and return to his holding.[5]

In this passage God warns Israel that the land ultimately belongs to God, not to landowners and, as such, there are regulations governing the sale and transfer of the land. In particular, the larger community is obligated to "redeem" land that a member

[4] *Concordancia Chadasha*, 403. The concordance also notes that the this particular root appears approximately 13 additional times in places that the concordance does not read the root as referring to redemption.
[5] Leviticus, 25:23-27

of the community was forced to sell because she or he was in "straits."[6] In its most literal sense, *g'ulah* here might mean to "buy back" or to return property to the proper owner, as understood by the legal framework governing land, a framework that exists wholly within a context of God's covenant with Israel. *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* concludes similarly that גאל is one of the "verbs of delivering" and suggests that at least one simple meaning for the word could be "to restore, repair."[7] I would suggest that this definition is, in fact, centrally important for Jewish thought, as I will explore later on.

The next usage of *g'ulah* in the Hebrew Bible appears shortly after the verse above, in a nearly identical context, and confirms a sense of restoration or repair.

> If a resident alien among you has prospered, and your kinsman being in straits, comes under his authority and gives himself over to the resident alien among you, or to an offshoot of an alien's family, he shall have the right of redemption even after he has given himself over. One of his kinsmen shall redeem him, or his uncle or his uncle's son shall redeem him, or anyone of his family who is of his own flesh shall redeem him; or, if he prospers, he may redeem himself.[8]

As in the previous passage, *g'ulah* is again used in a legal context in relation to an obligation that is upon the community and, in particular, families, to buy someone back from indentured servitude, just as they are required to "redeem" land of a relative that was sold to pay off debt.[9] If we were to construct a definition of redemption based

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[6] Commentary by Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus, the Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 174-175.

[7] G. Johannes. Botterweck, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Revised., ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 2:351.

[8] Leviticus, 25:47-49

[9] Another word, פדה, also meaning redemption, is most often associated with the obligation of parents to redeem the first born from priests. See the Sarna's comment on Exodus 13:13 in the JPS Torah Commentary, page 67. For contemporary application, see the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben* in the Koren Siddur.

solely on the book of Leviticus we might, at first glance, say that it is rather narrow in scope, and that its theological possibilities are rather limited.

However, as is often the case with Leviticus, it also seems that the statutory understanding of *g'ulah* has important and wide-ranging theological possibilities. One way of reading this permits a construction of a theology rooted in the idea that God ultimately "owns" everything and everyone, all life and property on earth, including the earth itself, in the way that Leviticus imagines God's ownership over the land. To be in covenant with God, or more simply, to be faithful to God, in this context, might mean to accept this cosmic view of reality as true. *Redemption, then, in this context, means, in its broadest sense, the obligatory, divinely commanded restoration of a divinely ordained order in the universe, an order that we see most intimately in the actual ordering of people and possessions in society, and especially with People Israel*. In this view, God commands a certain cosmic arrangement that plays out for human beings on the level of the proper placement of people with each other and on the earth, and the role of Israel is to maintain, or when needed, recreate, such an order. In this way, God's redemptive power is enacted in Jewish life, at the juxtaposition of divine law and the communal response to the obligations established in that law. As the *Theological Dictionary* notes, "behind this usage [of גאלה in Leviticus] stands the strong feeling of tribal solidarity: not only the members of a clan, but also their possessions, form an organic unity, and every disruption of this unity is regarded as intolerable and as something which must be restored or repaired."[10] The Levitical, and arguably the biblical notion of redemption is

[10] *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 351

rooted in an urgency to maintain the integrity of the community, of which each person as well as the households and the lands they dwell on play an integral part.

This understanding is not actually so different from a grander idea of redemption that we find earlier in the Torah, albeit with a slightly different formulation of the word. Prior to Leviticus, גאל appears just twice in the Torah in any form at all, and in both cases in text that appears more narrative rather than legal. We find the first usage of any form of גאל in Genesis 48:16 in Jacob's blessing to his sons:

> The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm— Bless the lads. In them may my name be recalled, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth.[11]

The next appearance is in the book of Exodus, as God speaks to Moses promising him that God will *redeem* the Israelites from bondage. As I will show later, the use of גאל in both of these narrative contexts is potentially deeply connected to the statutory use in Leviticus. Furthermore, the intertexual relationship has theological significance and warrants a discussion:

> Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the LORD. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will **redeem** you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the LORD, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the LORD." [12]

In both of these texts we find a notion of *g'ulah* that points to the transformational experience of being redeemed. Rather than the legal details of who and what must be redeemed, Genesis and Exodus paint gorgeous pictures of moments when this process actually unfolds. In particular, in the Exodus from Egypt, we find the

[11] Gen. 48:16

[12] Exodus, 6:6-8

source for the most significant, and certainly the archetypal moment of redemption in Jewish history. In this verse God foretells of the grand redemption that will occur for Israel in the near future. God will deliver Israel out of bondage—out of servitude—and return Israel to the promised ancestral land, in a moment that at once creates as it simultaneously restores Zion. This story becomes, of course, the redemption story *par excellence*. It provides the narrative and spiritual framework for the Passover story, and continues to inspire oppressed peoples into the present day.[13] Indeed, God's first utterance of the root גאל portends some of humanity's greatest aspirations throughout history, and in this way, the promise of God redeeming Israel "with an outstretched arm" is a theologically critical moment.

Is it, however, so different from the material that we find later in the book of Leviticus? Leviticus can sometimes get a bad reputation for being, at best, dry, boring and full of archaic, priestly legal material and, at worst, prescribing ways of living that we as moderns find outright offensive[14]. However, God's redemption of Israel in Exodus is a fulfillment of the obligations God sets upon Israel in Leviticus as the people are instructed through Moses. In Leviticus God requires that God's land and God's people remain together and constructs laws of redemption as the process by which this idyllic state is achieved. Families belong together and communities belong together, Leviticus insists. People Israel belongs on ancestral lands in a state of covenantal freedom, not toiling away as a slave because they happened upon a stroke of financial bad luck.

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[13] For example, some groups of Enslaved Africans in the Americas understood themselves as Israelites and dreamed of a promised land of freedom, a land of milk and honey; a place without degradation and humiliation.

[14] Examples of this include the regulations for menstruating women or the prohibitions against Homosexuality.

Is this not the same standard that God holds God's self to in the drama of Exodus? Is God's redemption not in perfect compliance with the legal framework that God will eventually reveal to Israel in the book of Leviticus? In this way, redemption, even in its biggest and most grand expression, as a narrative of national drama for the Jewish people, is rooted in Jewish law. Redemption is rooted in a legal obligation that people have to one another and that God and Israel have to one another and it becomes palpable, Jewishly, in the context of covenant and religious community.

Furthermore, redemption, in this formulation, requires that all parties involved not lose sight of a vision of the world as it is supposed to be. In order to fulfill the obligation to participate in the redemption of the universe one must have a sense of the ideal sacred order. One's neighbor is not supposed to be forced into indentured servitude or lose their land, and if either event happens, one encounters a sacred obligation to repair this abrogation of holy community. These obligations are what it means to live with the Torah, that, among many other acts, we are committed to the redemption of our selves and each other when the terrible, unlucky or horrific occurs.

These examples, however, do not exhaust the Tanakh in our search for a theology or theologies of redemption in the Hebrew Bible.

This sense of obligation seems to be reinforced later in the Hebrew Bible in Psalm 107. The text reads:

> Praise the LORD, for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal! Thus let the redeemed of the LORD say, those He redeemed from adversity, whom He gathered in from the lands, from east and west, from the north and from the sea. [15]

[15] Psalms, 107:1-3

While the same basic theme of freeing people from oppression continues in the Psalm, we find a sense of obligation made more explicit: we praise God *because* God is the Redeemer, the One who not only proscribed but also fulfilled the sacred obligations described in Leviticus. In other words, we might say that redemption is the fulfillment of law; it is perhaps law's boldest vision: a *nomos* of justice and order, of right and good. We praise God out of obligation to God who redeems us out of obligation to us. We praise God as beings created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image, that we too might fulfill the obligation to redeem the earth and its people.

Redemption in Jewish Liturgy

The biblical obligation of redemption and the narrative examples of redemption are made daily references in Jewish liturgy. Jewish liturgies are their own unique texts with particular agendas and histories. Much of the text found in liturgy is not original to the siddur itself[16]; it comes from various sources, especially the Tanakh and Talmud. Jewish liturgies are, and have always been, rabbinic texts; as they were either authored by or redacted by rabbinic authorities. While much of the material that is used in the composition of Jewish prayers is taken from the Hebrew Bible, it was rabbis who, over time, set these (and their own material) into an order that began to constitute Jewish prayer as we know it today. While the Hebrew Bible contains literature that we might

[16] There is no single siddur. I am, however, referring to the collection of classical Jewish liturgies which tend to follow a generally similar and recognizable order, often thought to date back to at least Talmudic times and credited to Rav Amram Gaon. For a detailed study of the history of Jewish liturgies, see Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993)

understand as prayer, a formalized system of Jewish liturgy does not appear in the Jewish textual tradition until at least the Tannaitic period.

