COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:

A JEWISH CALL TO ACTION

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis, entitled "*Community Organizing: A Jewish Call to Action*," is to analyze the intersection between community organizing and Jewish texts. Throughout the following ten chapters, my hope is to illuminate how the work of Congregation Based Community Organizing (CBCO) can be enlivened through a more explicitly Jewish foundation. As the field of CBCO becomes more popular in Reform Congregations throughout the country, there is a fundamental need to understand how organizing can be framed as a Jewish practice. Especially since many synagogues partner with broad-based, interfaith organizations to create an organizing effort, it is essential that our congregants understand how to engage in this work in a uniquely Jewish way.

While there is a plethora of contemporary resources which examine the connection between Judaism and social justice as a whole, there are very few systematic or comprehensive resources about the way in which organizing can be understood through a Jewish lens. Therefore, I hope that my thesis can serve this purpose. I trust that it will provide the community with an impetus for an on-going, communal conversation about how to frame the intersection between Judaism and community organizing in a more thorough manner. While there are many organizations, rabbis, and communal leaders who have already written about this connection in a very powerful way, I hope my project will serve as a compelling and unifying document. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to inspire an even broader effort within the community to examine the connection between organizing and Jewish thought.

My thesis can be broken down into three main components—an introduction, the body, and a conclusion. The introduction itself includes four subsections: a) a brief assessment of the current state of affairs in the field of Jewish social justice. ; b) a definition of community organizing; c) an explanation of the cycle of organizing; d) an short exploration of what makes a good organizer.

The body of the paper is divided into six major chapters. Each chapter investigates one meta-level organizing concept or tool. While there are certainly many other conceptual tools in the practice of community organizing, I have chosen the following six ideas because I believe they form the foundation of any successful organizing initiative. These include storytelling, relationship building, self-interest, power, action, and interpretation.

Each of the aforementioned chapters can be further subdivided into three areas. The first section will explore the idea from a secular lens. The second section attempts to provide an overall Jewish foundation for the idea. The third section of each chapter includes a "text bank" with further commentary and analysis. I hope that the text-bank portion of each chapter can be used as a foundation for a real text-study within a community-organizing framework.

The third section of my thesis attempts to present community organizing as a form of spiritual practice. In the conclusion, I will investigate how the Reform Movement can use community organizing not only as a way pursue systemic social change and to create more talented leaders, but also as an invaluable religious endeavor for our congregants.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout this project I use both primary and secondary resources. Whereas the majority of the paper relies on secondary resources, the last sub-section of each chapter includes a "text bank," as well as some additional analysis of those particular texts. Unless otherwise noted, the translations included in these sections are based on the 1985 *JPS Tanakh* or the English version of the *Judaic Classics Soncino Talmud.*

A few words about language. First, I often use the phrase "community organizing" and "CBCO" interchangeably. In many settings, however, "community organizing" refers the grassroots practice of leadership and campaign development in the broadest sense. In contrast, the phrase CBCO usually refers to how the practice of organizing is be applied specifically to a congregational setting. This term that has been developed primarily by Jewish communities throughout the country who have incorporated the practice of community organizing into the work of their synagogue. That being said, for stylistic reasons I will be using these two terms interchangeably throughout my paper.

Second, it is important to note that I view my thesis as both academic research paper, as well as an informal guide to community organizing. Therefore, I tend to switch between the third and first person quite frequently. Although it is uncommon for an academic paper, I often address the reader directly because my hope is that some of the following concepts and ideas will be used directly by congregations in their own organizing campaigns.

Secondly, throughout this paper I use the word "organizer" in two distinct, yet, related ways. First, an "organizer" may refer to a paid professional who has been trained in the art of community organizing by one of the broad-based organizations in the United States such as PICO, the IAF, Gamliel, etc.

The second way in which I use the word "organizer" is in reference to any lay leader or clergy member who adopts an organizing philosophy into their work in the synagogue. Oftentimes I will not differentiate between these two types of organizers. In part, this is to achieve a stylistic goal of avoiding overly cumbersome language. Therefore, unless specified,

when I say that it is an "organizer's" job to participate in a particular task, I am referring to anyone who has been trained in this philosophy and who has integrated this knowledge into his practice over time.

More importantly, I have also conflated the use of this term because the goal of organizing is to flatten the relationship between paid professional and lay leaders. Eventually, lay leaders and clergy members who have been learning the trade long enough should begin to serve as primary "organizers" within their community. While paid organizers and broad-based networks will always be an invaluable asset, the leadership team, or "organizers," within the community should begin to feel a sense of ownership of the process as well. Therefore, I most often use the term "organizer" in its broadest sense because it linguistically represents a core message of the organizing model.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, the Reform Movement in America has embraced a commitment to the pursuit of social justice as a religious act. Of the eight principles set forth by these early reformers, the final one reads:

> "In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relation between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."

Since then, each time the leaders of the Reform Movement met – in 1937, 1976, and 1999 – to create a new statement of principles, social justice has continued to play a central role in the movement's ideology. Yet, as we venture into the 21st Century, many individual congregants are renegotiating the centrality of this historic commitment because of several unique obstacles facing our contemporary world.

First, it is clear that as Reform Jews become more learned, they also become more committed to ritual practice, prayer life, and *talmud torah* (learning Torah). Primarily, this is an overwhelmingly positive transformation. On the other hand, in such a fast-paced and over-worked society, many Reform Jews are finding it difficult to "do it all." They either participate in adult learning, or they are on the social action committee, or they attend Shabbat services. Therefore, as Reform Jews have become more interested in Jewish learning and prayer, it has been increasingly difficult to encourage them to also commit themselves to a long-term social justice initiative when they are already at the synagogue two to three days a week.

Relatedly, I would argue that one of the primary obstacles facing 21st Century Reform

Jews is a general lack of time. As social and economic pressures continue to increase, many congregants report that they have very little time for "extracurricular" activities at the synagogue. This is only exacerbated by the phenomenon of the Baby Boomers' "sandwich generation," who are trying to take care of their children, as well as their aging parents.

For most families, this makes time at the synagogue limited in scope. And if people are seeking a respite from the chaotic life of modern-day America, they are more likely to seek refuge in the sanctuary or in Torah study, rather than in a complex, long-term social justice campaign. In essence, our ability to care is diminishing because of the pressures we face in a global economy. As Rabbi Jonah Pesner suggests, "The social network of caring is being frayed by the intense pressure of work and life on member families. And despite our sincere desire to fulfill the Jewish mandate to pursue justice, we engage only a slim portion of our members"[1]

Second, compared to earlier generations, another obstacle facing proponents of faith-based initiatives for social justice is that Jewish Americans are becoming more heterogeneous in their political outlook. Whereas in the 1960s and earlier, most American Jews tended to vote Democratic, today there is a growing amount of conservatism among our congregants. As Feldman notes, whereas many Jews a generation or two ago worked as teachers, social workers, and union members, today many our communal leaders have become business owners, professionals and investors.[2] This has made it increasingly difficult for Jewish leaders to come down on one side of an issue without risking alienation, or worse, the retaliation of a large or influential portion of their congregation or board. When large funders are opposed to the clergy's political ideas, it not only becomes a political risk to

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[1] Pesner 1.
[2] Feldman 13.

stand up for an issue on the *bimah*, it can also become a job liability. Therefore, it has become true that, "What is good/bad for the Jews has come to be defined by political parties and their apparatchiks rather than Jewish communal leaders."[3]

Having well-rounded constituencies is not a bad thing unless it inhibits Jewish leaders to speak about certain issues in public. Thus the question remains, how can religious leaders reclaim their moral agency and their ability to address controversial issues without losing their long-term efficacy and alienating their constituency? In part, as I will address below in greater detail, I believe that the answer to this question lies in our ability to make issues of social justice not just a political debate, but a spiritual reality.

Third, I believe that our constant access to technology and social media has made it more difficult for us to pursue long-term social justice based on face to face relationships. In a way, modern technology has become both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it allows us to organize our lives, our work, and our campaigns faster than ever. Through listserves, webinars, and other online forums, social change agents have the opportunity to take advantage of virtual communities and to expand their social networks in exponential ways. Organizations such as *MoveOn* or *Jewish World Watch* have proved that technology is a great asset for social change.

Generally speaking, in a fast-paced global world, technology brings people together in unprecedented ways. For instance, in fourteen hours we can fly ourselves across the world. In a matter of minutes we can know about the news in another continent. And with the click of a finger, we can donate money to a micro-lending organization in the country of our choice. Our big, wide open world has become one, small, virtual village.

However, while technology has the incredible power to "flatten" our world, it also

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[3] Feldman 13.

has the power to create distance between friends, family, and community members like never before. Rather than having a thought-provoking conversation over dinner, family members are busy checking their smart phones. Rather than taking a stroll with the neighbors, both kids and adults are opting to stay indoors to play the latest video game. And rather talking on the phone or sitting down face to face, many religious community members spend their time interfacing with one another on conference calls or through Skype. Added to the litany of other tasks that must be done online, it makes sense that many synagogue-goers do not find "committee work" a meaningful way to spend their "spare" time.

In order to address the problems noted above, we must find a unique and authentic way to engage today's Reform Jews in the practice of social justice. For the founders of the Reform Movement, the idea of placing social justice at the center of Judaism was a monumental and transformational idea that changed the course of modern Jewish history. Today, however, the message of *tikkun olam*, or Jewish social justice, has become so prevalent that it runs the risk of being a catch-all, or an empty phrase. This is evidenced by the fact that when most Reform congregants are asked why they participate in social justice they often reply by simply stating: "Because it is the right thing to do." There are two fundamental problems to this response. First, it implies that we have failed to impart a real and lasting connection between Judaism and social justice. Second, it insinuates that they are primarily motivated by righteous, yet external factors. In other words, most Reform Jews who participate in social action initiatives do so because they believe in doing the right thing for other, perhaps less fortunate, people.

On the one hand, there is nothing wrong with being motivated by an external feeling of compassion or justice because the Torah teaches us that our experience of oppression and

servitude should inspire us to protect the most vulnerable citizens among us. On the other hand, as the day to day financial and social pressures of our global economy continue to increase, I believe that most Reform Jews are looking for opportunities not only to mend the world (*tikkun olam*), but also to mend their souls (*tikkun hanefesh*).

In the end, the ultimate goal of my thesis is to illustrate how community organizing can fulfill this immense need in the Reform Movement. By exploring the secular philosophy of the CBCO model, along with an intense exploration of Jewish thought and texts, I hope to facilitate the connection between *tikkun olam* and *tikkun hanefesh* from a uniquely Reform perspective. By significantly embedding community organizing within Jewish texts and thought, I fundamentally believe we can enable contemporary Jews to see the CBCO model of *tikkun olam* as an expression of both their politics, as well as their spirituality. If we frame social justice as a form of spiritual practice I believe we can illustrate how this process has the ability to transform the lives of our congregants, as well as our neighborhoods and cities. Last but not least, if organizing is framed as a spiritual practice is has the potential to move us beyond bipartisan social justice issues that may otherwise divide our congregations.

CHAPTER TWO: DEFINING COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

"CHANGE MEANS MOVEMENT. MOVEMENT MEANS FRICTION. ONLY IN THE FRICTIONLESS VACUUM OF A NONEXISTENT ABSTRACT WORLD CAN MOVEMENT OR CHANGE OCCUR WITHOUT THAT ABRASIVE FRICTION OF CONFLICT."[4]

Thousands of years ago the prophet Amos challenged the Jewish people to create a world in which: "Justice flows like water, and righteousness like a mighty river."[5] And yet, as we enter the 21st Century we continue live in a world plagued by greed, poverty, war, famine, and environmental disarray. According to the former President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the heart of the Jewish endeavor is to pursue justice. Regardless of one's denominational affiliation, Yoffie argues that "Social justice, in short, is required by our religious texts and is inseparable from our religious mission."[6] Yet, the prophetic call to justice is not enough. We must learn how to take the passion of the prophets and turn it into concrete methods for social change.

Thankfully, community organizing can help us to achieve this goal by effectuating real social and political change. At its core, the CBCO model is a communal and public conversation about how faith-based institutions can create stronger communities and more effective social change. Organizers pursue this work by encouraging communities to value the process of relationship building and values clarification as much as they value their commitment to Jewish education, prayer life, holidays, life cycle events, etc. By engaging

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[4] Alinsky 21.
[5] Amos 5:24.
[6] Yoffie.

congregants in an intentional and systematic form of relationship building, organizing advances the creation of a shared narrative, along with shared values and goals for both internal and external forms of communal and social change. When done effectively, organizing teaches people how to harness their passion, commitment and power so that they can more effectively engage in civic change. The ultimate goal of the CBCO model is to create a reflective community in which a collective vision can be transformed into social change.

Organizers often define this kind of transformation as shifting the "world as it is" into the "world as it should be." While it is difficult to ascertain who first coined this phrase, it is clear that by the 1970s it had become an integral part of the organizing vocabulary. According to Alinsky's protégé, Ed Chambers, the "world as it is" is the world that we are born into. It is a world in which each person is concerned for their own self-preservation. It is a world of extreme individualism. It means competing for basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, safety, education, and health care. The "world as it should be," however, is a world in which our basic needs are met without violence or competition so that every human being can live from a place of hope rather than fear. It also means being able to pursue one's own dreams so that each person can become more self-actualized. Through this self-actualization one's actions should become more in line with one's values and hopes.[7]

With such a huge paradigm shift in mind it is important to emphasize that organizers do not believe that this type of adaptive change can occur overnight. Rather, organizing is viewed as a long term art-form rather than a science. It is a form art because it takes an immense amount of curiosity, imagination, patience, passion and humility. It is not a science because there is no magic formula for social change that can be plugged into from one

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[7] Chambers 21.

community or campaign to another. For this reason, I would argue that community organizing means turning the art of the impossible into the practice of the possible. At its very core, organizing is about shifting one's perspective about the world we live in. It is about acting strategically in order to turn a world filled with doubt, inertia, fear, and isolation into a world of hope, energy, courage, and solidarity.

On the most foundational level, community organizing seeks to propel relationships into community, community into power, and power into social change. Or as veteran organizer Marshall Ganz suggests, organizing can divided into three major elements. The first stage is to identify, recruit and develop leaders who have the desire to create a more effective and sustainable form of social change. The second stage is to build a stronger community with these leaders at the core. The third stage is to use these relationships to build power.[8] Yet, the question remains, what is the purpose of building power?