While references to God's redemptive power and language that refers to God as Redeemer or Savior are found throughout the liturgy, I will examine three primary locations where theologies of redemption are expressed through prayer. An exhaustive survey of theologies of redemption throughout Jewish liturgy is beyond the scope of this project. Rather, I aim to highlight some of the ways in which the liturgy interacts with theologies of redemption, especially because liturgy is one of the most significant and, for some, the only point of contact that Jews have with formal theology. I will examine the Amidah (specifically the petition for redemption), the redemption prayer, *Emet V'yatziv,* as well as *Havdallah.* A more robust undertaking of this subject would certainly include a full explication of ideas of redemption within holy day and festival liturgies, especially Yom Kippur, Chanukah, Passover and Purim. However, they each represent vast narratives of redemption in and of themselves that cannot be contained within the limits of this project (though the themes of these holidays share much in common with the biblical themes of redemption discussed in this chapter).

One place in liturgy where the praying Jew will encounter a clearly articulated theology of redemption is within the daily *Amidah*. The *Amidah* is divded into three sections: praise, petition and gratitude. The middle section, petition, is omitted on Shabbat and certain festival days when it is considered inappropriate to ask God to intervene on our behalf. The blessing for redemption, found among these petitionary prayers, might be understood as a pivotal moment in the narrative arch of the *Amidah*. Elliot Dorff notes that this blessing comes "after recognizing our ability to know, our

penchant for sin, our ability to repent, and God's willingness to forgive." He writes that after saying these opening prayers that relate to human knowledge, transgression and forgiveness, "the ultimate need is redemption." He notes that in Judaism redemption is communal and not from sin as it is in Christian thought but, rather, we plead for redemption "from the limitations and frustrations of life….[and] speak of God as "redeemer of Israel."[17] However, Daniel Landes notes that the *rishon* David Abudraham understands the blessing as "a plea for individual deliverance from hardships." Landes does concede, however, that "as the seventh blessing in the list, it has cosmic significance in that it is connected to the desire for universal salvation, which will occur at the end of time…."[18]

Whether one considers this blessing to be primarily individual or corporate, its location in the *Amidah* represents a liturgical strategy to help us understand a particular theological approach to redemption. Dorff continues to write that the *Amidah* has a built in vision for the redemption of the Jewish people constructed by the remaining prayers of the petitionary section of the *Amidah*:

> The subsequent blessings of the middle section of the *Amidah* articulate what redemption is. Following the order of the *Amidah*, redemption would be a state in which there is health, food, gathering of the exiles, justice, defeat of Israel's enemies, reward for the righteous, a rebuilt Jerusalem, and the messianic rule of the scion of David. This blessing, then, acts as a heading for the blessings that follow, culminating in the last prayer of the middle section, asking God to listen to our prayer.[19]

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[17] Elliot Dorff, *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, vol. 2, *Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries--the Amidah* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 113-115. This multi-volume set of commentaries on Jewish liturgy is organized like a contemporary Talmud wherein multiple scholars comment on a piece of text. From here the work will be referred to as *My People's Prayer Book*, with the particular volume number.

[18] Daniel Landes, *My People's Prayer Book,* vol. 2, 113.

[19] Dorff, *My People's Prayer Book,* vol. 2,115.

In this way, the liturgy does not only serve as a vehicle through which Israel can petition God for corporate redemption, but it also serves as an educational tool, enabling Jews who pray to imagine and share in the rabbinic vision of a redeemed world. Furthermore, redemption is clearly defined, and appears intrinsically connected with other Jewish theological principles such as the ingathering of the exiles, the restoration of Jewish sovereignty over a land of healthy and well-fed people, culminating in a messianic age.

Furthermore, I would argue that this rabbinic definition of redemption seems to build upon the biblical vision discussed earlier in this chapter, a vision of restoring order to a *nomos* that has, in some way, experienced corruption. Related to this idea, in his comments on the blessing for redemption in the *Amidah*, Landes notes that "interpersonally, redemption is related to the halachic responsibility for a relative to redeem property that a family member has lost or sold in a moment of distress." [20]

The next liturgical theme of redemption that we will examine also comes from the daily prayer service, the blessing for redemption found composed of *Emet V'yatziv* in the morning service, and its evening variation, *Emet V'Emunah*, followed by *Mi Chamocha*. The themes are basically the same in both versions, so I will focus only on the morning blessing, *Emet V'Yatziv.*

Ismar Elbogen notes that recitation of this blessing fulfills the dictum in the Tosefta that that Jews are to recall, everyday, the exodus from Egypt, and specifically God's acts of vengeance on behalf of Israel.[21]

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[20] Landes, *My People's Prayer Book,* vol. 2, 115

[21] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: a Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 21.

Like the blessing for redemption found in the *Amidah*, this blessing ultimately points to a future redemption but grounds this hope in the Exodus narrative, which Dorff suggests is due to its place in the Jewish narrative tradition as the "birth event of our people." [22] Of theological interest for this blessing are the liturgical changes of this blessing that occur in liberal prayer books. The traditional blessing includes the following words:

> From Egypt You redeemed us, Lord our God, and from the slave-house you delivered us. All their first-born You killed, but Your first born You redeemed. You split the Sea of Reeds and drowned the arrogant. You brought Your beloved ones across. The water covered their foes; not one of them was left. For this, the beloved ones praised and exalted God, the cherished ones sang psalms, songs of praises, blessings and thanksgivings to the King, the living and enduring God. High and exalted, great and awesome, He humbles the haughty and raises the lowly, freeing captives and redeeming those in need, helping the poor and answering His people when they cry out to Him…. Moses and the children of Israel recited to You a song with great joy, and they all exclaimed: Who is like You, LORD, among the mighty? Who is like You, majestic in holiness….[23]

In contrast, the liberal prayer books take issue with the tone of celebrating the destruction of the enemy as a component of redemption. *Mishkan T'fillah*, the Reform siddur, as well as several other liberal prayer books, remove the words beginning with "All their first born children were killed…" and does not pick up again until the words "For that, Your beloved sang praise, exalting You." David Ellenson notes that:

> This graphic description of divine chastisement has offended the moral beliefs and sensibilities of many liberal prayer book authors. Such a vengeful God has seemed inappropriate to Jews who enjoy the liberty and tolerance offered by western Emancipation. The Talmud, however, explicitly demands the inclusion of just these elements at this point in the service, so that modern liturgies have

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[22] Elliot Dorff, *My People's Prayer Book:* Vol. 1, 127.
[23] Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Sacks Siddur: A Hebrew/English Prayer Book.* (Jerusalem, Israel: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2009), 106.

> had to struggle with the tension between Jewish tradition and contemporary ethics.[24]

Aside from the universal/particular issue with this blessing, the invoking of the Exodus remains the central theme, and serves to underscore the significance of *yitziyat mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt, as being absolutely central to Jewish theologies of redemption. While the redemption prayer is one of the most significant moments that we mention the Exodus, it is far from the only location. References to the Exodus are also found in the *v'ahavta,* the Shabbat evening *kiddush* and psalms for *hallel*, among other places.

Another important point related to *Emet V'Yatziv* is its location in the service. This blessing concludes the rubric that is composed of the *Shema* and its blessings (*Shema u'birchotecha*) As such, it also is the conclusion to a meta-story that is told through the prayer service, which is the story of Jewish history. The story begins with the blessing *Yotzer Or*, the blessing for creation and light, and then moves to *Ahavah rabbah*, the blessing for revelation, for receiving the Torah, and concludes with *Emet V'yatziv,* telling the story of redemption, both past and future. In this way, Jews who pray these particular prayers also participate in a regular retelling of our people's drama and locate themselves in a Jewish notion of time, one that always points to a redemptive future.[25]

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[24] David Ellenson, *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman Vol. 1, *Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries--the Sh'ma and Its Blessings*. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub, 1997). 127.

[25] The *Shema* and it's blessings is not the only rubric in which one locates a pointing towards redemption. Additional examples include the concluding *Alienu* doxology, as well as the structure of the daily *Amidah*, as previously discussed.

Finally, *Havdallah*, the ritual for the conclusion of Shabbat, is a ritual that has an over-arching theme of redemption. Like the daily prayer service, Shabbat also brings observers through the same Creation/Revelation/Redemption story that one finds in the daily service, as mentioned above. However, on Shabbat, these themes are spread out across the entire day. On Friday night, with the recitation of Psalms during *kabbalat Shabbat*, one is immersed in images of the creation of the world. On Shabbat morning, with the longer Torah service as the centerpiece of the service, we find the theme of revelation. And finally, *Havdallah* points us towards redemption, which begins with the words "*hiney, el yi'shuati,* God is my salvation."

The Talmud teaches that Shabbat is "*m'eyin ha'olam ha'bah*, a reflection of the world to come."[26] In the Jewish imagination, *ha'olam ha'bah* is the world of ultimate redemption, it is the space and time towards which Judaism points itself. Shortly after the opening words of "God is my salvation" we find a phrase from the book of Esther, "*la'yihudim, hayta ora, v'simcha, vi'kar*, the Jews enjoyed light and happiness, joy and honor."[27] Added on to the verse from Esther are the words "*kein ti'hiyeh lanu*, may we have these too!"[28] Alyssa Gray notes that this verse may included "because *Havdallah* evokes a reference to light." However, she goes on to offer an alternative reading of this verse by telling a midrash that links the inclusion of the verse from Esther, a story of Jewish redemption, to the longing for redemption the liturgy attempts to create as part of the *Havdallah* ritual:

> Rabbi Chiya the Great and Rabbi Shimon Chalafta, were out walking shortly before sunrise. As dawn breaks and the sun slowly rises, Rabbi Chiya observes that Israel's ultimate redemption too will unfold gradually, similar to Mordecais's gradual elevation

[26] *Talmud Bavli, Brachot.* 57B (My translation).
[27] Esther 8:16
[28] Marc Brettler, *My People's Prayer Book,* Vol. 7, 166.

> to power in the Book of Esther. He cites none other than Esther 8:16, the verse we have here, as the verse corresponding to Israel's complete redemption.

Gray continues by commenting that:

> This is the perfect verse for the end of Shabbat. As our "taste of the world-to-come ends, we gladly anticipate the real messianic redemption said to arrive if Israel keeps Shabbat properly. We add "may we have these too!" expressing our wish that the joy felt by the Jews of Esther's day will be ours as well. [29]

Indeed, the entire theology of *Havdallah* reinforces a part of Judaism that longs for an ultimate redemption, one that is filled with light, happiness, joy and honor. I would argue that the inclusion of this verse from Esther as a potential vision for what a redeemed world might look like underscores the theologies of redemption that encounter in the daily service. Specifically this means that redemption for Judaism is, at its core, about the transformation from darkness to light, from suffering and degradation to freedom and joy.

Havdallah concludes on a messianic note, with the chanting of a song for Elijah the prophet:

> May Elijah the prophet, Elijah of Tishbi, Elijah of Gilad quickly in our day come to us with the messiah, descended from David.[30]

Gray notes that the references to Elijah coming with the Messiah is first found in Malachi 3:23-24, which speaks of "the great and awesome day" when he will "reconcile parents with children and children with parents (v.24)." She continues to note that "this allusion recalls the themes of harmonious parent-child relations" a theme that is referenced on Friday night with the children's blessing, and that mentioning "Elijah and

[29] Alyssa Gray, *My People's Prayer Book,* Vol. 7,). 173.
[30] Translation from *My People's Prayer Book,* Vol. 7, 172.

the messiah is a fit continuation of the link between Shabbat and the messiah, Shabbat being a foretaste and 'coming attraction' of the world-to-come."[31]

Jewish liturgy asserts a theology of redemption on a daily basis, assuring that Israel will continue to maintain a vision for a radically different future as a regular component of religious practice. On Shabbat, this vision gets amplified and also emotional, as we construct a framework within which we act our a kind of redeemed world, and then lovingly and longingly wish it farewell for another week.

Maimonides & Redemption in Medieval Jewish Thought

In the first chapter of his book *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, Gershom Scholem describes the close link between redemption, messianism and apocalyptic thought that was prevalent in medieval Jewish theology. He notes that, especially for the medieval thinkers, redemption becomes deeply linked to the rabbinic imagination of the end of the world. Scholem sees exile as a kind primary religious condition that deeply informed the messianic thought of the time, and in this context suggests that three different "forces" inform rabbinic and midlevel concepts of messianism: conservative, restorative and utopian.[32] Scholem sees the struggle of the rabbis in the Talmud as well as medieval thinkers to understand the idea of a Messiah as a struggle that lives in tension between these forces. On the one hand, messianism is inherently utopian in that it imagines a world without the kinds of problems that human beings have to negotiate in our present reality. On the other hand, despite the close connection to

[31] Ibid, 173.
[32] Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays On Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 3

eschatological thought, the medieval rabbis in particular take on the project of trying to make Jewish religious thought compatible with Greek philosophy, which leads to a deeply conservative thread in much of the theory that arises in the period. In particular, this meant that messianism was open to new kinds of critique and held up against and compared to a certain kind of rationalism that it had not previously been subject to.[33] Scholem writes:

> These rational tendencies developed within the Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages, which attempted to prove that Jewish monotheism and the religion that Jewish monotheism and the religion of revelation based on it were a consistent system of rational religion insofar as possible tried to construe them as such.[34]

This resulted in a messianism that was much more focused on a restorative vision of redemption rather than a utopian, and as Scholem notes, "the rational tendencies in Judaism pushed the restorative factor in Messianism decidedly into the foreground." In particular, Maimonides pushed for a messianism that was both conservative and restorative, and spoke openly against notions that were more utopian or in other ways imaginative. [35]

In medieval redemption theology, Maimonides emerges as a kind of central and even emblematic figure. Indeed, Daniel Frank notes that he not only "falls temporally in the midpoint of the six hundred year history of medieval Jewish philosophy" but he also notes that Maimonides is central to the period in another way:

> Maimonides is a Janus-faced figure, looking both forward and backward. He is the culmination of the Judeo-Arabic philosophical tradition, which includes Saadya, Solomon ibn Gabirol, and Judah Halevi. But Maimonides also establishes the Jewish philosophical agenda in Christian lands from the thirteenth century on with the translation of his

[33] Ibid, 24.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid, 25.

> *Guide for the Perplexed* into Hebrew…. Even beyond the Medieval period Maimonides is a pivotal figure, who provides a starting point for philosophical speculation.[36]

It is for this reason, as well as my desire to include a thinker who is emblematic of this period, that we will examine Maimonides's view of redemption.

By the time we reach the medieval period, redemption and faith in a messianic future are deeply intertwined, a process that developed slowly.

Maimonides was interested in redemption and seems to have believed very deeply in a messianic future, albeit a kind of straightforward and non-mystical one, or, again, as Scholem puts it, conservative and restorative. . In his commentary on the Mishnah Torah, Eliyahu Touger notes that:

> In his preface to the *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam explained that his goal in the composition of the work was to summarize and outline the observance of all the mitzvot. Similarly, as explained in Halacha 4:10, the king's "purpose and intent shall be to elevate the true faith and fill the world with justice." i.e. to spread the observance of Torah and mitzvot. The coming of the Mashiach represents the most complete expression of these goals. As the Rambam explains in this and the following halachot, Mashiach will rebuild the Temple and restore the observance of all the mitzvot which cannot be fulfilled at present . Hence, a description of his coming serves as an appropriate summation for *Hilchot Melachim* and the *Mishneh Torah* as a whole (*Likkutei Sichot I*). [37]

My overview of his work seems to indicate that his concept of redemption, like his contemporaries, seemed to be more explicitly focused on issues of restoration of the Davidic kingdom. In his Mishnah Torah, Book 14 chapter 11:1 Maimonides writes:

> King Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former state and original sovereignty. He will rebuild the sanctuary and gather the dispersed of Israel. All the ancient laws will be reinstated in his days; sacrifices will again be offered; the Sabbatical and Jubilee years will again be observed in accordance with the commandments set forth in the Law. [38]

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[36] Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136.
[37] Eliyahu Touger, trans., *Mishneh Torah: A New Translation with Commentaries and Notes* (Jerusalem: Moznim, 2001), 609.
[38] Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies)* (Springfield: Behrman House, Inc., 1972), 222.

In this excerpt we find Maimonides clearly stating that the Messiah, which I think we can fairly read as his notion of redemption, means the restoration of Israel as a sovereign body politic. Interestingly, and certainly in sharp contrast to his Christian contemporaries' views on end times, Maimonides seems to emphasize a certain sobriety in his view of this kind of restoration. In Chapter 11:3, he continues to explain that the coming of the Messiah will not be a kind of awesome and fearful display of God's power but rather a very literal and conservative reconstruction of a lost society, lead by a King Messiah:

> Do not think that King Messiah will have to perform signs and wonders, bring anything new into being, revive the dead, or do similar things. It is not so…. The general principle is: this Law of ours with its statutes and ordinances (is not subject to change). It is forever and all eternity; it is not to be added to or taken away from.[39]

He continues in Book 14 chapter 12:2 further:

> Said the rabbis: "The sole difference between the present and the Messianic days is delivery from servitude to foreign powers" (Sanhedrin 91b).[40]

Taking it even a step farther, Maimonides explains that the rabbinic tradition does not actually have a clear idea of what will happen in the time leading up to the arrival of the Messiah, and warns in 12:2 that:

> No one should ever occupy himself with the legendary themes or spend much time on Midrashic statements bearing on [the advent of the Messiah] and like subjects. He should not deem them of prime importance, since they lead neither to the fear of God nor to the love of Him. Nor should one calculate the end. Said the rabbis: "Blasted be those who reckon out the end" (Sanhedrin 97b). One should wait (for his coming) and accept in principle this article of faith, as we have stated before.[41]

Finally, Maimonides concludes this chapter by explaining that the era of the Messiah will be one of total peace, noting that there will be "neither famine nor war, neither

[39] Ibid, 223
[40] Ibid, 224
[41] Ibid, 225

jealousy nor strife," demonstrating that the utopian element of this theology is not completely occluded.