Community organizing harnesses communal power, leadership, and vision not only to affect social change, but also to create a sense of interpersonal and intrapersonal transformation. For example, the art of relationship building, which will be explored in more depth below, is not simply a means to an ends. Rather than building relationship in order to convince people to join a specific cause, the goal of CBCO is to help people gain a new understanding of their lives and interests, as well as their personal power and resources. This also means that when organizing is done well congregants relate to one another in a more deep and meaningful way. By valuing the process of relationship building as much as the final outcome, community organizers teach us that we should value "people before programs."

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[8] Ganz 3.

In summary, organizing operates on three levels to transform the individual, the synagogue, and the community at large. It is an intentional and strategic process of turning individual relationships into a community that is capable of acting upon shared values, shared vision and shared power. It is important to note, however, that organizing is an "art" that takes an immense amount of patience and practice. There is no simple formula that you can input from one community to the next. While there is strong philosophy that serves as the foundation for this work, it is essential to remember that this process will look differently from campaign to campaign and congregation to congregation.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CYCLE OF ORGANIZING

Over the past seventy to eight years the modern day field of community organizing has developed specific tools to help people build deeper relationships, cultivate their curiosity, think strategically and act powerfully. This grassroots process is known as the "cycle of organizing." While different organizations teach about the cycle in slightly different ways, I will be presenting the model used primarily by the Industrial Area's Foundation (IAF). In this model, the cycle includes five distinct phases: individual meetings, house meetings, research actions, public actions, and interpretation.

The goal of this chapter is to briefly summarize these five tools because they serve as the foundation for the meta-level themes that I will explore in the body of my thesis. In order to understand the concept of storytelling, relationship building, self-interest, and power, one must first understand the premise of an individual meeting, a house meeting, etc, because they are used to help people develop their interests, create deeper relationships, and build power within the community. Depending on the community, the cycle of organizing could take six months, a year, or two years to fully complete one cycle. Congregations that are new to the CBCO model tend to take longer to complete one cycle, whereas more veteran congregations can usually complete a full cycle in less than year depending on the size and goal of the campaign at hand.

The cycle begins with a "one on one" or "individual meeting," which is also known as a "relational meeting." And individual meeting can take place anywhere and it should last thirty to forty-five minutes. The goal is to create an opportunity for people to tell some stories that reflect one's interests, passions, or current challenges in life. A relational meeting

should not feel like an interview and it should not be used to solicit someone's involvement in a particular committee or campaign. Rather, it is a true moment of mutual exchange and curiosity. In summary, the goal of an individual meeting is to help people articulate their stories and interests, as well as build deeper relationships with other people in the congregation. All three of these goals will be discussed in greater detail below. Suffice it to say that the an individual meeting is more about understanding *why* people do what they do; rather than simply learning about *what* they do on a day to day basis.

After a number of individual meetings the next step is to create a house meeting campaign. A house meeting is basically an expanded version of a one on one meeting. A house meeting can be led by an organizer, rabbi or lay leader with the intention of encouraging congregants to share their stories and experiences in a larger group setting. Unlike a one on one meeting, house meetings are meant to facilitate deeper relationships among a broader network of people. By sharing stories with one another the hope is that congregants will begin to see other members of their community in a new way. This new perspective is meant to inspire people to act together to make some kind of internal (communal) or external (societal) change. The process by which a house meeting campaign turns into an action plan will be discussed in more depth below.

The third step in the community organizing cycle is a research action. A research action usually emerges after a series of house meetings in which leaders identify a prevalent theme or concern within the community at large. The goal of a research action is to help people transform a big, societal "problem" into a winnable "issue." In other words, while the *problem* might be the lack of quality public education in the public schools, finding the right

"issue" may mean working on a ballot initiative to help increase tax dollars for school funding.

Research actions can take place at any time throughout the cycle of organizing. In fact, they usually occur many times throughout the process in order to help people learn more about the issue and to hone their political knowledge. For instance, based on the example above, one research action may include a few lay leaders going to meet with a leader in the teacher's union to learn about how the school budget works. Another research action may include meeting with a board member or an academic scholar who knows about the issue from another perspective. After several research actions have taken place, the group reconvenes to talk about what they learned and how they might be able to take action on a particular issue.

A public action is an effort to bring together a wide array of congregants and constituents to speak publically about how a certain issue is affecting the broader community. There is a tremendous amount of work and preparation that needs to take place before a congregation can create a public action. Not only do the organizers need to create a viable issue that is widely and deeply felt throughout the community, the leaders must have enough relationships within the congregation to fill an auditorium with members who truly care about this issue. Furthermore, the group has to identify, and build a relationship with, a power-broker who has the power to affect change on this issue as well. A good public action is similar to a drama because it contains a compelling narrative arc. The intricacies of this work will be explored in Chapter Eight. In summary, a stellar public action challenges and inspires people to become more involved in the overall campaign.

The last step in the cycle of organizing is known as interpretation, which includes the notion of self-reflection, group evaluation and celebration. It is important to emphasize that the process of interpretation takes place throughout all of the other stages of organizing. This means that some kind of group evaluation or informal reflection usually takes place after every individual meeting or group encounter. Since I dedicate an entire chapter to this process, for now I will simply state that interpretation plays a huge role in the culture of community organizing. This practice will be explored in more depth throughout Chapter Nine.

The cycle of organizing, and the CBCO as a whole, is distinct from other forms of social change such as advocacy, service, philanthropy and direct action in several ways. The major difference is that the CBCO model relies on working with local leaders to develop an issue that they care about. Rather than approaching a community with a prefabricated plan of action, organizers work with leaders to identify an issue that the community develops out of their own interests and stories. These issues are developed by using the cycle of organizing to determine the immediate needs and the interests of the community. For example, in Baltimore local leaders fought to pass a city-wide living wage ordinance and in Boston leaders worked to win state-wide health care coverage. In Los Angeles, several institutions are working to improve public education, combat the rising cost of health care, and to address the foreclosure crisis. These campaigns have taught us that the most effective change occurs when an issue is identified, articulated, and developed by people within the community itself.

The fundamental building block for community organizing is the belief that people most affected by a problem have the talent and know-how to affect change in their own

community. Thus, rather than entering a community with a pre-fabricated solution to a problem, community organizing is based on the notion that the issue must grow organically out of the needs and interests of community itself. This theory applies regardless of the socio-economic background of the community because organizers believe that the people closest the issue at hand are also the best experts in their own community.

In summary, the cycle of organizing is meant to act as guide for any community that wants to engage in the CBCO model. Ultimately, the goal of the cycle is to help congregants build deeper relationships with one another, develop new leaders, and identify issues that people more passionate about acting upon as a community. The cycle of organizing is simply a way to mobilize the community's time, resources, and energy to achieve a specific outcome determined by the congregation itself. Thinking about this work as a "cycle" helps us to maintain a sense of routine, structure, and at times, even urgency. A campaign may consist of one organizing cycle or many. That being said, each cycle is meant to help the leaders of a community focus their attention on particular techniques that are meant to help the community achieve the meta-level goals and concepts outlined in the following chapters.

Whether we recognize it or not, stories are the building blocks of life. As social beings, we relate to one another through stories. Since it is impossible to remember every detail of one's life, our lives are annotated by an ever-evolving string of stories. Thus, the first step of any community organizing endeavor is to understand how stories operate within our own lives, as well as in the lives of others. Understanding the power of story-telling is essential to any form of social change, especially community organizing, because in order to know where we are going we must understand where we have been. In other words, one cannot mold the future without a clear vision of the past; stories help us clarify our past and create the imaginative process needed to build a new future.

Change-makers, therefore, must not only learn from history, but they must also learn from their own lives and their own stories. In order to understand how to actualize change on a communal level we must first recognize how change has been actualized in our own life. Additionally, stories help us to analyze the values that lie beneath our actions and encourage people to become more curious about their own needs and values. This heightened sense of self-awareness naturally leads people to become more curious about the motivations of other people as well.

In the realm of community organizing a good story is more than a mere snapshot of life. Rather, it is a compelling account of a critical juncture in one's life, which combines both narrative and self-analysis. A good story could be based on a time when you had to make a difficult decision, took a big risk, when your values or ideals were challenged, or when you came into conflict with someone or something around you.

Telling a story is more than just referencing the "who, what, when, where, or how" of your life or of a certain experience. While all good stories certainly include this type of information, a provocative story goes beyond these facts. Rather than simply identifying the setting, characters and the plot of a story, a great story also includes an investigation into the "why" of one's life. In thinking about our own stories it is important to ask questions such as: *"Why did I make that decision? Why did I go against the group in this instance? Why did I stand up for what I believed here but not there?"* These are just some of the questions that transform our own stories from pure narrative into an interesting analysis.

Telling your story is very different from giving someone your autobiography. Without giving it too much thought, when people ask us about our lives we often default to listing highlights from our resume. For example, a common way of answering this question would be: "I was born in Chicago, and then I moved to D.C. for college. I fell in love with the study of economics and political science, and twelve years later I am still working on Capitol Hill." This, however, is not a story; it is a curriculum vitae. A story is not about facts or figures, nor is it a list of credentials or work experience. Rather, a good story is a finite anecdote that not only provides the facts but also insight into one's core values and needs. Although a good story may reflect one's values, it is important to note that a good story is not synonymous with one's philosophical or ethical mission statement in life. For example, in today's political climate, many conversations begin with a claims such as: "We cannot afford to raise taxes," or "Everyone deserves quality health care," etc. Most likely, in this scenario, the person will continue on by trying to prove their opinion with certain statistics. This kind of political "stumping" is the opposite of story-telling. While a story may convey certain

embedded values or beliefs, a good story must also go beyond abstract theories to concrete situations or dilemmas.

Take, for example, the resume-like anecdote cited above. If we were probe a bit further, we might uncover the following story: "I grew up in a well-to-do home in suburban Chicago. I first realized that there was poverty and homelessness in the world when I moved away to college in D.C. Every day while walking to school in the morning I was asked for my spare change. Even though I gave some money to the same guy each day he kept coming back and asking me for more money. I was frustrated because my grandfather had worked his way up, pulling himself up by his bootstraps, and he never asked for a handout. So one day when I asked the man why he didn't get a job, he simply replied that he did not have enough money to buy a cell phone and no employer would hire him if he did not have a phone number where he could be reached. I realized that in my grandfather's era this was not an issue. While solving poverty is much more than providing homeless people with cell phones, I realized that there are concrete ways in which we can begin to lessen the sting of poverty in our society. I decided to work with a local group that meets with homeless people one-on-one to figure out what they need in order to be successful rather than assuming that they simply need food, money or shelter for the night."

In the world of community organizing, this is considered a great story for many reasons. First, this story is successful because it has a clear beginning, middle and end. For example, in the beginning of the story the narrator lays out her setting. Not only do we know that she grew up in Chicago, we also have a small, but important detail about her growing up in the suburbs. While it is important to avoid stereotyping the narrator based on this one fact, we may infer that life as a suburban kid in Chicago meant having better education and more

economic stability. Thus, the narrator provides us with a quick glimpse into the past without spending too much time describing previous events in her life.

The middle of the story, as with all great literature, consists of some kind of tension, challenge, or crisis. Literarily, a "crisis" is not necessarily a negative event; rather, it is an event that forces the character to make a physical, mental or emotional choice. As social creatures who are confronted with new challenges on a daily basis, we are drawn to other people's stories when they have the potential to teach us how to cope with the unexpected circumstances in our own lives. In this case, the narrator's crisis occurred when she confronted the same homeless man on her way to school every day. Rather than ignoring the man, she decided to interact with him. This interaction became a pivotal moment or "crisis" because it encouraged the woman to re-think some of her assumptions about homelessness in America.

A good story not only highlights a specific crisis, but it also offers the listener some kind of resolution. It is important to note, however, that a resolution does not mean that the narrator had to "fix" or "solve" the entire problem in its entirety. In fact, not many stories offer us a resolution in the colloquial sense. Rather, a good way to offer a resolution to a story, even if the crisis is still underway, is to offer a new perspective on the situation, one that might highlight a person's perseverance, ingenuity, or innovation. In the case above, the resolution is that the woman decided to create an organization that would listen to the needs of homeless men and woman. While her organization has not alleviated all poverty in America, her story does give us a glimmer of hope and encouragement that change is indeed possible. Thus, a good story is not simply about the past; but rather, it also offers us a glimpse into the future.

Last but not least, it is important to note that stories should be told in a way that balances one's personal narrative with a public experience. In other words, it is not advisable to tell a story that is too intimate, raw, or personal. While it is true that we are trying to encourage congregants to develop deeper connections with one another, if a story is too private, it may make the listener uncomfortable. While there is no secret formula for finding the right balance between a public and private story there are at least two guidelines that I would like to suggest. First, a good story goes beyond what you might tell a potential employer. Rather than trying to present a perfect image of oneself, a good public story includes an aspect of vulnerability. Second, a good public story is one that you will not be ashamed of or embarrassed by the next day. In other words, if the story is something you would normally only say during therapy then the issue may be too private to share. Likewise, if a story produces an outburst of tears or anger it may be too raw to tell. That being said, telling a good public story often does involve a bit of risk-taking and sharing something that does not feel 100% comfortable at first. For example, while I was doing one-to-ones in an affluent suburban community, a man once said to me: "I am so enraged by the economic downturn and the irresponsibility of Wall Street." Since I could tell he was really fired up by this issue, I asked him if he had been personally affected by the recession. At first, he was hesitant to answer. But after a while, he said that he had been out of work for six months and he was really ashamed of himself because he could no longer provide for his family. This was a very difficult story for him to tell, but with time this became the man's public story because it illustrated how his personal problem was really a much bigger public issue. Another way to think about the balance between the public and the private element of a story is through the feminist notion that the "personal is political." Telling our story, or helping

someone else tell his or her story, is about helping people weave their personal experience with a very public dilemma such as the one noted above.

Now that we understand what individual stories are, how do we use them? I would argue that stories can be used in one of three ways. First, stories can help people understand their own self-interest in a deeper way. Second, stories can help communities find shared interests that they will decide to act upon as a congregation. Third, stories can motivate and inspire both individuals as well as communities to act on their beliefs.

To begin with, how can stories help people understand their own self interest in a more complex way? One could argue that stories are meant to be told, listened to, interpreted, probed, added onto and then activated on both a personal and communal level. It is easy to surmise what it means to tell or listen to a story but what does it mean to help someone interpret a story? I would argue that there is an art to telling a story, as well as listening to a story. The role of the listener is to help the person telling the story interpret why this incident or event had such an impact on him or her. For example, some of the questions you could ask include, but are not limited to: *"Why is this story so meaningful to you? What kind of emotions did it produce? What would you have done differently? What would you have done if…? Did you see yourself as acting powerfully in this story? What would it mean for you to act powerfully next time? What would it take to rewrite this story in a way that you would like it to end?"* By asking these probing questions the listener can help sharpen the storyteller's own understanding of his or her own story. In this way, engaging in storytelling in a one-on-one setting is an experiment in mutual learning and exploration. The storyteller should be prepared to tell a good story as outlined above, but also, she or he should be

prepared to reflect on the story in a way that allows for the story to expand, grow, change and evolve based on the listener's questions.