While Maimonides lived in a time when the development of the idea of a King Messiah was fully in place, and this idea appears to have been basically non-existent when the book of Leviticus was redacted, it is not so difficult to identify a common thread running from place to place in the tradition. While messianic ideas certainly place the work more fully in God's hands vis-a-vis the Messiah, a theology that makes more sense in conditions of exile, the core values remain essentially the same: Judaism articulates an ideal state of being for the People Israel and obliges the People Israel to work for that state. In Leviticus this meant literally redeeming loved ones from unfavorable conditions, while in later thought it seems to have framed in more messianic terms, the result is essentially the same: redemption for People Israel means repairing breaches to the ideal state of the community, whether that breach is a kinsman sold into slavery or the condition of exile for the entire people. As we move into the modern and postmodern periods of thought, the thread will be a bit more difficult to identify as Jewish theology in general becomes more diverse and dynamic. That said, the foundation that I have established this far will be important as we approach the modern and postmodern work because I will argue that the category remains intact and that, in certain ways, thinkers in the tradition continue to respond to what is essentially the same legal framework established in the book of Leviticus and continue to be inspired by the meta-narrative of Exodus.

CHAPTER THREE: Redemption in Modern and Postmodern Jewish Thought

There is a commandment in the appearance of the face,
as if a master spoke to me.
However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute;
it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all.[1] (Emanuel Levinas)

In this chapter I examine redemption in several areas of modern and postmodern Jewish thought. Like other surveys in this project, this is hardly exhaustive. My focus is on pulling out key ideas that will help for the foundation for my own theology of redemption. Of special importance for that way I am reading modern Jewish thinkers is their relationship to social justice, or, more precisely, the way that they can be said to understand the relationship between social justice and the theological category of redemption.

I begin with a reading of Rosenzweig's theory of "the All" as expressed by his mapping out of theology in the *Star of Redemption*. Building on this work, I explore two of Levinas's theories: the face of the other and substitution. I conclude with a discussion of Jewish feminism that helps bridge the modern and postmodern with an examination of the work of Rachel Adler and Tamar Ross.

Rosenzweig's Star of Redemption

No serious conversation about redemption in Jewish thought would be complete without including the voice of Franz Rosenzweig. While there are certainly modern thinkers who deal with the topic before him, he represents a critical turning point in

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 89.

terms of Jewish thought related to redemption. For this reason, I begin my exploration of modern thinkers with him.

Rosenzweig was an early 20th century German Jewish thinker who is probably most famous for his magnum opus and the ideas that come out of it, *The Star of Redemption*. The work is enormous and in some ways enigmatic and difficult to read. It is part of his larger move away from traditional philosophy and rationalism and into religious thought, though he apparently refused to call his work religious.[2] Borowitz notes that he "gained his intellectual maturity by giving up the rationalistic gods of his early philosophical faith.[3]"

Also important is the context in which the book was written. Borowitz suggests that *The Star* is in some ways a response to World War I and the failure of humanity that Rosenzweig witnessed in his lifetime—and by extension the failure of idealistic rationalism—that the War represented. Prior to the carnage that World War I proved possible, European liberalism imagined humanity as ever evolving toward greater good and greater enlightenment.[4] Both Borowitz and Glatzer suggest that it was under these conditions of dissonance that Rosenzweig's major contributions to Jewish thought emerged.

Rosenzweig's sense that prevailing philosophical frameworks could not adequately respond to, account for or even improve the lived human experience seems to have motivated his turn towards religiosity, as Borowitz notes:

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[2] N.N. Glatzer, "Forward," in Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 2nd ed., trans. William Hallo (New York: Holt, Reinhart, Winston, 1970), x.

[3] Eugene B. Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: a Partisan Guide*, 2nd ed. (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1995), 127.

[4] Ibid. Also see the work of Hermann Cohen, especially *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995)

> Rosenzweig concludes that we must renounce traditional philosophy's goal and hope: a single concept universal enough to embrace persons and the world in their distinct realities. Instead, we shall understand them only when we acknowledge a reality beyond them and independent of it. Religion calls it God. As suddenly as that, without proof or definition or even pointing to any special realm of religious experience, but simply contrasting the work of modern philosophy with the reality of human existence, Rosenzweig posits a real, existing, independent God.[5]

His most critical idea for this project is also the title of his major work, *The Star of Redemption*. From this idea emerges one of the central ways that many modern Jews think about the major theological categories of Creation, Revelation and Redemption in Judaism. Rosenzweig invented a new way of understanding these theological categories internally and perhaps more importantly, in the ways that these categories relate to and interact with one another. While I remain most interested in his notion of redemption, it is not really possible to disentangle this from his larger concept of "The Star". In order to understand his view of redemption effectively, we must understand his proposal more holistically.

The Star is a symbol that brings together two different trilogies, God, Man and World and Creation, Revelation and Redemption. Glatzer calls the former "elements" and the later "paths." For Rosenzweig there are "three givens of existence" that form that foundation of that which cannot be understood through rational idealism: the self, the world and God. As Borowitz puts it, "they precede our reason….we, the world, and God are simply there. Our reason cannot hope to explain them in terms of some master abstract principle. Ideas are always less than life."[6]

What emerges as critical for Rosenzweig is how both people and the world relate to God, and it is this network of relationships that completes his star and permits it to

[5] Ibid, 129.
[6] Ibid, 129-130.

be a holistic theology. Using the theological categories of Creation, Revelation and Redemption, Rosenzweig proposes and maps out in the form of a star a theory of God's relationship with reality.

God is connected to the world through creation. [7] As Glatzer notes, "in creation—a continuous process—God, hitherto hidden in the mythical beyond, appears and gives the world reality. It is a transitory, finite, mortal, mute world."[8] Creation as a singular category, in Rosenzweig's formulation, is rather incomplete without the other theological categories, particularly when human beings and the human experience are accounted for. As creations of God, and therefore a result of this God-world relationship, human beings cannot relate to God through the fact of our creation alone. Rather, human beings require revelation.

Revelation forms the foundation of the human and God relationship. It is through revelation that human beings translate Creation into meaning and become capable of responding to God and each other. Through revelation the human being "becomes an individual able to speak and to respond to the first divine commandment: Thou shalt love." Foreshadowing Levinas's theory of language and the face, Rosenzweig understands revelation as that which creates the conditions for human society and community. It is through God revealing God's self to humanity that language becomes possible and speakable; it is through revelation that we exist as humans.[9]

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[7] Ibid, 132.
[8] N.N. Glatzer,
[9] Ibid, xvi.

And finally, it is through redemption that human beings relate to the world, a concept that is critical for this project. Redemption is, for Rosenzweig, the process of human beings responding to God's revealed law. Translated into particularly Jewish terms, we might say that redemption is the process of the Jewish engagement with Torah. In revelation humanity finds first the command "thou shalt love" and can respond to this in relationship to God. Revelation both allows for and demands a love for God. When we turn this love toward one another we begin to participate in the process of redemption.[10] As Borowitz notes, Rosenzweig reads revelation as pointing toward a perfected world, one that human beings will bring about through our response to revelation:

> Standing before God, we know we must transcend our present level of existence. Our work in the world ought to reflect better our knowledge of God. Each person needs to reach out and find others. Ultimately a community will appear whose members, through knowing one another in full individuality, will live with one another in peace and harmony. In turn such communities will overflow to reach all humankind and then out to nature until a final concord of people, the world, and God is achieved. The relations among the three existential realities are consummated in this messianic fulfillment. [11]

It is important to note that his theology of redemption is not totally void of eschatological overtones. Rosenzweig certainly seems to understand religious time as linear and pointing toward an ultimate time of messianic glory. However, *The Star* also represents a move away from the more traditional rabbinic modality of waiting for a Messiah to arrive. While his theology of redemption does include an eschatological element, what strikes me as critical is his focus on the human-world relationship as central to the category of redemption. God's role in redemption, for Rosenzweig, is

[10] Ibid.
[11] Borowitz, 133.

primarily through Creation and Revelation as theological categories that set up the conditions in which human beings can bring about a redemptive world through our status as created beings that are capable of responding to revelation. That is, redemption seems to be, primarily, a human responsibility: not a guarantee, not a promise, but only a sacred possibility. Rosenzweig writes:

> "Love your neighbor. This is, Jews and Christians affirm, the embodiment of all commandments. With this commandment, the soul declared grown-up leaves the parental home of divine love to go out and travel through the world. It is a commandment of love like the original commandment of revelation that accompanies all the single commandments and that alone removes from them the rigidity of laws and makes them living commandments." [12]

Rosenzweig reminds us that redemption is, to a great extent, in our hands. Creation and Revelation are incomplete without it or, more precisely, Creation and Revelation create the conditions in which redemption is possible.