The second way in which stories can be used is to help communities find a common issue or concern. In other words, organizing is based on something called a "listening campaign." A listening campaign consists of hundreds of individual one-on-one meetings and house meetings, in which congregants are invited to share their stories with one another. For many people, this may be the first time that they have been asked to engage in this kind of storytelling in such an intentional or official way. The purpose of having all these individual and house meetings is for people to begin hearing other people's stories and understanding some of the wider concerns the exist within the community. Listening campaigns are usually led by a team of ten to twenty leaders who are trained in relational meetings and storytelling. It is their job to help the community interpret what kind of stories people are telling and to help the community decide what issue they want to address in the coming year or years. This is a much more complex process than can be described in a few lines, but what is important to keep in mind here is that personal stories form the basis of exploring communal concerns and interests. Rather than deciding an issue from the top-down, or rather than deciding based on whatever hot topic is in the news at the particular moment, an issue emerges from the stories and experiences shared by congregants people in the congregation are talking about in real time, in their own lives, and in their own communities.

Third, stories can be used to inspire individuals and communities to act on their values.

One way this is done is by helping congregations interpret their past actions so they can learn to tell a new story about their community, their values, and their actions. This allows congregations to weave together a new story out of their collective past experiences. This generative process takes place when people come together to interpret how their stories overlap and what kind of story the community wants to tell in the future. It means figuring out how to translate individual narratives, and perhaps even pain, into a public issue and a cry for action.

Here is one story of a congregation that has successfully begun this process of turning individual narratives into a new communal narrative. Historically, this congregation was known for its commitment to social justice, and yet people started to notice that the same ten or twenty people were always engaged in all things related to social action. As a result, the leaders of this congregation embraced the community organizing model and began having one-on-one conversations with their congregants. After talking to over three-hundred people, the leaders at this synagogue started to realize that pursuing "social justice" could no longer simply mean working with low-income communities, because they were hearing story after story about unemployment, financial insecurity, and healthcare dilemmas within their own congregation. However, after each individual meeting the congregant would say: "Please don't tell anyone else at the synagogue, because I'm sure that I'm the only one dealing with this. Everyone else seems to be well-off." After weeks of hearing this same refrain, the leaders started to realize that they wanted to tell a different story about their synagogue. They wanted their synagogue to be a place where people were not afraid to talk about the problems they were facing economically, socially, or physically. Therefore, after months of listening to stories about fear, isolation and insecurity, the leaders and clergy of this synagogue wanted to

develop a new message—one of hope, solidarity, and creative civic engagement. As depicted by this example, the use of individual stories and narratives, the goal of community organizing is to weave together a new story based on communal conversations, hope, and ultimately, social change.

One of the ways in which old stories are turned into a new story for communal change is through an organizing tool known as an "interpretation session." It is important to note that an interpretation session can take on one of many forms. For example, it could mean getting together ten leaders in an informal setting to talk about what stories they have been hearing from other congregants. Or, it could mean gathering together fifty to one-hundred congregants who have already participated in an individual meeting or a house meeting to hear a multitude of stories and to interpret them as a group. Regardless of the size, the goal of these interpretations sessions is two-fold. The first goal is to present a wide variety of stories that incorporate some of the common themes that have been heard throughout the community. Second, participants are encouraged to think about how these stories may have a common point of connection and can be woven together to create a shared vision and future narrative.

As noted earlier, story-telling is the foundation of our social reality. Therefore, creating new stories through a specific kind of communal engagement has the potential to help us create social change. It would be immensely naive, however, to assume that telling a good story leads directly to any kind of concrete action or change. That being said, stories are the building blocks of social change because when they are told in an effective and convincing manner, they have the power to engage our emotions in a very powerful way.

Author Jeffrey Stout argues that face-to-face encounters are fundamental to social

change movements because they actually have the power to help us empathize in a monumental way. Unlike a survey or an email, Stout argues that face-to-face interactions have the potential to affect us physiologically. Based on research done in the 1990s on "mirror neurons," scientists argue that neurons in the brain actually react to other people's emotions in a way that transfers that emotion, neurologically, to the listener. In other words, if you are sitting face to face with someone who is sad or mad, you may start to feel sad or mad as well. For many years people believed that this was simply an empathetic response; however, research shows that one's brain may actually be receiving some of the sadness or anger from the other person and incorporating it into one's own body.[9] Undoubtedly, it is more likely that if you are able to conceptualize, or even feel, someone else's fear, pain or sadness, you are likely to act with them to change their situation. This is why face-to-face interactions are so important in the world of community organizing.

According to veteran organizer Marshall Ganz, who worked hand in hand with Caesar Chavez in the 1970s, stories have the ability to turn negative emotions into positive emotions, and those positive emotions can serve as the basis for communal action and social change. First, he suggests that stories have the ability to turn fear into hope. Unfortunately, many Americans live with a lot of fear—fear of losing their job, of not being able to afford a good education, or of ending up in the hospital and not being able to afford their healthcare premiums. But with such complex governmental and corporate systems at play, most people tend to live with this fear rather than trying to change the system. Ganz argues that stories can instill a sense of hope or optimism by stirring up feelings of courage and audacity. As noted above, one way to do this is to include some kind of resolution or a story of success.

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[9] Stout 153.

As discussed, however, a resolution does not mean that every story must end in a victory. It is possible to tell a story of defeat through the lens of courage and hope.

Second, stories are meant to transform apathy and inertia into energy and urgency. Literally, *apathy* in Greek means a "lack of emotion." Apathy can be born of many causes. Sometimes, apathy is a byproduct of routine. When something happens too often, it starts to appear ineffective or unimportant. For example, if a group holds a peace rally everyday it is easy for participants and onlookers to become apathetic about this particular group of actors. Another form of apathy is caused by feelings of hopelessness. If one cares about an issue but feels unable to do anything to change it, he or she can become apathetic. In addition to providing hope that small success and change is possible, stories can also illustrate how anger is a productive antidote to apathy. It is important to note that many people are uncomfortable using their anger as a tool for good. In this case, it is important to define the difference between "hot anger" and "cold anger." In the world of community organizing, "hot anger" is rarely helpful. It is defined as uncontrolled rage. Conversely, "cold anger" is the ability to engage one's anger for the sake of illuminating an injustice and motivating others to act against that injustice. "It is a constructive anger based on the difference between what 'ought to be' and 'what is.' It is the indignation we feel when our 'moral order' has been violated." This is also known as righteous indignation. A great biblical example of the difference between "hot" and "cold" anger can be found in the beginning of the story of the Exodus. In Exodus 2:11-15, Moses witnesses a Hebrew slave being beaten by a taskmaster. Moses is so enraged that he strikes the taskmaster with a fatal blow. The consequence of Moses' "hot anger" is that he must flee to Midian so he is not prosecuted for the murder of an Egyptian loyalist. Moses' anger is marked by an act of violence; it is an example of "hot

anger," which can be described as a rash action that leads to unforeseen consequences. On the other hand, "cold anger" involves using one's anger as a calculated risk. For example, in Exodus 10:3-7, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and demand: "Let My people go!" They spell out all of the injustice that Pharaoh has done to the Israelites and they notify Pharaoh of the consequences of his inaction. This is an example of Moses using cold anger and calculated speech to convey a very strong message to the Pharaoh. In this way, cold anger is used to transform inertia into urgency. It tells us why an action must be taken in the immediate future. In addition to using cold anger as a means to combat inertia, stories can also transform inertia into a sense of urgency by explaining why there is a certain window of opportunity for a particular form of action.

The last way that a story can inspire action is by transforming self-doubt and isolation into confidence and solidarity. One way stories can turn self doubt into confidence is by relaying a story in which you, or someone you know, actually made a difference in the world. As mentioned above, this can be about a small victory or a huge campaign. Simply stated, a story that is told about making a difference breeds more confidence. Confidence is also encouraged by giving people public recognition for their participation in something that made a difference. Even this small gesture makes a huge impact on individual psyches. In addition to bolstering confidence, storytelling and recognition can also promote a sense of solidarity. Many people defer action because they feel that the work is too daunting for them as individuals. But when stories are told that promote the notion of working together to solve an issue, individual actors are more likely to take a risk and become involved. In other words, without a sense of shared identity, people often feel powerless. This is one of the key reasons that community organizing takes place within the congregational setting. By building the

interests and stories along institutional lines people become aware of the fact that their efforts are not in vain because they are acting within the power of the institution itself.

In summary, there are many different ways that stories can help propel congregations into action. At the most basic level, however, it is important to remember that stories have the ability to energize people because they can transform a narrative of fear, insecurity or inertia into a story of hope, confidence, and urgency. This psychological transformation is the first step towards creating communal action and social change.

When many congregants first encounter the CBCO model, they are often perplexed or even skeptical of a process that puts so much emphasis on story-telling. They question why a social justice initiative would begin with such an involved and lengthy practice involving meeting with so many people one-on-one or through house meetings. Many group members ask how talking to people about their life, stories, and interests can help them build a social justice initiative in their synagogue. As examined above, veteran organizers argue that story-telling is a practical tool for developing deeper relationships, which ultimately lead us towards more civic and communal power. However, I would argue that Judaism also teaches us that stories and words have an innately transformative and powerful property.

Just as stories are the building blocks of life, Jewish tradition teaches us that words are the building blocks of existence. As written in the first chapter of Genesis, "In the beginning God said 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). This passage teaches us that that language is not only a form of communication, but also a powerful tool for creation. This pattern continues as God creates the heavens and the earth, the stars and the seas, humans and animals with His words: "Let there be…." As this demonstrates, words are more than the tools to narrate a story or to express a sentiment. Rather, they have the power to create a new reality. The Kabbalists argue that our words have power because each Hebrew letter serves as the foundation of every creation—past, present and future. As the Zohar states: "Twenty-two elemental letters—God engraved them, carved them, weighed them, permuted them, and transposed them, forming with them everything formed and

everything destined to be formed."[10] Thus, not only does God have the power to create reality through speech, but as humans we have to co-create "everything destined to be formed" through our own speech. Furthermore, if humans are truly created in God's image (*b'tzelem Elohim*) then it stands to argue that our words also possess an element of the divine ability to alter our reality through speech.

One example of our tradition's belief in the immense power of human speech can be found in the story of Noah and the great flood. When we first meet Noah in Genesis, chapter six, God is outraged at humanity because society is vile and corrupt. Frustrated by His own creation, God decides to send a flood to destroy all humanity so that He can start over and create a better version of the world. However, the Torah tells us that God finds one righteous man, Noah , who is worth saving from the impending flood. As it says in Gensis 6:14, God said to Noah: "Make an ark (תיבא, *tevah*) for yourself…" The late Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev (1740-1809), argues that the word *tevah* can also mean "word." As Rabbi Levi theorizes in his famous commentary entitled the *Kedushat Levi*:

> "The word *tevah* does not only mean ark, but also 'word.' God tells Noah that all his activities would be confined to the inside of the ark, including speech….by using the right words he could construct the ark by merely uttering the correct formula. Using the correct words would also *ensure that God would feel at home inside and around the ark. The dual meaning of the word tevah teaches Noah that his words could ensure the survival of man and the earth*."[11] [emphasis added]

As Rabbi Levi suggests, Noah's words have an almost magical ability to create a safe-haven for humanity through the articulation of a simple, pre-fabricated statement. More importantly, I would argue, Rabbi Levi teaches us that Noah's words can also make God feel "at home" in the ark, as well as in the world at large. Last but not least, Noah's words

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[10] Matt 102.
[11] Munk 33.

actually have the ability to help save humankind. Just as Noah's ark or "words" carried him and his family to safety, so can our words help create a vehicle for perfecting the world.

Our speech matters because it has the potential to transform our reality. From this Hasidic tale we learn that words not only have the power to create, they also have the power to carry us to a new and safer ground. Words are like arks that enable humans to create a world of new possibility. Words can carry us through the treachery and chaos of a world flooded with injustice to a world of peace and justice. Words can transform stories of fear, violence, discord, and inequality into stories of hope, safety, and unity. In fact, I believe that through the creative energy of words, which are turned into stories, our journey to redemption begins.

As we learn in the Book of Exodus, the Israelites suffered gravely under the rule of a new Pharaoh.[12] As we tell this story year after year at Passover, God calls out to Moses and Aaron to lead the Israelite people to freedom. At the pinnacle of this historic drama, God tells Moses and Aaron that He will bring one last plague upon the Egyptian people. After conveying that God will kill all of the first born Egyptian men, Moses leaves Pharaoh's presence enraged. At this very moment, instead of telling us about the outcome of this dramatic event, the narrative is interrupted by God's instructions for how the Israelites should talk about their Exodus from Egypt before it even happens.[13] One might think that God would save the Israelites first, and then tell them how to commemorate this momentous occasion. However, the opposite is true. In Exodus Chapter 12, while the Israelites are still in the "narrow" and oppressed world of *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), God commands the people to mark the first of Nisan as the date in which every Israelite household shall re-tell the story of their

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[12] Exodus 1:8-11
[13] In the Masoretic text, this narrative break can be found between Ex. 11 and Ex. 12.

Exodus from Egypt. The first twenty or so lines of Chapter 12 focus on God's instructions

for what the Israelites should sacrifice, wear, and eat during Passover. Then, beginning in

Exodus 12:24-28, God instructs the people on how they should tell the story of the Exodus to

their children:

> "And it will come to pass, when your children say to you: 'What does this service [ritual] mean to you? You will say to them: 'The Passover sacrifice is for YHVH, who passed over the homes of the Children of Israel in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, but God saved our homes.'"[14]

> והיה כי יאמרו אליכם בניכם- מה העבודה הזאת לכם? ואמרתם זבח פסח
> הוא ליהוה אשר פסח על בתי בני ישראל במצרים בנגפו את מצרים ואת
> בתינו הציל.

One noteworthy aspect of this verse is that it teaches us that redemption does not occur

without story. In other words, redemption cannot not take place until the centrality of our

story of redemption is also ensured for future generations. Thus, I would argue that the

Torah is trying to teach us that story-telling is not simply a precursor to the Exodus but

also a pivotal component of our struggle for freedom. Until God ensures that the

Israelites will repeat the story of the Exodus year after year, they cannot be set free from

bondage.

Similarly until we learn to tell the story of our own modern day *mitzrayim*

(narrow places) there is no way to move from a world of oppression and injustice to a

world of justice and equality. While many congregants wonder why they must tell their

own personal story in order to build a platform for social justice, it is clear that the Torah

emphasizes the need to tell our story before we can participate in our own liberation.

Although the story-telling process utilized by the CBCO model can be very time

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[14] Exodus 12:26

consuming, it is based on the radical, Jewish notion that stories are the foundation of

redemption. Furthermore, as Abraham Joshua Heschel once said: "We shall never be able

to understand that the spirit is revealed in the form of words unless we discover the vital

truth that speech has power."[15] Therefore, rather than viewing the process of story-telling

or relationship-building as a superfluous or time-consuming part of the CBCO model, we

must recognize that Judaism teaches us that words and stories are in fact the beginning of

redemption.

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[15] Heschel, *Man's Quest* 25.

As mentioned above, the dramatic story of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt is abruptly interrupted by an explanation of how the Israelites should commemorate their liberation. Based on the verse above (Ex. 12:24-27), the Rabbis suggest that there are four archetypes found among the Israelite children: the wicked child, the wise child, the simple child, and the child who does not know how to ask.

These four archetypes are based on four different verses in the Torah that refer to the Israelites journey from Egypt. For example, Exodus 12:26-7 symbolizes the wicked child, Exodus 13:8 refers to the child who does not even know how to ask a question about the people's struggle for freedom, Exodus 13:4 represents the simple child, and Deuteronomy 6:20-26 signifies the wise child.

- *Please compare and contrast the verses below.*
- *What similarities or differences are there between these verses?*
- *Is there anything that these verses can teach us about the connection between story-telling and redemption?*
- *Other than the rabbinic interpretation, why do you think there are four different ways to tell the story of our Exodus?*

Exodus 12:26-27
The Wicked Child

כו וְהָיָה כִּי-יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם.

26 And it shall come to pass, when your children say to you:' What does this service [ritual] mean to you?

כז וַאֲמַרְתֶּם זֶבַח-פֶּסַח הוּא לַיהוָה, אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל-בָּתֵּי בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנָגְפּוֹ אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-בָּתֵּינוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקֹד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ.

27 You will say to them: "The Passover sacrifice is for YHVH, who passed over the homes of the children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but he saved our homes. And the people bowed the head and worshipped.

Exodus 13:8
The Child Who Does Not Know How to Ask

ח וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה יְהוָה לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם.

8 <u>And you shall explain</u> to your son on that day, saying: 'It is because of that which YHVH did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.

Exodus 13:14
The Simple Child

יד וְהָיָה כִּי-יִשְׁאָלְךָ בִנְךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מַה-זֹּאת <u>וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו</u>--בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם, מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים.

14 And when, in a time to come, your son asks you, saying: 'What is this?' <u>You shall say to him:</u> 'It was with a mighty hand that YHVH brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Deuteronomy 6:20-24
The Wise Child

כ כִּי-יִשְׁאָלְךָ בִנְךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה הָעֵדֹת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם.

20 When, in a time to come, your children ask you, 'What do the testimonies, and the statutes, and the ordinances mean, which YHVH, our God, has commanded you?

כא <u>וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבִנְךָ</u> עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרָיִם וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם, בְּיָד חֲזָקָה.

21 Then you shall say to your children: 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and YHVH freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand.

כב וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה אוֹתֹת וּמֹפְתִים גְּדֹלִים וְרָעִים בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּפַרְעֹה וּבְכָל-בֵּיתוֹ לְעֵינֵינוּ.

22 And YHVH wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and his entire household.

כג וְאוֹתָנוּ, הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם לְמַעַן הָבִיא אֹתָנוּ לָתֶת לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֵינוּ.

23 And us He freed us from there, so that He could bring us to the land that He swore to our fathers.

כד וַיְצַוֵּנוּ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל-הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לְיִרְאָה אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל-הַיָּמִים לְחַיֹּתֵנוּ כְּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

24 Then YHVH commanded us to do all these laws, to revere Adonai our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case.

<u>A Closer Look:</u>

Three out of the four passages above use the verb *amar*, which means to "say" or to "speak," in order to convey to the Israelites that they must repeat the story of Passover to their children year after year. In contrast, in Exodus 13:8 the Torah uses the verb *l'hagid,* which comes from the root *n.g.d.* to convey a similar message.

This distinction is important because the Rabbis decide to call the Passover Seder a *Haggadah*, which comes from the same Hebrew word as in Exodus 13:8. In Modern Hebrew, the word *l'hagid* is usually translated as "to tell" or "to say." So, what can we learn from the Rabbis' decision to call the Passover Seder a *Haggadah*? Furthermore, what significance does it have that the central element of the Passover celebration is the "*magid*"—the telling of the *story* of the Exodus from Egypt?

In Exodus 13:8, the word *higad'tah* is in the *hif'eel* form of the verb *n.g.d.* This verb appears 334 times in the *hifeel* form alone, but only 48 times in the Chumash.[16] Since *hif'eel* forms are often causative, it is logical to presume that *higad'tah* can be defined as "to cause to know." Yet, for the sake of simplicity, it is often translated colloquially as to tell or to say. However, the goal of this etymological investigation is increase our understanding of this verb's complex nature. For example, linguists argue that the verb form of *higad'tah* is most likely related to the prepositional form of the word (i.e.- *neged*), which means "to face, to confront, or to stand across from."[17]

Interestingly, the connection between *l'hagid* (to tell) and *neged* (to stand across from someone) is in keeping with the ideals of the CBCO model. In order "to tell" someone your story or to really "cause them to know" what you are experiencing, one must have a face-to-face encounter in which the participants are literally standing across from one another (e.g.- *eish neged l'eish)*. While Jewish organizers often use the idea of *panim al panim* to speak about a one-on-one encounter, I would like to suggest that we might also use the root *n.g.d* to arrive at a similar idea. Perhaps, only by r standing across from someone in a one-on-one encounter that we will know how "to tell" a story, which causes us to get to understand ourselves and our community members in a way that enables us to act together with more power.

In support of this idea, linguists argue that the Arabic meaning of the root *n.g.d.* means to "overcome" or to "help."[18] In other words, by standing face-to-face, or by confronting someone one-on-one in order to tell them a story, we may actually be able to help one another overcome an obstacle that we cannot handle on our own as individuals. Interestingly, this understanding of the root *n.g.d.* may be indicated by the first use of the word in the Torah. In Genesis 2:18, God says that it is not good for man to be alone, therefore He creates Eve as an *ezer-knegdo* for Adam. Most often, this word is translated as a helpmeet. However, what does it mean to be a helpmeet? Applying the information above, I

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[16] TDOT 175.
[17] TDOT 174.
[18] TDOT 174.

would argue that a helpmeet is someone who helps another person by standing face-to-face with him or her, perhaps even confronting or agitating them, so that they will understand the true nature of their stories, their interests and their desires.

Last but not least, the verb form of *n.g.d.* first appears in Genesis 3:11 when God asks Adam "Who told (*higid*) you that you were naked?" One scholar suggests that in addition to a lot of other uses, the verb *n.g.d.* also carries the connotation of being used to investigate the truth. Once again, I believe that this insight can help Jewish organizers deepen the connection between the concept of story-telling and its ability to turn relationships into a force for social change.

RABBINIC TEXT

At the beginning of the story-telling portion of our Passover *seder*, a section known as the *magid* (telling), the Rabbis retell the story of how we were slaves in Egypt. This section is known as *avadim hayinu* in Hebrew. While many *seder* participants are familiar with the first half of this section, which talks about how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt with an outstretched arm, fewer people are familiar the second half of the paragraph, which reads:

"Even if all of us were smart, all of us wise, all of us experienced, all of us learned in Torah, we would still be commanded to discuss the Exodus from Egypt. And everyone who really discusses the Exodus from Egypt is praised."[19]

<div dir="rtl">

אפלו כלנו חכמים כלנו נבונים כלנו זקנים כלנו יודעים את
התורה מצוה עלינו לספר ביציאת מצרים. וכל המרבה לספר
ביציאת מצרים הרי זה משבח.

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- *Why do you think that the Passover Haggadah instructs us to tell the story of Passover even if we are smart, wise, experienced or learned? Is there a difference between all of the different descriptors used above?*

- *While Hoffman translates the word מרבה (marbeh) as "really," many other scholars translate this as "to increase, to expand upon, or to multiply." Therefore, in your opinion, what does it mean that anyone who really discusses or expands upon the story of the Exodus deserves praise?*

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[19] Translation based on Hoffman 169.

<u>A Closer Look:</u>

According to Rabbinic scholar, Professor Alyssa Gray, this section of *avadim hayinu* reminds us that no matter how well we know the story of Passover, we are still commanded to tell the story and even to expound upon it more than needed. Based on the comments of a medieval Jewish philosopher known as the *Rashbetz,* Gray argues that: "We should not think that the recitation of the Haggadah is only for the children—notwithstanding all the attention paid to them at the Seder. The recounting of the Exodus from Egypt is an adult responsibility as well, even for those adults who are Jewishly learned."[20]

Similarly, in the beginning of some CBCO campaigns, people may feel a sense of resistance talking to people and telling stories. At times this is because they feel like they already know this person or because they have engaged in similar conversations in the past. My hope is that this section of the *Haggadah* will help us place the notion story-telling in a larger framework. If we can learn something new each year from the *Haggadah*, then I certainly believe that we can learn something new from each conversation with another person no matter how familiar we may be with this particular person. The *Haggadah* teaches us to remain humble and to avoid scorning repetition because it is, in fact, a key ingrediate to the story of our redemption.

Furthermore, many medieval commentators, such as Abudarham (14th Century Spanish commentator) and Don Isaac Abarbanel (Spain and Italy 1437-1508) argue that the only way someone is praised for telling the story of Passover is if they expand and expound on it (*hamarbeh l'saper*) more than normal.[21] Just telling the story of the Exodus is not praiseworthy. Rather, expanding upon it is the only way to be praised for this mitzvah.

- o *How might this relate to the concept of story-telling in cycle of organizing?*

Last but not least, while the idea of increasing upon the story of the Exodus is clearly a post-biblical injunction, Professor Larry Hoffman suggests that we expand upon the story of Exodus as a way to imitate God's great expansion of signs and portents in the land of Egypt.[22]

- o *The Rabbis teach that expanding upon the story of the Exodus is a form of imitatio dei[23] because it is supposed to parallel God's expansive mercy as He bestowed an ever-increasing amount of miracles upon the Israelites in order to free them from Egypt.*
- o *In what ways is expanding a story like expanding miracles?*

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[20] Hoffman 172.
[21] Hoffman 187.
[22] Hoffman 184.
[23] The idea of *imitatio dei*, imitating God, is seen as a holy endeavor in Judaism, as it says in Leviticus 19:2: "You shall be holy, for I, Adonai, am holy."

Rabbi Leon de Modena (1571-1684)

"Words are the guides to acts; the mouth makes the first move."

- o *Why do you think Leon de Modena believes that words are the guides to acts?*
- o *What are some words that have inspired you to act in the past?*
- o *Can you think of an instance when your works influenced your acts?*

Rachel Adler

"To determine where we ought to go, we must reflect on where we have been. We do this best by storytelling. As individuals, we continually rework and relate our life stories to ourselves and to others and project ourselves into possible futures through dreams and fantasies…The ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre says, "I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior questions, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' Commitments emerge out of stories and are refashioned in stories."[24]

- *Do you agree with Adler's idea that in order to know where we are going we need to know where we have been?*
- *In addition to story-telling, what is another way in which we may "remember" where we have been?*
- *Adler argues that commitments emerge out of stories. Can you think of an example of this in Jewish teachings or texts? Can you think of a time when this was true in your own life?*
- *What is a story about your past that could inform what you are going to do, or be, in the future?*

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[24] Adler 320.

Later in this chapter, Adler introduces her readers to the concept of *nomos*, the Greek word for "law." While many Jewish scholars have used this word to refer to *halakhah*, Jewish law, Adler suggests that there is another way to think about this notion based on broader sociological and cultural factors. As Peter Berger, a famous American sociologist argues, *nomos* does not simply refer to particular law or legal concept. Rather, *nomos* represents the process by which human beings fashion the world around them through their own ideology and actions. In other words, the way we understand things to be true are created by our discourse. Thus, our own language creates that which we believe is "true," common sense knowledge. Adler argues, therefore, that our world is ordered and made full of meaning through our individual and corporate understanding of the world. Therefore, *nomos* is a universe of meanings, values, and rules embedded through story-telling.[25]

> o *What stories would help us to inhabit the world of possibilities? Having told a story of possibility, how could we inspire people to be "willing to live some of them out in praxis"?*

Rabbi Tzvi Blanchard

"There are stories that tell about holding people while they cry with the pains of this world, and then there are other stories that show the possibility of really coming full circle, of being transformed. These stories show us what it means to actually be able to touch all parts of ourselves and bring them together, and to access what is available not just in our own memory, but all across the spectrum of our family's memory, of our community's memory, of the human race's memory, and perhaps in spiritual domains we can only begin to understand"

> o *In Jewish texts or traditions, what story or stories tell us about the possibility of coming "full circle" and about being transformed? Are there stories like these in your own life as well?*
> o *Blanchard argues that stories can bind our imagination across space and time. Is there a story that plays that role for you in your life or in the life of your family?*

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[25] Adler 329.

CHAPTER FIVE: RELATIONSHIPS

If stories are the building blocks of all community organizing efforts, then relationships serve as their foundation. The root of relationship building begins with a mutual exchange of stories, which transforms an ordinary interaction into a personal encounter. A personal encounter becomes the basis for an on-going relationship, which ideally grows and deepens over time. The goal of this chapter is to examine the meaning of relationships and why they are so important to the CBCO model.

In the early 1960s sociologist Peter Blau argued that all human relationships are essentially a process of social exchange. He argued that relationships are formed, deepened, or dissolved based primarily on a cost-benefit analysis. In other words, we, as human beings, are constantly weighing, both consciously and unconsciously, how much a particular relationship can help or hurt us. For example, Blau explains that people decide to invest in a relationship based on whether or not a person (or group of people) can increase their social status, economic status, or emotional comfort in that moment of their life. However, when the time or effort needed to sustain a relationship outweighs the benefits, people tend to let that particular friendship or acquaintance dissipate. Thus, in a world where Romanticism often informs our outlook on relationships, friendship, and love, Blau argues that human beings are actually much more scientific in their approach to connectivity. While there is no doubt that his theory was formulated in an age where social utilitarianism was at its peak, I would argue that many of our own interactions are influenced by this social exchange theory whether we are aware of it or not.