Levinas, the Face of the Other and Substitution

Important for my consideration of redemption as a binding responsibility inherent to being Jewish is the work of Emanuel Levinas. Levinas was a prolific 20th century philosopher who was interested in, among other things, both phenomenology as well as Jewish thought, and especially *Talmud Torah.* Levinas emerged as an important critic of western philosophy's tendency to produce a totalizing view of reality in which everything could be reduced to the rational and the knowable. Importantly, he found the multi-vocal nature of rabbinic literature to be an important example of a non-

[12] Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 271

totalizing discourse. Levinas finds the dynamic, contradictory and highly detail oriented methodology of the rabbis to be a method which allows for greater humanity and, importantly, for more significant human responsibility.[13] This responsibility, in the context of Levinas's radical theory of the human obligation to the other will be read here as a kind of theology of redemption. In particular I examine two core ideas in his philosophy: his notion of the face of the other, and his theory of substitution.

Of particular interest for this project is Levinas's proposal that ethics preceds epistemology; that it is the first philosophy. As such, the human response to other humans is pre-rational and a quasi-involuntary response. In the face of the other we find a kind of immutable call, something that reaches out and grabs us. It is in this crux that Levinas seems to locate the intersection of God and human responsibility, and it is precisely this component of his work that I wish to bring into my own developing theology. To begin, I will describe both of these theories and then I will describe ways in which I can imagine them informing a theology of redemption. It is worth noting here that I am quite a novice when it comes to Levinas's theory. His philosophical writings are difficult and demanding and I do my best here to locate what I think is relevant for my project and make it intelligible.

Levinas and the Face of the Other

Levinas's theory of "the face" is perhaps his idea that has enjoyed the most widespread circulation. Simon Critchley, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, writes that Levinas's "big idea" is that "ethics is understood as a

[13] Rabbi Robin Podolsky interviewed by author, Los Angeles, CA, December 3, 2013.

relation of infinite responsibility to the other person.[14]" This "big idea" becomes concretized in his notion of the "the face." For Levinas, the face of another being is categorically more than the physical phenomena that are made up of eyes, nose, mouth and cheeks. The face is that which necessarily signifies more than itself, that is, it points to and represents that which is not the self that gazes upon the face of another. In this way, the face of the other points to a kind of interiority, to a universe that is always already enigmatic and in some ways eternally mysterious.[15] In other words, the encounter with the face of another person insists to us that we are not alone, that there is life beyond our individuality. This face represents potential need, and points to our potential obligation to respond to that need.

Importantly, Levinas finds in the face what he calls the "trace" of the other, a kind of sign that points to the universe that is the other person, the person who is different from the self that is encountered and engaged by the face.[16] Rabbi Robin Podolsky, a Levinas scholar, pointed out to me that this awareness of that which is not the self is a critical component in Levinas's theory of ethics:

> The face signifies that I don't make the world. Each person is a mystery that I cannot fully penetrate. It also reminds me that I live in time, that I am going to die. In the face is this trace of the other, which becomes a trace of God. [The face insists] that I cannot murder, that I cannot let [the other] hunger. I cannot be indifferent.[17]

In the discovery of the other is also the production of language, knowledge and society. One develops language precisely out of the encounter with the face that signifies otherness. Sociality as a category results from the human discovery that one is

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[14] Simon Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)6.
[15] Bernhard Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 78.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Podolsky, interview.

not alone in the universe and that this status of coexistence requires interaction, response and cooperation. In a sense, it is this encounter that, for humans, transforms chaos into cosmos, the disordered into the intelligible, the sensible and the possible. That is, it is the recognition of the other "and her potential destitution" that forms the foundation for human society. [18]

It is also from this encounter that we discover that the other calls upon us and makes demands of us. The face of another and all that it signifies is disruptive, and far from being a neutral presence, the face is an interpolative discourse. It demands a change in course, a readjustment for all that could possibly emerge from the enigmatic universe of the other, and in particular, the potential destitution of that other.[19] As Podolsky alludes to, it reminds the self that it is not alone, but that it is connected to others and even produced by others. The face, prior to language or reason, makes ethical demands of us. Waldenfels writes of the face:

> The otherness or strangeness of the other manifests itself as the extraordinary par excellence: not as a something given or intended, but as a certain disquietude, as a derangement which puts us out of our common tracks. The human face is just a foyer of such bewilderments.[20]

Indeed, Levinas speaks of an "elevation" and a "height" of the other. That is, there is something about the face of the other that, in a certain sense, delineates the boundaries of our freedom in that it adjures a kind of response:

> The first word of the face is the "Thou shalt not kill." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all.[21]

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Waldenfel, 64.
[21] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 89.

Indeed, in response and perhaps in challenge to his notion of the face offering a primal command that can be summarized by "thou shall not kill" Philippe Nemo, questions how this notion can account for evil when he notes that "the encounter with the Other occurs [also] in the mode of violence, hate and disdain." [22] To this point Levinas responds that he sees this as a kind of inversion of a response that remains primary:

> …. Whatever the motivation which explains this inversion, the analysis of the face…. with the mastery of the Other and his poverty, with my submission and my wealth, is primary. It is the presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not that, we would not even say, before an open door, "After you, sir!" It is an original "After you, sir! That I have tried to describe." [23]

Essential for the notion of responsibility to the other is Levinas' proposal that "subjectivity is not for itself; it is…initially for another." That is, Levinas sees human subjectivity as a product of interconnectedness. We are granted subjectivity by the fact of not being alone in the universe. Inextricably bound up in this subjectivity then, is responsibility, which is for the other, because subjectivity is, by definition, for the other. The face signifies this universe of other-than-the-self to which one is responsible as a result of one's subjectivity.[24]

Substitution

In short, Levinas refers to the taking on of responsibility for others as substitution.[25] At first glance it there appears to be nothing remarkable about this, but when this notion is understood in the context of his larger philosophical framework, the

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[22] Ibid, 89.
[23] Ibid, 89.
[24] Ibid, 96.
[25] The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that for Levinas "it is a justifiable simplification to say that substitution is responsibility, explored this time as a multi-faceted interiority, an inner life with a host of affective tones."[25] Bergo, Bettina, "Emmanuel Levinas", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (online ed.)

implications are critical. As discussed with his theory of the face, Levinas understands human subjectivity to be deeply integrated with responsibility. Substitution then, is not merely one putting oneself in the place of the other, but it is the entire philosophical framework of human subjectivity in which one accepts the suffering of another. Furthermore, this placing of one's self in the position of the other is neither altruism nor is it the result of pure freedom of choice.[26] Instead we might understand substitution as that which becomes one of the possible responses to the call of the face itself, a response that seems to be both commanded and questionably voluntary. Robert Bernasconi notes that Levinas rejects the idea that sacrifice (one of the possible acts of substitution) is made possible by freedom:

> [Levinas] rejects the claim that it is because the ego is a free consciousness, capable of sympathy and compassion, that it can take responsibility for the sufferings of the world. The experience of responsibility is not the experience of a free choice, but rather 'the impossibility of evading the neighbor's call.' [27]

Indeed, Levinas understands subjectivity in relationship to responsibility as a state of being held hostage:

> Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation--persecuted. The ipseity, in the passivity without arche characteristic of identity, is a hostage. The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone. [28]

For Levinas, it is this "condition" which creates the possibility for justice in society, which is how I am reading his notion of "solidarity.":

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[26] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, Or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 117.
[27] Robert Bernasconi, "To Which Question is 'Substitution' the Answer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 236.
[28] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 114.

> It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity--even the little there is, even the simple, "after you, sir." The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, **but the condition for all solidarity**.

Taken together, Levinas's theory of the Face of the Other as well as his notion of substitution come together to create an important contribution to my developing theology of redemption, and also relate to other theories of redemption that have already been explored in this thesis. An obvious example is the connection between his theory of substitution and the Levitical treatment of *g'ulah*. In the context of the priestly book of Leviticus, the command to redeem kinsfolk and their property is hardly conceived of as a polite request that one might consider responding to as an act of free will. Rather, the command to respond to the need of one's kin is just that, a command, and understood to be emanating from God. Indeed, the entire existence of the people is dependent on their acceptance of God's covenant. That is, the subjectivity of the Jewish People, from the perspective of Torah and especially Leviticus is entirely bound up with the notion of covenant with God. Responding to God's call is not optional; it is a fact of their existence, a fundamental component of their national subjectivity. On this point Leviticus and Levinas agree: the matter of choosing to respond to one's obligation to another is fraught, as the command seems to emanate from that which one cannot precisely turn away from.

The correlation with substitution as well as the Face is clear: Levinas frames in Western philosophical terms what the Torah frames in religious terms: redemption is here and now. It is present with us and has everything to do with responsibility. One finds one self compelled to put the needs of the other first, one is, as Levinas puts it,

"held hostage" to this obligation. It seems that this is what the Leviticus has in mind as well when it describes how to create holy community.