In the work of community organizing, relationships are recognized as a form of social exchange, but also much more. Ganz suggests that the social exchange theory can help

organizers recognize that everyone enters into a relationship with certain interests, as well as resources. When another person enters that relationship, they usually enter with different interests and resources. The best relationships are those that have a balance between similar and different interests and resources.

Relationships thrive the existence of shared interests because people are attracted to others with a shared experience or vision. On the other hand, if people are too similar the social exchange theory tells us that this relationship will not flourish either. In many ways this seems counterintuitive because we often think about establishing relationships with people based on how much we like someone or how many things we have in common. However, truly rich relationships evolve when there are enough differences between people that they can grow and change by being in community with one another. A great example of this exists within the interfaith model of community organizing. By bringing together lay leaders from diverse faith backgrounds the assumption is that there are enough similarities between people of faith so that they can eventually work towards a common goal. However, there are also enough differences between the faiths to make these conversations interesting, engaging, and challenging. Different faith groups also bring a wide variety of resources to the table, which makes the interfaith foundation of community organizing an ideal form of social exchange. For example, while many Jewish congregations have relationships with people in political power, many Catholic communities have the ability to mobilize a large number of people very quickly. By sharing these kinds of resources the group as a whole becomes more powerful. As Ganz suggests, the best relationships are those that have a mutual giving and taking of interests and resources.

While this kind of social exchange is an important element of relationship building, Ganz emphasizes that true relationships cannot be boiled down to this kind of a utilitarian trade. He argues that we while we need to understand how social exchange theory affects our relationships, we must consciously push beyond this notion in order to transform a simple exchange into a real relationship. According to this understanding, relationships are not simply about having "meetings" with one another; rather, they are about having true encounter with another human being. This means being present and available to listen to a person's dreams, fears, and challenges, and then being able to reciprocate. In essence, it is about understanding why people do what they do. And yet, it is not a fact-finding mission. It is a mission of essence. Who is this person at his or her core? Where do his or her beliefs come from? Who, or what, motivates and inspires this person to act on his or her beliefs? What inhibits this person from acting on his or her beliefs?

The goal of gathering this information, however, is not about using a person's self-interests so we can "manipulate" them into working on a specific campaign or idea. Although many relationships are initiated in order to fill a spot on a committee or board, community organizing seeks to enable people to build something together from the ground up. Rather than pitching a particular idea to someone, community organizing is about co-creating and developing an idea over time. Thus, if our goal is to plug an individual's interest into a pre-existing idea or campaign, then we have misunderstood the art of the relational meeting. Instead of thinking about whether this person's "interests" meets our "needs" (e.g. - for more people to be involved your leadership team, campaign, etc), the key question is whether or not this person can act in a relational way.

There are many facets to being a relational person, but there are at least two essential characteristics worth mentioning in brief. First, a relational person must have a deep sense of curiosity for the social landscape. This means being interested in developing open-ended, public relationships with other people in the synagogue that are not based on a particular set of actions or programmatic efforts; but rather, a true interest in understanding what inspires and motivates other people. This is demonstrated by approaching others with a sense of mutuality and respect, not only for someone else's life experience and stories, but also, for the creative input and ideas that they generate going forward.

The second most important characteristic of a relational person is whether or not he or she can absorb the tension inherent in cultivating a relational atmosphere. Veteran IAF organizer Mike Gecan argues that all healthy relating tends to generate tension over time.[26] Unlike groups engaged in community organizing, most organizations do not encourage their participants to reflect on their self-interest, or to articulate their needs in an explicit manner. This is unfortunate because whether or not one's needs and interests are expressed, they inevitably inform the dynamics of any given group. As a result, in many groups self-interest tends to play out more implicitly, through hidden agendas and back-room deals. Conversely, in community organizing, where people are encouraged to understand and articulate their self-interest, it is inevitable that there will be more explicit tensions within the group. In the long run, however, the hope is that this kind of transparency will lead to a deeper level of mutuality and trust over time. Therefore, a truly relational person has the ability to sustain the overt tension that is created when people are encouraged to express conflicting interests, concerns and beliefs. In the end, a relational person is someone who is not afraid of confronting this kind of tension without trying to immediately resolve it, or run away from it.

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[26] Gecan 25.

Another mark of a true encounter is that it has the ability to shape both individuals in the relationship regardless of who initiated the meeting. This means that even if you are the one who invited the person to have a relational meeting, or even if you see yourself as the "expert" organizer in this situation, an authentic encounter can only take place if both parties are open to the possibility of being affected or transformed. This is a difficult concept to grasp because it means being able to achieve two goals that often appear somewhat contradictory. On one hand, a good relationship is based on understanding a person's core interests and concerns. On the other, if the meeting becomes a fishing expedition with the goal of discovering a person's interests in order to meet the organizer's needs, then the meeting will become an un-relational, survey-like exchange. Thus, the relationship model of community organizing seeks to strike a balance between getting to know someone at their core, while being open to having your own thoughts and behaviors affected by the conversation itself. In other words, if you have not learned something new about yourself during a relational meeting then you have not learned the real art of a one-on-one encounter.

In summary, good relationships include some kind of exchange of ideas, interests and resources. Yet, they are more than simple transactions. Social exchanges are transformed into relational moments when two people encounter one another from a place of genuine curiosity and mutual respect. They require delving into a person's core essence so that we can become more effective at co-creating the world that we wish to inhabit. True relational moments also enable us to reflect on our own motivations and to learn more about our own stories and interests at the same time. Now that we better understand what true relational encounters are, we must analyze why they are important.

Relationships are important for a myriad of purposes, but within the CBCO model I would argue that they are significant four main reasons. First, relationship building based on a true encounter makes it possible for people to feel a true sense of belonging. Second, through a give-and-take process, relationships help people to clarify their interests, resources, values, and needs. Third, relationships are important because they have the potential to turn energy and interests into communal goals and communal action. And fourth, relationships form the basis of social and political power.

By focusing on the renewed art of relationship building, one that defies the highly transactional nature of many modern-day relationships, community organizing creates space for people to feel a true sense of belonging and meaning within our communities once again. For the sake of this paper, I define a transactional interaction as one with a finite purpose in which a person receives something in return for something else. Whether buying a coffee from a barista at Starbucks or agreeing to pick up the kids for a carpool, many of our encounters on a daily basis are transactional. It is important to note, however, that just because something is transactional does not mean it is inherently negative. The problem is that a much higher percentage of our daily interactions are becoming transactional. Leading economics professor Richard Sennet argues that Americans suffer from an over-professionalization of our social networks. In other words, although people tend to be more social by going out to more events or by connecting to more people online, these exchanges often lack the depth that people experienced in their relationships a generation or two ago. For example, in the past people used to have "workout buddies" and now most people hire fitness trainers. Or, whereas people used rely on a close network of friends to talk about difficult situations, more and more people feel like they can only really open up if they are

talking to a therapist. While Sennet is not arguing for the elimination of trainers, therapists, nutritionists or other trained professionals, he is pointing to the increasing privatization of our relationships. Relationships with trainers, nutritionists, and therapists are both real and essential, but they are ultimately limited by their fee-for-service nature. The goal of building relationships within the synagogue model of community organizing is help our congregants remember what is like to develop relationship that are neither one-dimensional nor based on a finite contract or term.

In addition to noting how over-professionalization has decreased our ability to be in real relationship with one another, Sennet also argues that this trend is amplified by what he calls a "tyranny of technology." This maladjustment is illustrated by our need to maintain constant and superficial contact with others through technology such as texting or Facebook. Therefore, while the number of our online "friends" may be increasing, the depth of our individual and community-wide relationships are decreasing exponentially. Consequentially, building a relationship for the sake of a relationship is, in effect, a countercultural action. Thus, the work of community organizing hopes to enliven people's interest in building relationships that go beyond the status quo, so that people feel a deeper sense of belonging and meaning in their lives.

The second reason that relationships are important is because they help us to simultaneously clarify and broaden our interests. As mentioned above, relational moments should help us develop a sense of curiosity for ourselves and others. "When we enter into relationship with another, we become actors in each other's stories, not only exchanging resources and making commitments, but influencing how we think of ourselves and who we

want to become."[27] Thus, relationships not only form the connective tissue that facilitates

cooperation, they also motivate self-reflection and transformation. This self-reflection may

translate into new interests, concerns, or the discovery of new abilities or resources. The

energy that is produced by developing new interests or resources often renews people's

desire and courage to act on their beliefs.

This brings us to the third way in which relationship building plays a pivotal role in

community organizing. By invigorating people's curiosity and broadening their interests,

relationships have the ability to turn new energy and new interests into common goals and

action. Relationships equip people with the tools and the language to be able to express what

is possible when they widen and deepen their relational networks. By drawing on a deep

fountain of communal interests, resources, and abilities, relationships enable people to

imagine a new way of acting in the world. In this sense, relationships in conjunction with the

use of stories, allows us to mobilize feelings of hope, anger, self-worth, and solidarity. These

emotions, when engaged with and interpreted in intentional ways, often spark a call for

communal action.

Last but not least, relationships are critical because they form the basis of social and

political power. As suggested above, shared power originates from the notion that we are all

capable and responsible for co-creating and co-authoring the world that we want to live in.

Shared power is cultivated through shared leadership, shared visioning, and communal

action. Shared power, or what is known as "power-to" in the organizing world, is quite

subversive because most powerful agencies that we interact with operate on a model of

"power-over" certain people, things, or institutions. This kind of power is typified by one or

two people on the top of a social pyramid, making decisions that affect a broad base of

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[27] Ganz 36.

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people. Hierarchical power is evident today in many corporations, banking institutions, and government agencies. While there is a saying that one must fight "power with power," community organizing teaches that the only way to combat the hierarchical power that is so ingrained in American society is through developing a strong sense of shared power and leadership. The starting point of shared power and shared leadership begins with relationships.

The reason that shared power begins with relationships is because without a large number of people who support a particular cause, it is difficult to make long-term or systemic change. As Gecan notes, even if there is a current crisis in the community, organizers will spend a "year or two or three with them *not* addressing these immediate and important issues and concerns. We'll use that time to build the organization and to develop a firm base of power, so that the group will someday have the punch and impact needed to instigate and preserve lasting change."[28] Another way to look at the connection between relationship building and shared power is to examine the world of social reform as it now exists. While there are plenty of good ideas in the world for how to "fix" any number of social problems, the real problem is that there is often not enough social capital to influence decision makers and to hold them accountable for initiating real and lasting change. In the end, relationship building and the relational power created through institutional life is the ultimate source of this accountability. I would like to stress that community organizing seeks to develop relationships within, and among, institutions because although individuals move from institution to institution, institutions generally maintain their social longevity. Therefore, if a public official promises to make a change in a particular district and the person who made that deal leaves his or her post, the institution as a whole can hold that public official

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[28] Gecan 9.

accountable for the promise that he or she has made. In the end this is why congregation-based community organizing has such great potential to promote social change.

In summary, I would like to suggest that while relationship building may appear to be a simple process, it is actually one of the most complex efforts of any successful community organizing effort. In order for a relationship to be successful, one must enter the conversation with a genuine level of curiosity and respect. Through the exploration of one's hopes, dreams, interests, story, and values, a relationship has the potential to ignite people to act on a shared set of values or interests. Through cultivating this type of relational power, relationships are the second step in transforming the world as it is into the world as it should be.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING FROM A JEWISH LENS

As examined in the section above, relationship building serves as the foundation for any successful community organizing initiative. Not only can it help us create "power in numbers," this process can also help a community clarify its interests, develop communal resources, and solidify communal goals. From this vantage point, however, relationship building in secular organizing settings can presented in a somewhat a utilitarian light. One way to counteract this tendency is to examine how Judaism envisions the value of relationships within our ancient texts and tradition. As Buber once said "all actual life is encounter."[29] The question remains, how can Jewish texts help us to transform everyday interactions into truly transformative encounters?

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[29] Buber 62.

A true encounter relies upon a mutual exchange of story. But when two near-strangers meet for the first time, where can they being to look for this notion of mutuality? One could begin by asking the other person why they joined the synagogue, what hopes or dreams they have for their future. Furthermore, however, I would argue that the story of creation is a great place for people involved in CBCO to begin to understand the profoundly religious and spiritual side of relationship building.

As noted in the last chapter, throughout the creation narrative God says "let there be light," and there is light, etc. And after almost every day of creation God looks at His creation and says, "It was good." On the sixth day of creation, after God has formed the animals, the birds, and *ha'adam* (a human being) God asserts, "It was *very* good."[30] Therefore, the first statement ever made about a human being in the Torah honors the notion that an individual human being has an inherently sacred value. That being said, the second statement ever made in the entire Torah about the status of human beings can be found in Genesis 2:18 as God says: "It is not good for *ha'adam* to be alone, therefore I will make him (or her) an *ezer k'negdo* (a helpmeet)."[31] From this passing, yet consequential statement, we learn that human beings are meant to be in relationship with one another in order to survive and flourish. Therefore, while God asserts the value of our individuality, a mere twenty lines later the Torah also suggests that *ha'adam* is actually an incomplete without human companionship. This fundamental need for human companionship is further indicated by the Hebrew words used in this verse. For example, in Genesis Chapter 1, Adam is called simply *ha'adam*, which literally means from "the earth." But it is only when God decides to create a human partner that Adam begins to recognize his own potential. As it says in Genesis 2:23:

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[30] Genesis 1:31
[31] See pg. 41 for a more in-depth discussion of the phrase *ezer k'negdo.*

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הַפַּעַם עֶצֶם מֵעֲצָמַי וּבָשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקָּרֵא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לֻקֳחָה-זֹּאת.

And *ha'adam* said: 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman (*eishah*), because she was taken out of man (*eish*).'

Thus, it is only through a human relationship that Adam becomes an *eish*, a man who exists in connection with another human partner who comes from the same place and the same Hebrew root (*eishah*). Through this process humanity is transformed from an object that derives its vitality from an inanimate object such as the Earth, into a real human being that derives its source of inspiration from another human being. Furthermore, by changing Adam's name from *ha'adam* to *eish*, I would argue that the Torah become less fixated on Adam's physical origin and more concerned with *who* Adam will embark on this journey with. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues, Adam must be able to pronounce the name of the other (an *eishah*) before he can develop his own identity as an *eish*, as a human being.[32] Therefore, like Adam, before we can claim our own individuality, we must first acknowledge our fundamental interconnectedness. Before there can be an "I," there must be a "we." This subtle interpretation is further highlighted by linguistic shift from pose to poetry as Adam declare the first poem in the Torah: "Surely this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh!"[33]

So what can the story of creation teach us about the importance of relationships within the CBCO model? As Jews engaged in community organizing I would argue that our tradition teaches us that relationship precedes identity. Just as Adam truly sees himself as a human being through his encounter with another person, so too must we remember that our

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[32] Sacks, Rebuilding 14.
[33] Genesis 2:23

own true identity and search for meaning cannot be fulfilled in isolation. It is sparked and cultivated by our relationships with other people who act as our own *ezer k'negdo*.