I would also argue that Levinas's implicit rejection of any kind of antinomianism relates in certain ways to the feminist theologies of Adler and Ross. Both Adler and Ross see a central place for law in a Jewish feminist theology, a theology that might be both redemptive and liberating. Likewise, Levinas understands his theory to somewhat beyond choice, or, when one chooses to not respond to the call to the other, one is, in a certain sense, in violation of a command, in violation of the nomic realty in which one lives. To kill, then, for Levinas, is wrong because it violates the commandment of the face.

Emanuel Levinas's work may not be obvious theology, but his contribution both affirms a certain reading of Torah as well as carves out space for a Jewish ethic in an otherwise secular realm.

Jewish Feminism

Jewish feminists and Jewish feminist theology, in all of their diversity are, by nature, interested in redemption. Jewish feminism is, at its most fundamental level, interested in the redemption of Judaism from oppressions related to gender, though its reach goes far beyond issues of gender in Judaism.[29] Jewish feminist theology engages or has the potential to engage all aspects of Jewish thought, yet a fundamental question for Jewish

[29] Jewish feminism, or feminism writ large, is not only about redemption related to gender; nor is it only about gender issues. As feminism (and by extension Jewish feminism) has continued to develop over time, the focus of Jewish feminism as grown from what Rachel Adler calls a false dualism that attempts to bridge the world of women with the world of Judaism to a much more complex project that brings an awareness of the problematic nature of such discrete and essential categories.

feminism seems to be: how can feminism redeem Judaism for all people from the oppression of sexist and patriarchal thinking? To be clear, this question is not the only one Jewish feminist thinkers ask; as a field of study feminism has developed and become more sophisticated and diverse over time. That said, I would argue that the question of redemption is, at least for Jewish feminist theology, a central concern. When we understand one of the primary goals of Jewish feminist theology to be the redemption of Jewish theology from the world of androcentric, sexist thinking to a world of gender equality and sophisticated understanding of gender identity, we see a theology of redemption. Indeed, in one of the central texts of Jewish feminism, *Standing Again at Sinai*, Judith Plaskow opens the first chapter by noting that the oppression of women within Judaism is a central problem for Jewish feminism:

> The needs for a feminist Judaism begins with hearing silence. It begins with noting the absence of women's history and experiences as shaping forces in the Jewish tradition. Half of Jews have been women, but men have been defined as normative Jews, while women's voices and experiences are largely invisible in the record of Jewish belief and experience that has come down to us. Women have lived Jewish history and carried its burdens, but women's perceptions and questions have not given form to scripture, shaped the direction of Jewish law, or found expression in liturgy. [30]

And yet, Jewish feminism is not limited to this issue, even as it begins with "hearing [the] silence" that Plaskow discusses. Jewish feminists, and in particular, Jewish feminist theologians, complicate the work of Jewish feminism through inclusion of post-modern and post-structuralist frameworks of thought. In her introduction to *Engendering Judaism*, Rachel Adler writes:

> Relegating gender issues to women alone perpetuates a fallacy about the nature of Judaism. It presumes that Judaism is a body of gender neutral texts and traditions and that women constitute a special gendered addendum to the community of

[30] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1991), 1.

> transmitters….The impact of gender on Judaism, then, is not a women's issue; it is an issue for everyone who seeks to understand Judaism.[31]

Adler continues later in the introduction by noting the problems with early Jewish feminism that set up the "primitive opposing categories: 'women's experience' and 'authentic Judaism." She writes:

> Both "women's experience" and "authentic Judaism" proved to be untenable categories, however. Monolithic notions of "women's experience" were effectively debunked by poststructuralist feminist critiques, which charged that the term privileged white, middle-class, Western women's experience and erased cultural and historical differences. The term also incorporated the dubious assumption that there was such a thing as a raw experience, unmediated by language and socialization. "Authentic Judaism" proved equally troublesome. There are and were many versions of Judaism.[32]

To narrow my focus, I will examine some specific aspects of work from three of the major thinkers in Jewish feminist theology in order to uncover their particular approaches to a theology of redemption. The thinkers, Adler, Plaskow and Ross, represent three different theological approaches from within Jewish tradition.[33] In particular, and to further focus my approach, I will examine their theologically different approaches to Jewish law in the context of Jewish feminism in search of a theology of redemption. This approach will help unpack redemption as a theological category in Jewish feminism as it relates to (as well as departs from) redemption in classical Judaism, and ultimately helps construct my own theology.

In Adler's ground-breaking work, *Engendering Judaism*, she aims to "engender the Jewish conversation" and examines three primary categories in her endeavor: law,

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[31] Adler, xiv.
[32] Ibid, xix
[33] This, of course, means that I am choosing to exclude many important people who have contributed to Jewish feminism. However, these three thinkers are widely credited with having produced "full length" feminist theologies. See Elyse Goldstein, ed., *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*, Hardcover ed. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009).

liturgy and the ethics of sexuality and relationships.[34] Though the entire project is, in many ways, a new vision for Jewish law, in her chapter titled "Here Comes Skotsl: Renewing Halakah" we find Adler's major proposal for a feminist reworking of Jewish law.

Adler ends this chapter on a hopeful note, imagining that we can "regenerate a world of legal meaning that fully, complexly, and inclusively integrates the stories and revelations, the duties and commitments of Jewish women and men."[35] Because I see Jewish law and a sense of obligation to the tradition as central building blocks to a theology of redemption, I read this statement as one which points towards a feminist vision of redemption of our halakhah. Significantly for my own work, I will argue that Adler not only articulates something very important for us about the redemption of the Jewish legal tradition, but also, in doing so, offers us an important and nuanced way of thinking about redemption as a broad theological category that seems to be a critical part of feminist and queer theologies of redemption. In short, this means that redemption can't always be about returning to an idealized past (such as the return of kinsfolk from slavery discussed in Leviticus and later rabbinic material or the restoration of the Davidic monarchy and Temple worship) as our tradition so often seems to suggest. It sometimes means working to construct a radical departure from the past that is, in the same instance, deeply rooted in tradition. This intersection of rootedness in tradition and imagination of a more liberated future is central to a Jewish feminist theology of redemption.

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[34] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: an Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), xxvi.
[35] Ibid, 59.

Adler's proposal for halakha becomes a theology of redemption rooted in feminism, postmodern theories of gender and in the meta-Torah of Judaism. Her project is, on one level, the project of redeeming Jewish law for all Jews, and especially those of us who have been cast as outlaws through androcentric rabbinic disputation. The redemption, however, is not just restorative, but deeply generative. It is a redemption imbued with the story of the creation of the universe.

Explaining this in broader narrative terms using the story of the Exodus, the Israelites who were redeemed from Egypt were not the Israelites who went there. They became the people of the Torah through this process, by which I mean, they became transformed people and **a** transformed people, even as a kind of restorative process took place. They became Jews with all of the weight and power that it meant to be a Jew. The restoration of an ordered world was at once the genesis of a radical new vision at the same moment that it returned a displaced people to an ancient home. Rachel Adler, I think, wants the same for us; that we might return to an ancient home in our stories, texts, rituals and traditions, even as we work to create—to engender—something different.

Adler frames her work on renewing halakhah by citing a clever Yiddish folktale about a woman named Skotsl. In the story, a community of women elects Skotsl to take their grievances about gender inequality in Judaism directly to heaven. In order to do so, the women form a human tower so that Skotsl can climb up and address God. The tower, however, fails; and Skotsl disappears in the process, unable to complete the mission, thereby leaving the status quo of gender roles in the Jewish world intact.

Adler reads this story "specifically as a story about women's relationship with the law." She notes that a primary theme in the story is that "women reject the halakha as it stands and search for a way to recreate it." [36]

Critical for my reading, however, is what Adler asks after introducing the story of Skotsl. Adler proceeds not by calling for the inclusion of women in the Jewish tradition as understood through Jewish law today, but rather by asking:

> What is supposed to happen when Skotsl comes? Will Jewish women simply obtain what Jewish men have? Or will the mitzvot we do and the Torah we learn be themselves transformed when women becomes fully visible and fully audible in Judaism…. The problem of Jewish women calls into question the operation of all the processes by which Judaism is reinterpreted and renewed. [37]

In these questions, and more fully later in the chapter, Adler insists that simply including women, that is, simply bringing women into the currently practiced tradition, is not the real liberation that we need or dream of. Indeed, she notes that Reform Judaism, which has long included women in all aspects of Jewish life, did so by "categorizing them as honorary men." She notes that progressive Judaism remains heavily invested in "Enlightenment universalist values" that "fail to recognize crucial differences among people" and thus "make poor guides for how human beings may live in community."[38] In other words, Adler does not seek a recovery of traditional Judaism with only the adjustment of inclusion of women, but rather, a redemption of Judaism itself to be achieved, specially, through the renewal and re-imagination of Jewish law. That is, Adler articulates a vision of Jewish law that maintains legal obligation as central to the tradition, but imagines the law as vitally renewed and reimagined as a result of

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[36] Ibid, 22-23.
[37] Ibid,24.
[38]In this conversation Adler is citing an important 1983 article on women in classical Reform Judaism: Riv-Ellen Prell, "The Vision of Woman in Classical Reform Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (1983):575-589

eradicating sexism as well as other kinds of oppressions from the project of creating, interpreting and living by law.

In Adler's approach to Jewish law I think it's possible to locate one of the critical contributions that Jewish feminism makes to a theology of redemption, and a critical way in which Jewish feminism responds to the theology of redemption as I read it in the book of Leviticus.

If we follow the biblical framework from earlier in this chapter, and we understand redemption to be, as I argue Leviticus does, the restoration of people and land to their proper place, and by extension, the restoration of a particular nomos, we then encounter a challenge from Jewish feminism. It demands from us that we not merely romanticize the nomic past in our critique of any kind of present disorder. Jewish feminism demands that we hold the tradition and the past accountable for the injustice, pain and suffering that are parts of it, that we must read texts more closely, that we have to, as Adler asserts, "interrogate its moral universe, to hold the text accountable, to redeem the text by learning Torah from it."

And so we have to ask more about what kind of "moral universe" Leviticus imagines: What becomes of the kinswoman who was sold into slavery and then "redeemed" by her kin, as Leviticus commands? Do we imagine that she simply returns, unscathed by the experience, and that all is simply back as it was? Will she be as the women in the Yiddish folktale imagine Skotsl, returning to a stable world? No. We must ask about what happened to her along the way. Jewish feminism asks: what experiences did she have that might have changed her? How might her vision for the future be different than it used to be? And what about her community? Did people miss

her or need her? Was a family traumatized by her absence? More deeply, how could the community have ever permitted her to be sold into slavery in the first place? In other words, the entire legal framework, the nomic universe, is called into question. We know that the past does not actually return, but rather the process of redemption is one of great change and transformation. It might include pain and heartache, and those who experience it will—I think necessarily—be different on the other side.

This reminds me of a teaching by Israeli Jewish educator Rachel Korazim. I once had the opportunity to attend a lecture of hers about several modern Hebrew poems. One of the poems she spoke about was Yehuda Amichai's poem about the *akeda* in his collection *Open Closed Open* (the particular poems are untitled)[39]. In this poem, Amichai imagines that Abraham had three sons instead of two, the third being named "Yivkeh" translated as "he will cry." The poem imagines this mythical third son as the son that *was* in fact sacrificed on Mount Mariah. While teaching this poem, she paused, and looked at us, and then slammed her hand on the lectern and said something along the lines of "of course someone died up there! A family can't go through that kind of trauma without loss!"

The poem includes the lines:

"Yishma-el was saved by his mother, Hagar.
Yitzhak was saved by the angel,
but Yivkeh no one saved."

[39] Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open: Poems*, harvest ed., trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2006) 21.

Korazim highlights this moment in which redemption occurs, but the world is also radically changed after. It's a fair question. Do we really think, can we even honestly imagine that the world, the ordered universe, the siddur of their family and community was the same after this episode? The 11th hour redemption of Isaac did not undo the climb up on the mountain, or the hiding of intentions, or the fact that it appears that Abraham would have very much carried out this horrific act. The redemption here saves Isaac's life, and it does keep the family intact, but it also points towards the new and undiscovered. Significantly, I think it helps create a Judaism that is horrified by child sacrifice specifically, and blind faith generally. [40]

If we read Rachel Adler in search of a theology of redemption, I think we find one which not only insists that when we go up the mountain, we will come back down different people, but which also questions the world in which that journey was acceptable, even as we return to that story again and again as part of out Jewish narrative tradition.

Orthodox feminist Tamar Ross, a prominent feminist theologian who has produced a comprehensive theology from an Orthodox perspective, offers a different approach to Jewish law, one which in certain ways builds upon the work of Adler, even as she strongly critiques Adler's work and in specific ways departs from Adler's approach to halakha.

Tamar Ross is invested in classical halakha even as she also sees it as being in process. To even use the term "classical halakha" is, however, fraught with issues for her because, for Ross, there is only the traditional halakha, not an alternative, renewed,

[40] Rachel Korazim, (lecture, Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles, CA, January 31, 2013).

redeemed vision of law that Adler suggests. Ross seems to locate redemption at the intersection of identities of Orthodox and feminist, suggesting that Orthodox feminist women are uniquely and supremely positioned to take on the issues Jewish women face under rabbinic law:

> …those in the best position to negotiate the encounter between Judaism and modernity are those most intensely affected by the conflict of loyalties that it has engendered. Deeply immersed in the rabbinic tradition and maintaining a high degree of allegiance to its standards and practices, Orthodox women with feminist sensibilities are the very personification of the qualifications required for Adler's project…the potential for engendering classical halachic development lies largely in their hands. Able to approach *halakhah* critically without rejecting it and to manipulate its internal vocabulary, they are the ideal formulators of new legal meaning. [41]

In part a response to *Engendering Judaism*, Ross imagines a way that Orthodox Jewish women committed to classical *halakha* can also function as feminists in the community, including raising feminist questions, concerns, and inquiries, and making feminist interventions in Orthodox communal praxis.

Importantly, Ross seems to reject certain aspects of postmodern thought and non-foundationalism[42], even as she uses key elements of nonfoundationalism in the construction of her theological approach.[43] A key concern for Ross about Adler's work is that it, in her view, relies too radically on nonfoundationalism, which Ross says, when applied to law, "does not provide sufficiently precise tools for the determination of law." Ross finds a certain relativism in Adler's work and claims that her vision "does not seem to harbor any constraints as to the form her suggested feminist redemptive vision may

[41] Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Hanover: Brandeis, 2004), 172.
[42] Ross defines nonfoundationalism as "the view that there is indeed no firm "foundation" that serves as the basis for our knowledge…." see Chapter 9, pages 164-165 of *Expanding the Palace of Torah* for a thorough discussion and definition of nonfoundationalism.
[43] Ibid., 166

take beyond her own moral convictions, and perhaps those of a particular stratum of Jewish society. "[44]

Ross's vision of legal evolution is partially rooted in what she calls "fluid revelation." Fluid revelation is, for Ross, the idea that "God sometimes takes into account the contemporary predilections of the Jewish people when revealing His will." [45] An important source for this part of her thought are the teachings of Rav Kook. Ross describes Rav Kook as teaching that "if certain unprecedented ideas or norms become absorbed within tradition, it is a fair indication of the workings of divine providence."[46] For Ross and for Orthodox Feminism, this means that changes to the ways Jewish communities and even Jewish legal authorities treat women are possible when they can be understood as part of revelation. While she does view Halakah as dynamic, the process for legitimizing change remains cautious and conservative, relying on legal authorities acceptance of change in order for change to be legitimate. Again citing Kook, she writes that "R. Kook concludes that if certain unprecedented ideas or norms become absorbed within tradition, it is a fair indication of the working of divine providence."[47] For Ross, Sinai is still calling and the legal authorities can still listen and thus the community can absorb certain changes while leaving the present structures of power in place.

[44] Ibid, 167
[45] Ibid, 204.
[46] Ibid, 205.
[47] Ibid.

Conclusion

There are many threads that can be said to tie together modern Jewish thinkers. Important for this project is the way that each of them calls upon the Jewish community to take up the project of redemption—to make it our sacred responsibility. While they don't all use this language specifically, each articulates ways that the transformation of our community and the world is quite profoundly in our hands.

This represents, in some ways, a radical departure from classical rabbinic thought and in other ways maintains elements of the rabbinic tradition. In my next chapter, the conclusion to this project, I will construct my own theology that will draw upon all of the thinkers explored thus far in this project.

CONCLUSION: Redemption Songs

In his now famous 1958 book, *Things Fall Apart*, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe describes the experience of losing an entire universe through his writing about the rise of colonialism on the African continent.[1] It's a devastating story, but it's also the story of something universal, which is that things really do fall apart. Whole worlds collapse. Entire systems of meaning and beloved ways of life are vanquished as if they never existed.

Redemption must be accounted for in a spiritual system because of this very truth and so a theology of redemption—a theology of *tikkun*, of healing and repair—starts from an honest awareness of what seems to be an inescapable truth of the human condition: we long for permanence, stability and predictability; yet we live in a world that is always in flux. Our well-intended efforts to establish a strong foundation for ourselves are always—*necessarily*—confounded because reality is neither stable nor stagnant. Cosmos and chaos—order and disorder—are forever interacting. And yet, in Judaism, we find an attempt to live in such a way that creates and recreates, again and again, despite this unavoidable truth. This reaching out for creation, for cosmos amid or in opposition to chaos, is a golden thread woven through our Jewish story. We see this process of reordering that which is broken in our early priestly text of Leviticus as the Israelites negotiate what it means to live in community with one another and in covenant with God. In those ancient days our ancestors defined themselves in part by their obligations to one another, and they called it redemption. We see the process of

[1] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, anchor books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1994)

redemption in the struggle of post-Holocaust thinkers who, despite their utter devastation, dared to think God back into existence and found Her, as Levinas did, in the face of the neighbor who needs us. And we see it as Jewish feminists build a Judaism by imagining a law that is just and that we might live by in a tradition that is more whole than the tradition that dehumanized women and others in so many ways.