On one hand, it is true that an intentional effort to build stronger and more meaningful relationships may help our congregants clarify their interests and build more communal or civic power. On the other hand, as I hoped to have illustrated, I believe there is a much deeper, spiritual elemant involved in the relationships building process found in the CBCO model. Our true selves can only be known by being in relationship with one another. Relatedly, one *midrash* teaches that we can also encounter God through our encounters with others. As it says in *Genesis Rabbah 8*, at one point human beings were known as אש (*esh*), or fire. But in Genesis 1:26, when it says that God created human beings *b'tzelem elohim*, that meant that a piece of God, literally the י (*yud*) and the ה (*hey*) of God's ineffable name, was added to the word אש in order to create human beings known as איש (*eish*) and אישה (*eishah*). By combining the two ideas mentioned above, one could argue that relationships not only help to illuminate our true selves, but if done with some level of intentionality they can also help us to connect with God's essence as well.

As many organizers suggest a genuine relationship is one that assumes a shared past and implies a shared future. Yet, in today's hyper-individualized world it is sometimes difficult to imagine having a shared past with someone you may have never met. Fortunately, as Jews, we are provided several different ways to establish this sense of engaging in a shared past. For example, the Jewish calendar, through the cyclical nature of the holidays and the festivals, enables modern Jews to participate in rituals, prayers and actions that bind them to an ancient narrative. For instance, while one congregant may come from an upper-to-middle class East Coast family, and another family may be new immigrants from the Former

Soviet Union, when these two families sit down together at the Passover table they are commanded to see themselves as having a shared past. In other words, they should assume they are "brothers in arms" fleeing Egypt in order to make it to the Promised Land together. In this sense, Passover, as well as the over-arching Jewish narrative, is predicated on the basis that all Jews, past, present, and future, see themselves as having a shared narrative, a common identity, and in implied future.

Based on the interpretation discussed above, one might suggest that it is easier for Jews to assume a shared past with other Jews. However, I would argue that this is not true for two primary reasons. First, this section of the Genesis narrative occurs well before the Torah presents any racial, ethnic or religious divisions among humanity. Therefore, by emphasizing this aspect of the creation story I believe that our congregants can turn everyday interactions with both Jews and non-Jews alike into true spiritual and ethical encounters. And based on this text I would like to suggest that a true encounter is defined by one's ability to learn something new about oneself, the other person, as well as God.

Second, because of decreased Jewish communal affiliation, as well as, the growing fissure between different Jewish denominations, many contemporary Jews have a difficult time accessing this notion that all Jews have some kind of shared narrative. And for those who can at least access this narrative, it is sometimes difficult for them to believe in it. And for those who may believe in it, it is sometimes difficult for them to imagine that a shared past implies a shared future. The leap from acknowledging, accepting, or believing in a shared past to deciding to act with someone else to create a shared future is not a simple process. While I cannot predict how this process might unfold in a step by step nature, I would argue that both organizers and Reform synagogues can benefit from this conversation.

In other words, I believe that CBCO can help Reform congregants re-connect to the idea that we, as Jews, have a shared past and a shared narrative that obligates us to work together towards a better future. Second, I believe that making a more explicit connection between organizing concepts and Jewish values, we can enliven the conversation that takes place in a typical CBCO environment in order to illuminate how relationship building can be a spiritual practice with a deeply profound outlook.

Therefore, while there are many Jewish texts that I could have presented in order to illuminate the sacred nature of building relationships for the sake of clarifying one's interests or building more communal power, I have chosen to limit the texts below to one's that may help us illuminate how relationship building can be seen as a true, spiritual encounter with another person, and perhaps even with God.

BIBLICAL TEXT

יז בַּרְזֶל בְּבַרְזֶל יָחַד וְאִישׁ יַחַד פְּנֵי-רֵעֵהוּ.	**17** Iron sharpens iron just as a man sharpens the wit[34] of his friend.
יח נֹצֵר תְּאֵנָה יֹאכַל פִּרְיָהּ וְשֹׁמֵר אֲדֹנָיו יְכֻבָּד.	**18** He who tends a fig tree will enjoy its fruits, and he who cares for his master will be honored.
יט כַּמַּיִם הַפָּנִים לַפָּנִים כֵּן לֵב-הָאָדָם, לָאָדָם.	**19** As face answers to face in water, so does one man's heart to another.

  o *Do you see any correlation between these three verse? If so, what is it? In your own words, what do you think the Torah is trying to teach us in these three verses?*

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[34] See section below entitled "A Closer Look" for a more thorough examination of this word.

- *In verse 17, what do you think it means to "sharpen" the face of one's friend? What do you think the literal word for face is used if the one translation suggest that it means one's "wit"?*
- *In what ways might we need to "sharpen" our faces or our wit?*
- *What could we learn from verse 19 about the art of relationship building in a Jewish context?*

A Closer Look:

In Proberbs 27:17 of the 1985 JPS translation of the Tanakh, the editor translates the word פני as "wit." Literally, the word פנים or פני (*panim or panai*) means "face." However, the semantic meaning of this word ranges from one's "face" to standing to the idea of being "in the presence of" someone, or being "in front of" someone or something, etc.

According to the Brown-Drivers-Briggs (BDB)[35] biblical dictionary, the word פני is also connected to the Hebrew root *p.n.h.* Therefore, it makes sense that in some instances the word פני or פנים is used to indicate God (i.e.- Malachi 1:9) or another person, "turning towards" someone (i.e.- Genesis 32:21) to show them favor or approval.

However, out of the over three-hundred instances of the word פני in the Tanakh, none of them are used to mean "wit" or "intellect" other than in the passage above. Therefore, what do you think is the deeper meaning of the word פני in this passage from Proverbs? What might it teach us about the correlation between learning and a one and one encounter?

Furthermore, while verse 18 does not have the word "face" in it, these three verses seems to teach us something about the potential of a one on one encounter. First, as I would suggest from verse 17, our awareness, our face, or our senses become sharpened and more acute when we are in the presence another human beings. Instead of iron sharpening iron, human encounters sharpen other human beings. Second, I would like to suggest, as found in verse 19, that human beings can act as a mirror for one another. Helping us to "see" what is only visible when looking at a reflection of oneself in water. In this way, I would argue that the text is suggesting that a relationship is the greatest gift to mankind because without it, one cannot fully see oneself or one's potential. The texts below will also serve to uncover other elements of this section of Proverbs.

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[35] BDB 815-819.

Numbers Rabbah 21:15

"He who tends a fig tree will enjoy its fruits," (Prov. 27:18). "Why is the Torah compared to a fig tree? Because the fruit of most trees, such as the olive tree, the vine, and the date palm, is gathered all at once, while the fruit of the fig tree is gathered little by little. So it is with the Torah. ON studies a little ach day and eventually learns much, because the Torah is not to be learned in one or even two years."

"נוצר תאנה יאכל פריה." למה נמשלה תורה בתאנה? שרוב האילנות הזית הגפן והתמרה נלקטין כאחת והתאנה נלקטת מעט מעט. כך התורה היום לומד מעט ולמחר הרבה לפי שאינה מתלמדת לא בשנה ולא בשנתים.

A Closer Look:

When people first learn about the art of story-telling, relationship building and self-interest they often worry that they are doing their one on one meetings "wrong." Some congregants will say: "I met with this person already, but I don't know if I am asking the right questions to get at their self-interest." Or, "I have met with this person several times and I still don't know what I'm looking for or how to understand their values and interests." Therefore, I believe this text is helpful because it encourages congregants to understand that the "torah" of our lives cannot be "collected" in one sitting. Rather, as relationships evolve, they become more fruitful. Little by little, one begins to understand another person's interests, values, and motivations. I hope that this text can mitigate the pressure felt by many congregants who feel like they need to "get it right" or gather all the "necessary" information during one's first encounter.

Rashi, one of the most famous medieval Jewish commentators (11th Century France), tries to uncover the hidden meaning of Proverbs 27:19. In his commentary he is troubled by why the Torah uses the analogy of water and what it means for one man's heart to be likened to another man's heart. As the biblical text says:

Proverbs 27:19

יט כַּמַּיִם הַפָּנִים לַפָּנִים כֵּן לֵב־ הָאָדָם לָאָדָם. **19**As face answers to face in water, so does one man's heart to another.

Rashi on Proverbs 27:19

כמים - הללו הפנים שאתה מראה לתוכן הן מראות לך

Translation:
What does the Torah mean when it says: *"Like water? The face that you show it, it will show you."*

A Closer Look:

One must note that when trying to translate this verse or Rashi there are two important grammatical variations to highlight. First, the word "to show" comes from the *hifeel* form of the word r.a.h. (ראה). Thus, the word *mar'eh* (מראה) literally means: "to cause to see." However, for the sake of simplicity in English I have followed the more common translation of *mar'eh* as, "to show."

Second, the word for face *panim* (פנים), while it symbolizes a singular entity, it is technically in the plural form in Hebrew. This explains why many of the other pronouns and prepositions in this sentence are also in the plural form (i.e.- הן ,לתוכן ,הללו).

Interestingly, I have often wondered why the word for face in Hebrew is in the plural form. While one could argue that this is simply a grammatical irregularity, perhaps this *midrash* suggests another reason for why the word for "face" is in the plural form. Perhaps the biblical word for "face" was a subtle hint that one cannot see his or her own "face" (in the singular sense) until one looks into the eyes of another human being or face. Hence, the plural usage of the word "face" to connote a singular entity. Similar to the interpretation offered above regarding the words *eish* and *eishah*, perhaps it is only through two faces (*panim, פנים)* that one can see him or herself as an individual "face." In other words, one's own dreams, visions, and reality can only be defined when looking at one's reflection through the face, vision and reality of another human being.

כן לב האדם לאדם - חברו לפי מה שאדם יודע שחבירו אוהבו כן הוא מראה לו פנים

<u>Translation:</u>
"What does it mean when the Torah says: "The heart of man is to a man? According to how much a man knows that his friend loves him, thus a man will show him his face."

- o *In the context of a one on one encounter, what can this text teach us about the art of relationship building from a Jewish lens?*
- o *Do you agree with Rashi's interpretation that showing another person "love" will encourage another person to show you his or her face? In what ways is this true? In what ways would this be difficult in the context of a relationship building campaign?*

<u>A Closer Look:</u>

In the context of community organizing some people may hear the word "love" in Rashi's statement and feel uncomfortable with the idea that it takes "loving" another person to get to know their interests and values.

This sense of unease is not necessarily a bad thing because the CBCO model teaches us that there is a difference between public and private relationships. While a private relationship may be based on the concept of love (either romantic or fraternal), a public relationship is more likely to be based on mutual respect or a deep ethic or care such as *hesed*, or loving-kindness. But here, Rashi explicitly uses the Hebrew word a.*h.v* (אהב) to transmit the idea of love.

In order to overcome this seemingly problematic use of the word a.h.v., biblical scholar Yochanan Muffs argues that in the rabbinic use of the word *a.h.v.* may have had a different connotation. For example, in some liturgical settings, as well as in the Qumran community, the word he word *a.h.v.* denotes a commitment or a relationship that one enters into without coercion or compulsion. Thus, a relationship based on a.h.v. can also mean that one enters into it with free will and from the depth of one's own heart.[36]

Based on the discussion above, this is a fitting Jewish gloss on the CBCO idea that the goal of a one on one relationship is not to manipulate the person into doing what you want them to do. Rather, to truly "love" someone or to be in relationship with them we must create a vision that everyone can enter into with an open heart and a free will.

<center>HASIDIC TEXT</center>

Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Ki Tissa 15

"When a man stands by the water, he sees his shadow large upon the water. But when a man lowers himself down, the shadow is made smaller. And the more he lowers himself, the more his shadow becomes smaller and smaller until his face upon the water. At that point, the face of his shadow meets the face of the man.

Thus it is with the heart of a man to a man. When a man thinks of himself as great, his friend also thinks of himself as great. But when a man humbles himself before his friend, then his friend will also humble himself until there is nothing but humility between them. And between them is an equality and an equilibrium and by this means they becomes friends who never part."

- *What do you think the Ba'al Shem Tov is trying to teach us regarding the symbolism of a shadow in the water that gets bigger and smaller?*
- *Do you think the Ba'al Shem Tov believes that it is better or worse to have a "big shadow" on the water?*
- *Similarly, do you think it is better for a human being to help another human being feel great" or to help them to feel "humble"?*
  - *Are there any situations where one may want to cultivate another person's greatness and another situation in which you may want to help another person cultivate their humility?*

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[36] Muffs 129.

Emmanuel Levinas

"In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God. To my mind the Infinite comes in the signifyingness of the face. The face *signifies* the Infinite. When in the presence of the Other, I say, "Here I am!" This "Here I am!" is the place through which the Infinite enters into language. The subject who says "Here I am!" *testifies* to the Infinite."[37]

- *According to Levinas there is a profound connection between one's face, the Infinite, and language. What do you think about this proposal?*
- *In particular, Levinas argues that the phrase hinneini ("Here I am) creates a special opening to the Infinite. Do you agree or disagree with this connection? Why or why not? How might you explain his theory?*

"Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient I-Thou forgetful of the universe…The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice. It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger; but this very poverty and exile which appeal to my powers, addresses me, do not deliver themselves over to these powers as givens, remain the expression of the face. The poor one, the stranger, presents himself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the *third party*, thus present at the encounter, whom is in the midst of his destitution of the Other already serves. He comes to *join* me. But he joins me to himself for service; he commands me as a Master. This command can concern me only inasmuch as I master myself; consequently this command commands me to command. The *thou* is posited in front of a *we*. To be *we* is not to "jostle" one another to get together around a common task. The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of a third party (that is, of the whole humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding."[38]

- *How might Buber I-Thou theory be similar, or different, from the ideas posed by Levinas above?*
- *What do you think Levinas means when he says "language is justice" or that one's face can open up humanity?*
- *What do you think Levinas means when he says that "the epiphany of the face qua face" opens humanity"?*

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[37] Levinas, *Totality* 105-106.
[38] Levinas, *Totality* 213.

o *In another essay by Levinas, he argues that "access to the face is straightaway ethical."[39] What is Levinas trying to convey with this idea?*

o *How do you reconcile Levinas' statement that the poor, or the stranger, "presents himself as an equal" and "joins" him in the endeavor for justice, but at the same time, the Other also serves as his "master"? How might this relate to the experience of contemporary synagogues partnering with faith communities from different socio-economic backgrounds?*

Martin Buber

Martin Buber (1878-1965), an Austrian-Jewish philosopher most well-known for his groundbreaking book entitled "*I & Thou*," argues that human beings approach every interaction in one of two ways—either in a "*I-it*" manner or an "*I-Thou*" comportment. An *I-it* relationship is primarily utilitarian. It revolves around how a person intends to use an object or another person for his or her benefit. For example, an *I-it* relationship is consumed by self-centered actions. As Buber suggests, the sole focus is on what "I perceive" or "what I feel" or what "I want."[40] In contrast, an *I-Thou* encounter surpasses any functional purpose. Verging on the indescribable, an *I-Thou* moment defies rational explanation. Some might say that it is the moment when two becomes one. Or, perhaps, it is that split second when the world appears at a stand-still because of one's interaction with another person, nature, or something within the spiritual realm.[41]

While Buber clearly privileges an *I-Thou* encounter over an *I-it* relationship, it is important to note that he does not believe that one can explicitly create an *I-Thou* moment. As he says, "The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking."[42] Second, he does not believe that *I-Thou* moments are forever. On their own, they are qualitatively unsustainable. Buber admits that we live most of our lives in *I-it* interactions and that is nothing to be ashamed of. The problem, however, is that is that as history marches on the number of I-it relationships are expanding while the number of *I-Thou* moments are vastly decreasing. Thus, the goal of any modern religious endeavor is to help people access the powerful and transcendent *I-Thou* experience.