God literally commands us to fix and repair, to come together again, despite a narrative tradition and a history that assures us that absolutely nothing lasts forever. This tension between falling apart and always rebuilding is, for me, the life force of Judaism and the binding agent of Jewish communities. Redemption is one of the possible Jewish responses to this (at times painful) tension. Redemption is what allows us to honor God and live as God's creation while upholding God's revelation.

Maintaining a belief that the universe, either one's personal world or the actual entire world is a mendable, repairable place, is critical for liberal Jews for at least two reasons: First, it requires us to acknowledge that it's broken. This can be hard, especially for those of us blessed with the many privileges that come along with living in the United States in the 21st century. Each theology explored in this thesis insists on some way in which a theology of redemption requires of us that we see what is broken in our world and respond. For the liberation theologians this is represented in the idea of the preference for the poor. Liberation theology points to material poverty as a product of human sin rather than an absence of grace. Critically, this requires response in the form of changes to socio-economic policy in our present time. Emanuel Levinas theorized the other in society—the face of the other—as that which might potentially need us. The other is configured as a commandment to respond to need, to be present

and react to suffering. This again points to the need for human awareness of human suffering, and for Levinas this becomes almost pre-rational, and at the same time theological.

Yes, faith in the possibility of redemption is a faith that invites us, prods at us, begs us even, to look around and see what's not working. It is a faith that insists that we must be awake and alert as we move through life. It is a faith that says that to be a Jew means to live in reality; that we see what's not right--from pain and suffering in our own lives, to the oppression of people and animals everywhere, to the exploitation of our planet. It is a faith that helps us look at what is broken and impossible in our hearts, whether it's an unthinkable traumatic experience from childhood or a current relationship that we know is not how it ought to be…to look at it and call it for what it is. It is a faith that prevents us from being lemmings who just follow along and instead calls upon each of us to be people who see injustice and oppression and become indignant, angry, demanding and pushy because we know that what we see is not right. Yes, believing in redemption means understanding that things do indeed fall apart but it also means seeing the dust that rises in the wake of a crash as a clear and unmistakable call to action.

The second reason that we as liberal Jews ought to believe in a Jewish, Torah based theology of redemption is that it obligates us to build the world of our dreams and not settle for anything less. Our tradition is woven with stories that animate our imaginations as to what human life could look and feel like. Our story begins with the exile from Eden, and the loss of the garden of love, nourishment, safety and security. It is lost to a world in which jealousy, murder and scarcity are part of reality. And yet,

when Jews get married we say that the *chuppah* is, in some ways, like that garden. The seven blessings remind us of creation and a profound peace. Under the chuppah the tradition invites us to see that we are people that can build gardens; that Eden is never fully lost. We, in our love and wisdom, can transform the harsh world into which Adam and Eve were sent, into a world of relationship and connection, love and bliss. The chuppah insists that redemption is possible, that in our gardens we see that this is the world we live in; this is the universe that God created.

When we read the Passover story, the ultimate Jewish redemption story, we tell of a journey from oppression and despair to a place of freedom, to a land of milk and honey. This story provides the narrative and spiritual framework for not just the Passover story; but for Western civilization's ethic of freedom and human rights. Yes, faith in the possibility of redemption helps us imagine what is possible.

However, none of this is possible unless we agree that it's possible, and this is where Leviticus becomes a central text in my theology because I think the legal framework that God commands for redemption is critical for us today. I also believe that Jewish redemption needs to *have* a legal framework if it is going to be both workable and authentically Jewish.

Many of the theologies in this project helped to guide me back to Leviticus and to a sense that a Jewish theology of redemption that will work for postmodern liberal Jews requires the rabbinic nomos of a legal framework—even if the law itself is a renewed and reimagined law. Rachel Adler points us towards this in her important work on Jewish law in *Engendering Judaism* when she calls for the creation of a reimagined Jewish legal system that remains firmly rooted in the Jewish story. In doing so she

allows those of us who live Jewish lives outside of the orthodox community to reclaim a religious sense of obligation and responsibility. If we are Jews who are trying to do Judaism after Emanuel Levinas and Rachel Adler, than we are Jews who know that we live in deep and obligatory relationship to one another, and that a Jewish legal system need not be oppressive but rather is the very framework that might enable us to enact redemption in our shared lives. In other words, we need a framework that allows us to respond to Torah (revelation), the Torah which commands us to respond to each other.

Redemption is rooted in a sacred obligation that we have to one another and it becomes palpable and possible, Jewishly, in the context of covenant and religious community, a community in which we are committed to the redemption of our selves and each other when the terrible, unlucky or horrific occurs.

In this way, redemption is law's boldest vision: a blue print of justice and order, of right and good that we are commanded to recreate whenever it's lost.

There is, however, at least one potential issue for Reform Jews in the theology that I've explained thus far. During our Torah services we stand and face the ark and chant *Hashivenu Adonai eilecha v'nashuva, chadeish yameinu k'kedem*. *Return us to You God, and we will return. Renew our days as of Old.*[2] In this moment we declare that out of utter destitution and hopelessness can emerge a future of wholeness and renewal. But as liberal Jews we have to ask: to what exactly do we return? This verse is found in the book of Lamentations and so in its most literal sense we might read it as a longing to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple after destruction. However, a reimagined Judaism

[2] Lamentations 5:21

with a renewed *halakha* might not reinstate the Davidic throne or cultic sacrifices that were lost.

It turns out that not every family, relationship or set of agreements ought to be reconstituted after it falls apart, as survivors of abuse can surely tell us. Leviticus imagines the ideal society as one in which a priestly class exerts tremendous control over the life of the community, and for that matter, many of the political arrangements described in Torah are hardly what most of us would consider an ideal past that we long to restore. Indeed, when speaking of a theology of redemption we have to be careful because it's all too easy to slip into a deeply conservative worldview that aggressively seeks to return everything to a kind of imagined original state. However, I would argue that to read the tradition as suggesting that we want to return everything back to an idealized past is an erroneous reading that quickly becomes fuel for religious fundamentalism. Leviticus is a book for people whose lives change, who move back and forth from purity to impurity, from joy to pain, from health to illness to health again. It is a book that attempts to create a framework for the reality that is the volatility and vulnerability of the human condition.

The moments of redemption in the Torah, the moments when God, individuals or a community live out a redemptive theology and transform life from how it is to how it ought to be; these are never moments of literal restoration; there is always something new that results.[3] When Adam and Eve are sent out from the Garden, the redemption that they experience is not a return to Eden rather, they emerge as mortals with knowledge, as transformed beings. After Egypt, we did not return to the life of the *Avot*

[3] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, interviewed by author, Los Angeles, CA, October 2, 2013.

and *Imahot*, but instead we became an Israelite nation. Slavery and degradation in Egypt were unacceptable conditions, but so was going back to business as usual. Perhaps the best example of this is the fundamental framework of the rabbinic tradition. When our holy of holies—our most sacred place, the Temple, was destroyed, the rabbis redeemed our people not through rebuilding that which was lost, but by building a new temple on the pages of Talmud and in the sweet words of prayer.

American Progressive Judaism, with our feminism, our commitment to GLBT rights, and our love of social justice seems to me to be yet another example of the evolving nature of our traditional commitment to redemption. When the Ashkenazi world of Europe fell apart, the reformers sought to rebuild and recreate, and what we have is a Judaism that works for us, that embraces us, that allows a gay man to attend rabbinical school and allows a woman to be the school director. But even more importantly, it keeps alive what I would argue is a very ancient theological principle and a truth about God: redemption is something we can, and I think actually most of us do—believe in and make present in our lives. It's a part of theology that helps us keep living when loss seems like it could consume us, when heartache and melancholy are all that we can feel. It is in these moments that Leviticus calls out to us and insists: you *can* rebuild, you *can* renew. For God's sake, *You have each other.*

The Torah imagines a world in which each person matters deeply, and commands us to create and recreate that kind of existence. So we struggle against evil, and strive to uphold all that is right and good.

At the end of the Torah service, when we return the scroll to the ark, we not only raise our voices in hope that full redemption might someday be our reality, but we also

celebrate the tradition that commands us to make redemption a reality in our lives here and now, messiah or not. We are blessed with law that makes us responsible for one another, with a Torah that points us in the direction of community, and reminds us just what it is we have to do when things, as they inevitably do, fall apart.

The theology of redemption that I propose is one that takes this notion seriously. God is not hiding and waiting for the right moment to come and save us because God gave us Torah, and hearts, and faces. We see each other and we respond to each other. We build community that accepts morality and obligation as its foundation; that sees this foundation as a source of freedom rather than a burden. The Torah teaches of a redeeming God and also a redeeming community. We can and must be that for each other even as we struggle to sense God's presence in our lives.

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