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[39] Levinas, *Ethics* 85.
[40] Buber 54.
[41] Buber 57.
[42] Buber 62.

<u>Primary Texts:</u>

"Those who experience do not participate in the world. For experiences is "in them" and not between them and the world. The world does not participate in experience. It allows itself to be experienced, but it is not concerned, for it contributes nothing and nothing happens to it. The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-Thou establishes the world of relation."[43]

"The human being whom I say You I do not experience. But I stand in relation to him, in the sacred basic word. Only when I step out of this do I experience him again. Experience is remoteness from You."[44]

- o *According to Buber, what is the difference between the world of "experience" and the world of "relation"? Which does he prefer and why?*
- o *Do you experience a difference between these two paradigms or do you think that this is simply a matter of semantics?*
- o *If you believe there is a difference, can you describe a time in your life when you felt a difference between "experiencing" and "relating" to someone or something?*

 "Man becomes an I through a You. What confronts us comes and vanishes, relational events take shape and scatter, and through these changes crystallizes, more and more each time, the consciousness of the constant partner, the I-consciousness. To be sure, for a long time it appears only woven into relation to a You, discernible as that which reaches for but is not a You; but it comes closer and closer to the bursting point until one day the bonds are broken and the I confronts its detached self for a moment like a You—and then it takes possession of itself and henceforth enters into relations in full consciousness."[45] (Buber 80)

- o *What does Buber mean when he suggests that, "Man becomes an I through You." Is this similar or different from the text examined above? Does it add any nuance to our understanding of the ideas and texts discussed above?*
- o *In this section, is Buber suggesting that there is a difference between the I and the You? Are they one in the same? Or is one being used to cultivate the other? If this is true, does this match Buber's goal of being more non-utilitarian in our approach to life?*

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[43] Buber 56.
[44] Buber 59-60.
[45] Buber 80.

At an earlier point in this book, Buber suggests that "relation is reciprocity."[46] According to Professor Eugene Borowitz, Buber believed that every time we enter into relationship with someone it imposes duties upon us[47]. While Borowitz does not identify which duties Buber is referring to here, do you agree or disagree with this overall sentiment? If so, is there any evidence of this that can be found in the primary texts above?

Abraham Joshua Heschel

"Religion in contemporary society has become an impersonal affair, an institutional loyalty. It survives on the levels of activities rather than the stillness of commitment. It has fallen victim to the belief that real is only that which is capable of being registered by fact-finding surveys….Judaism, too, has become an impersonal affair. By Judaism is meant what is done publically rather than that which comes about in privacy. The chief virtue is social affiliation rather than conviction. The chief virtue is social affiliation rather than conviction. Engaged as we have been in building institutions and calling for affiliation, we have neglected to deal with the persona, the private, the intimate.[48]

- o *Do you agree or disagree with Heschel's assessment of contemporary religion? Why or why not?*
- o *What does Heschel mean by the "stillness of commitment"? When are "activities" necessary and when should we focus on the "stillness of commitment"?*
- o *What do you think our goal is as modern Reform Jews—affiliation, conviction, or something else altogether?*

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[46] Buber 63.
[47] Borowitz 213.
[48] Heschel, *Insecurity* 213.

CHAPTER SIX: SELF INTEREST

In this day and age, when American Jews have attained such wide social acceptance and economic success, it is easy to see why many social justice efforts within the synagogue focus on issues outside the Jewish community. Many American Jews would argue that the most pressing needs must be met by allying with people who are more directly affected by poverty, violence, inequality, etc. This may look like building coalitions with poor people to work on living wage campaigns or supporting union jobs. It could mean raising money for organizations doing relief work in war-torn countries. It could mean building alliances with organizations doing great work around civil rights and environmental rights. In other words, Jewish social justice work, in many of our congregations, is often focused on how we can ally and build coalitions with other, more vulnerable people within our society.

In contrast, the CBCO model promotes the idea that real change must begin at home. On-going and sustainable transformation begins with an internal process of self-discovery. This theory is based on the notion that in order to change the world, one must change oneself. Changing oneself requires understanding what motivates us to act in certain ways. This concept is known as "self-interest." Some people act on their self-interest quite consciously. For example, when vying for a raise or when volunteering for a prominent position on a board, many people recognize that this self-interest is a healthy form of ego that leads to professional and personal advancement. All too often, however, in the non-profit world we are taught that the most altruistic person is the most the most "authentic" social activist. In other words, in the world of social change, people often believe that one needs to sublimate his or her self-interest for the sake of the common good. On the contrary, organizing

promotes the discovery of one's self-interest as a tool for social change. Thus, community organizers suggest that the most effective and sustainable avenues for social change begins when we can recognize, claim and use our self-interest within the framework of self-discovery and communal transformation.

Marshall Ganz suggests that self-interest is composed of three different kinds of needs: existential, relational, and growth needs.[49] Here, Ganz is not only referring to "personal or professional growth;" but rather, a theory proposed by psychologist Clayton Alderfer who argues that "growth" stems from creative outlets which provide people with the opportunity to develop their skills, ideals, and imagination in order to become more self-actualized. Interestingly, Alderfer argues against Maslow's theory that needs are hierarchical; and instead, proposes that "lower-level" needs such as physical safety co-exist with "higher-level" needs such as personal connection and self-actualization. In other words, while Maslow claims that people fulfill their needs in a certain order, Alderfer argues that all of our needs are competing for our attention at the same time. Thus, human beings are simultaneously trying to attain relational, existential and growth needs at every moment of their life.

Although many people have accepted Alderfer or Maslow's theories as common knowledge, when people hear the word "self-interest" they often perceive this idea in a negative way because they conflate the idea of self-interest with the notion of selfishness. However, according to Ed Chambers, "self-interest" is simply defined as a natural concern for one's own survival.[50] This impulse for survival, both consciously and unconsciously, plays into our decision-making on a day-to-day basis and it is essential for our own well-

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[49] Ganz 13.
[50] Chambers 25.

being. Chambers suggests that self-interest is comprised of four different aspects: *self preservation, self-determination, self-recognition, and self-respect*. Self-preservation refers to the ability to defend oneself and one's livelihood. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this applies to the bottom two layers of his hierarchy—physiological and safety needs. Physiological needs include having enough food, water, shelter and clothing. Safety needs include being free from abuse, harm, violence, or war.

The second aspect of self interest, according to Chambers, is known as self-determination. This is defined as "the capacity to expand and deepen our abilities through creative, self-initiated action."[51] In many ways, this notion is similar to Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualization. Thus, self-interest is not simply something that is done to survive physically; but also, something that is done to sharpen one's talents and gifts in order to pursue one's creative needs. As mentioned above, this creative outlet leads to the development of a more self-actualized person. Therefore, acting on one's self-interest also means engaging in the pursuit of self-actualization. Rather than seeing this as a selfish endeavor, it is important to recognize that self-actualization, or self- determination as Chambers calls it, enables people to contribute more fully to society because they are able to capitalize on their strengths and act more effectively on their needs, desires and dreams.

The third and fourth aspects of self-interest are inextricably bound to one another, so I will present them as a pair. Chambers argues that self-recognition is the ability to "claim our place and space in the world, whether others have acknowledged it yet or not."[52] In this regard, self-recognition is parallel to the notion of self-affirmation. It means believing in yourself even when others may not validate your ideas or worth. Our ability to attain self-

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[51] Chambers 25.
[52] Chambers 25.

affirmation comes from the fourth and final attribute of self-interest, which is self-respect. Chambers defines self-respect as recognizing our own uniqueness. Self-affirmation can only be attained when we recognize that each person has a unique contribution to make to the world because no other human being was created in exactly the same way, or for the same purpose. While many people define self-respect as honoring oneself, Chambers goes one step further by suggesting that self-respect means recognizing our own metaphysical and spiritual uniqueness. With this recognition we are able to honor our unique contribution to the world. Once someone is able to see how his or her contribution to the world is utterly unique, they will begin to understand how self-interest and selfishness are not one and the same.

In summary, Chambers suggests that that self interest is a composite of several different internal and social mechanisms which motivate human beings to survive, not only physically, but also, to thrive mentally, emotionally, professionally, and socially. Based on this perspective it is possible to see how self-interest is not the same as being selfish. Quite the opposite is true. While acting on our self interest means ensuring that we have enough food, shelter, and money to take care of ourselves, it also requires the ability to contribute to society in a way that honors our individual uniqueness, as well as the ability to bring greater light and talent into the world. According to this understanding, self-interest is as a noble pursuit.

That being said when self-interest is defined too narrowly, it can lead to acts of pure selfishness. Self-interest turns into selfishness when someone overemphasizes his or her own physical, economic, or spiritual survival above all others. Not only is this behavior self-indulgent, it can also lead to social and communal isolation. Therefore, how do community

organizers inspire people to identify and embrace their self-interest without encouraging them to become too self-centered?

One way to avoid defining self-interest in a narrow way is by investigating the etymology of the word itself. In Latin, the word "interest" is composed of two different roots: "Inter" means "between or "among," and "esse" means "being."[53] In this regard the Latin word actually illustrates how interests are not simply solitary pursuits. Rather, they exist between two inter-related beings, values, conversations, etc. Thus, our own self-interest, which we often assume is a private endeavor, is often shaped by the people, relationships, and values that surround us.

Based on our access to particular resources and how our community values these resources, people tend to transform certain values into "interests." Therefore, in addition to suggesting that self-interest comes from certain existential or relational needs, community organizing recognizes that self-interest exists at the intersection of communal and individual needs and values. For example, many Jewish parents argue that acquiring a quality education for their children is their higest priority because it gives their children more opportunities for success down the road. Therefore, their immediate self-interest is to get their kids into the best primary school they can afford—be it a public, private, or charter school. Consequently, many Jewish parents in Los Angeles have realized that improving educational opportunities in the city is a part of their immediate self-interest.

The goal of an organizer is to demonstrate how one's immediate self-interest may be shaped by cultural norms that also affect the well-being of other citizens. For example, the desire to provide quality education for one's child may be intensified by an American ideology which focuses on radical individualism in a hyper-competitive world where higher

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[53] Chambers 25.

education is often the key to social and economic advancement. Or perhaps, in wealthier communities, the need to provide a top-notch education for one's child may also be influenced by a desire to "keep up with the Joneses." Additionally, Judaism places a high premium on the value of education and so some parents could also be responding to this historic Jewish value.

By helping people understand how their self-interest has been shaped by outside factors, including but not limited to American and Jewish values, this helps people see how their self-interest is actually connected to the goals and interests of people who come from different backgrounds. For example, by building deeper and more intentional relationships among parents in one synagogue, members started to realize that they were not the only ones struggling to figure out how to provide their kids with a quality education in a city that has notoriously bad schools. While many Jewish parents felt isolated by the growing economic pressure placed on them to send their kids to private schools, they soon realized that other parents, from all walks of life, felt the same way. Not only did this realization break the cycle of shame and isolation, it also empowered parents to work together to create a city where parents, teachers, and administrators could work together to create better schools. In part, this simply derived from connecting parents from different socio-economic backgrounds and broadening their narrative about what "other" parents want for their kids. Additionally, parents began to see the interconnected nature of their self-interest as teachers told them that if more students were doing well on standardized tests, their energy could be focused on creating more engaging and creative lessons rather than teaching to the test. Soon, parents realized that it was in their interest to raise the quality of education for all students. By broadening the conversation about where people's values come from, organizers strive to

demonstrate how people's self interest is really a matter of "inter-esse" or inter-being. I hope that this example demonstrates how self-interest is at once a private and individual matter, as well as, a relational concept that is shaped by the values, needs, and resources within the wider community or culture.

If one agrees with the premise that self-interest is an individual as well as a relational pursuit, then organizers, rabbis and lay leaders can help communities develop, refract, and refine their self-interest through intentional community building activities and conversations. This process begins on an individual level through one on one conversations that encourage congregants to identify, articulate, develop and clarify their values and interests. This is accomplished by training leaders within the community to ask questions that honor people's life experience in order to uncover their deep-seated values. In organizing language, this is known as asking "probing" questions. The most basic form of a probing question is "why?" For example, one might ask someone *why* they decided to move away for college, or *why* they pursued a certain career. By asking people *why* certain things matter, organizers can guide people in a process of self-discovery and self-development of their interests and ideals.

While the process of discovering one's self interest begins in a one on one meeting, the goal is for this conversation to expand outward to become a communal conversation. As resources and interests are uncovered, the hope is that people will begin to see how their needs and their values co-align. As discussed in the introduction, one way to help people connect their needs and values to one another, and ultimately to a greater cause, is through house meetings. A house meeting is an intentional conversation with approximately ten individuals who discuss their hopes, dreams, and challenges with one another. The second goal of a house meeting is to help people imagine how their stories are connected to one

another. For example, in a recent house meeting in Los Angeles one small group of congregations realized that while all of their stories were slightly different, many of them highlighted the broken nature of the health care system. While one parent bemoaned how difficult it was to get consistent care from her doctor, another congregant expressed how long the waiting lines were in the county hospital. While their stories accented different frustrations, this house meeting allowed people to see how powerful they could be if they found an issue that enabled them to work together to fix one aspect of a broken health care system. In this case, one congregation rallied around a bill that would enable the state health care commissioner to block random and frequent increases in health insurance premiums. While not everyone in the community would be equally effected by this political campaign, it demonstrates the notion of moving a community closer to a concept know as "enlightened" self-interest.

Enlightened self-interest is the ability to see one's self-interest as intimately connected to the interests of others. It is important to note that enlightened self-interest is not the same as mutual self-sacrifice.[54] Rather, enlightened self-interest is defined as the intersection between one's self interest and one's desire to build public power and respect.[55] Perhaps, the best way to illustrate the difference between enlightened self-interest and mutual self-sacrifice is through the following thought experiment. Let us imagine a congregant who says: "Since I am concerned about getting my son or daughter better health care I will go along with this campaign about the county health system until we start working on a campaign that helps me get better coverage for my private insurance plan." I would argue that this is an example of broad self-interest that is based on mutual self-sacrifice. In other

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[54] Chambers 73.
[55] As I will discuss in the next chapter, "power" is simply defined in the CBCO model as the "ability to act or achieve a purpose."

words, this person is willing to work on a certain campaign in order to get what she needs for her family's own well-being. I must emphasize that this is a noble aspect of a broadened self-interest and it is important to acknowledge and honor congregants who have reached this level of communal commitment.

Additionally, the goal of organizing is to help people reach a higher level of mutuality. The highest form of self-interest is when someone is willing to participate in a campaign for two distinct, but equally important reasons. First, they realize that even though they may not need immediate health care reform, it is in their long-term interest for their community to be well-organized and well-equipped to be involved in the public arena. In other words, the more powerful the community as a whole acquires, the more power the individual has act on his or her values as well. Therefore, even if a campaign is not serving someone's direct needs, people who act from enlightened self-interest understand that having a deeper and more involved public presence will benefit them in the long run.

The second aspect of enlightened self-interest is when someone is motivated to participate in an organizing effort because they respect the dignity and welfare of other human beings as much as they respect their own. Based on this definition, however, some would argue that there is a very fine line between altruism and enlightened self-interest. The difference is that people acting from enlightened self-interest do understand that their actions will bolster their long term influence and power. Furthermore, as I will explore below, I believe that the Jewish principle of *hesed* (covenantal love) can help us develop a more nuanced approach to our understanding of enlightened self-interest. For now it is sufficient to say that community organizing is based on the premise that knowing oneself is the basis for communal change. Without knowledge of what drives us to act it is difficult to engage others

in a process of self-discovery that will lead to cultural or political transformation. Thus, self-interest is defined as the ability to understand and articulate why you, or others, decide to act, or not act, on certain beliefs, values, and resources. Ultimately, understanding self-interest requires appreciating a process that is influenced by personal, as well as, communal goals, resources, needs and interests.

Helping people access, articulate and own their self-interest is probably one of the most difficult aspects of community organizing. Therefore, it is extremely important to note that uncovering someone's self-interest is not about manipulating them into being involved in something which only the organizer actually cares about. Rather, understanding one's self interest requires the ability to find a real connection between what you care about the most and what other people care about. The question posed by one veteran organizer is: "Where does my deep hunger meet the deep thirst of my community?"[56]

The hope of any community organizing effort is to help people identify where their deep hunger meets the needs of their community. By helping individuals identify their values, needs and self-interest, as well as the values, needs and interest of their neighbors, it is possible to shift people from a narrow to a broad sense of self-interest. The goal is that through a deep commitment to relationship building, people's moral universe will expand wide enough for them to realize that creating social change for the entire community is as important to them as creating change for their own immediate needs or concerns. It is at this critical juncture that a community harnesses the power they need to create real and lasting change.

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[56] Alexis DeSalvatierra

Of all the concepts in the cycle of organizing, the notion of self-interest is probably the most complex and difficult idea to integrate into one's psyche. For this reason I believe that Jewish texts and philosophy can both compliment and challenge our understanding of self-interest as presented in many different organizing settings. Overall, I would argue that there are two main obstacles that people face when they start to learn about the concept of self-interest.

First, even though most organizers emphasize the fact that self-interest is not the same thing as selfishness, many people still have a hard time accepting or internalizing this difference. For far too often liberal Jews believe they should pursue justice because it is simply the "right thing to do." But this exaggerated sense of altruism inhibits us from admitting that we all have interests and needs that need to be met. Especially in this difficult socio-economic time, it is critically important that we are not working from old assumptions or stereotypes about the well-being or livelihood of our congregants. However, this is still a difficult concept for many congregants to accept. I hope, therefore, by analyzing the following Jewish texts that congregants will begin understand this complex concept in a more nuanced and visceral way.

The Rabbis teach that every single human being is of incomparable worth. No two people are the same. This idea can be found in the Rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 4:10, where the Torah says that Cain is responsible for the "bloods" of his brother, rather than the "blood" of his brother that out from the earth. The Rabbis ask why the Torah presents the

word blood in the plural form (damai, דמי)? The Rabbis response can be found in Mishnah

Sanhedrin 4:5:

דמי אחיך צועקים אינו אומר דם אחיך אלא דמי אחיך דמו ודם זרעיותיו....לפיכך נברא אדם
יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחת [מישראל] מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל
המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא.

> "[The Torah says] the 'bloods' cried out rather than the 'blood' of your brother to teach that
> it is not only the blood of your brother, but all his descendents....Therefore, humans were
> created singly, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul [of Israel], Scripture
> accounts it as if he had destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul of Israel,
> Scripture accounts it as if she had saved a full world."

Following this idea to its logical conclusion, if killing one human being is like killing the

world, then the Rabbis are implying that every human being has infinite value because we are

all unique in some incomparable way. Therefore, the Rabbis not only teach us that we should

respect one another based on the concept of *b'tzelem elohim*, but this text teaches us that we

should respect one another based on our utter uniqueness and irreplacability. Recognizing the

innate uniqueness of every human being enables us to see how self-interest can be a positive

force for change rather than an act of selfishness. In other words, if every person was created

for an unique reason, then one should not be ashamed of his or her unique needs and

interests. In this way, I would argue that tapping into one's self-interest could be viewed as a

quasi-form of revelation because it enables people to envision an aspect of their purpose in

the world. That being said, the Rabbis also teach that our uniqueness is inextricably bound to

our overall connectedness as a human race.

As we learn in Genesis Chapter Two, the Torah teaches that God created the first

human being, Adam, as a single, unitary soul who became the progenitor of the entire human

race. Therefore, it makes sense that every human being is connected in some way. If that is

the case, however, how is it possible that we are all unique and somewhat connected at the same time? In the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 38a*) the Rabbis offer an ingenious solution to this otherwise difficult conundrum:

> "Unlike a man who strikes many coins from one die, and they all resemble one another; in fact, they are exactly alike. But even though the king of kings, the Holy One blessed be He, fashioned every man from the die of the first man, not a single one of them is exactly like his fellow. Hence, each and every person should say: 'The world was created for my sake.'"

This text teaches us that human beings are connected by the fact that we are struck from the same die or mold, and at the same time, we are all utterly unique. This midrashic innovation could help us to understand that our self-interest is inherently connected to everyone else's interest because we, as human beings, are both utterly unique, as well as, bound by a common ancestry. Whereas many people conflate the notion of self-interest and selfishness, this midrash illustrates that finding a balance between these two extremes is not only a secular endeavor, but also a holy pursuit that has been engrained in Rabbinic understanding of our creation story. Spiritually and religiously speaking, therefore, it is somewhat of a false dichotomy to understand the world through one's self-interest as something that is radically disconnected from a larger, more unified vision that unites people of all different backgrounds and faiths.

The second most difficult issue that many congregants face when learning about self-interest is that organizing appears to teach us to own and articulate our self-interest, while at the same time, not clinging to one's own interests too strongly. As noted above, the CBCO model is unique because it explicitly promotes the idea that we all have self-interests that are healthy and worth uncovering through the process of story-telling and relationship building. However, when people finally feel comfortable acknowledging or owning their self-interest,

organizers often teach us that we must balance our narrow self-interest with a broader, more "enlightened" self-interest. However, this balancing act often becomes a serious point of confusion, or even tension, for people who are new to the CBCO model.

This may be a flaw in the way that self-interest in taught in some organizing settings. By differentiating between the idea of "self-interest" and "enlightened self-interest" many people become confused or paralyzed by this distinction. As I can imagine one congregant saying: "But I thought you wanted me to identify an issue that matters to me so that I can work on it out of my self-interest! But now you are teaching me that I should put aside *my own, personal issue* to work on something that more members of our community care about? Why did you teach me about self-interest if you really want me to do what's in the best interest of the community as a whole?"

Unfortunately, if congregants are reacting to the notion of self-interest in this way then it is likely that we have misrepresented the true meaning of self-interest. While some organizers teach these concepts in tandem, many organizers teach "self-interest" and "enlightened self-interest" at different times and in different settings. Yet, by doing so, I believe that we are doing a disservice to our congregants and the CBCO model. Experience indicates that many people are used to acting from one end, or the other, of the "self-interest spectrum." In other words, many people understand what it means to act out of extreme self-interest because they know, or can identify someone who is really good articulating what they want and getting exactly what they need. Similarly, we all know someone who consistently articulates their desire to act from a place of complete altruism. However, the ultimate goal of teaching people about self-interest is to help people imagine a world in which people act from a middle-ground between extreme selfishness and extreme

selflessness. Therefore, perhaps, organizers need to reassess the idea of teaching self-interest and enlightened self-interest as different sides of the same coin. Rather, I believe that we need to create a way to talk about these two concepts in a more unified and singular fashion.

Perhaps Maimonides concept of the golden mean, the *sh'vil z'hav* (שביל זהב) can help us present the concept of self-interest in a more unified and balanced way. In his monumental work, the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides argues that one of the goals of Judaism is to help people acquire balance in their body, mind, and soul. While it is difficult for human beings to actually acquire this kind of balance in life, Maimonides argues that the pursuit of the 'golden mean' should be seen as holy work because it is one of the most significant ways in which Jews can sanctify God's name.[57] The purpose of sanctifying God's name is three-fold. First, it is to honor God's glory and greatness. Second, it is to help create a stronger relationship between worshiper and worshiped, or in other words, between God and human beings. Third, Maimonides believes that sanctifying God's name can also help human beings find their ultimate purpose in life.

Thus, Maimonides suggests that Jewish law and ritual was created – with all of its details and intricacies—as a way to help people overcome their base instinct to act in extreme ways. Therefore, he proposed that everyone needs to spend time identifying their base instincts in order to find a way to bring them back to the golden mean. In other words, the goal of the golden mean is to help people avoid being too modest or too arrogant, too generous or too stingy, etc.

For this reason I believe that Maimonides's theory of the golden mean can serve as new way to present the concept of self-interest. Rather than suggesting that there is a difference between "enlightened self-interest" and "self-interest," perhaps we need to teach

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[57] Twersky 42.

"self-interest" as a unitary concept that balances the needs of the self and the community as a whole. A Maimonidean approach to self-interest recognizes the fact that a golden mean already exists in the hyphen between the words "self" and "interest." Therefore, perhaps, our job as organizers is not only to help people investigate the meaning of "self" or "interest" in their lives, but also to uncover the meaning of the hyphen—which can serve to either separate or balance these two spheres of our existence.

In order to investigate this issue further, my hope is that the following texts will illustrate how the concept of self-interest, while this phrase is never referenced explicitly, may appear in several different ways throughout the tradition. Specifically, I hope to examine texts that will focus on the following three aspects of self-interest: 1) Are there texts that can help us deal with the uncomfortably of uncovering, owning and acknowledging our self-interest as a healthy, rather than selfish endeavor? 2) Are there texts that can further support my theory of taking a more Maimonidean approach to self-interest? In other words, are there texts that may help us focus on the hyphen that exists between the notion of "self" and "interest" so that we can teach about self-interest as a balance between the needs of the community and one's own needs? 3) Is self-interest a goal in and of itself, or is there a way envision the development of self-interest as a means towards a greater ends?

A Word of Note:

In truth, there is no way to find an exact correlation for the word "self-interest" in the Torah. In modern Hebrew, self-interest is called as תועלת עצמי (to'elet atzmi). The noun to'elet means "interest, benefit, value, or use," and the word atzmi signifies "oneself."[58] This word derives from the Hebrew root e.tz.m, which can signify either a "bone" or "strength, number, or power."

The word etzem, meaning bone correlates with the notion of self because one's "self" is literally made up of one's bones. On the other hand, the second definition of the root e.tz.m, which means strength, power, or numbers does not correlate so obviously correlated with the notion of "self."

In the Torah, the word צצום (atzum) means power, strength, or numbers. Most often this word has a negative connotation because it is most often associated with war or conflict.[59] For example, in Exodus 1:9 and Numbers 22:6 this word is used when other nations set out destroy Israel are too numerous and too powerful. On the other hand, in the Book of Deuteronomy, God promises to destroy Israel enemies who are also atzum. However, the first occurrence of this word has a different connotation. For further analysis, see Genesis 18:18 below.

Genesis 18:17-19

יז וַיהוָה, אָמָר הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה.	**17** And YHVH said: 'Should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,
יח וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוֹ יִהְיֶה לְגוֹי **גָּדוֹל וְעָצוּם** וְנִבְרְכוּ-בוֹ--כֹּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ.	**18** since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him.
יט כִּי יְדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יְצַוֶּה אֶת-בָּנָיו וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הָבִיא יְהוָה עַל-אַבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר עָלָיו.	**19** For I have singled him out, so that he may instruct his children and his prosperity to keep the way of YHVH, to do what is right and just in order for YHVH to bring about to Abraham what He has promised him."

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[58] TDOT 289.
[59] TDOT 291.

- *According to this text, why does God decide to tell Abraham about His plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah?*
- *In these verses, what constitutes being a "great and mighty" (atzum) nation?*
- *How might this verse correlate to the notion of self-interest (to'elet atzmi)?*

A Closer Look:

From the positive use of the word *atzum*, as seen above, I would argue that one way that Abraham and his descendents will become a "great and mighty" nation that is by pursuing *tzedek u'mishpat*. In other words, what is in one's long-term self-interest is to do what is right and just in the world. According to this verse, I would suggest that doing something for oneself, one's self-interest, or in order to build one's might directly correlates with doing what is right and just.

Furthermore, the noun *atzum* appears 31 times in the Tanakh where its meaning oscillates between "numerous" and "powerful." However, according to *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, one must remember that in "segmentary societies the power and prestige of a family were defined by the number of its members."[60] Furthermore, unlike other words that mean power or might, the root *e.tz.m* is never used in correlation to God. Rather it is used solely to describe individuals or nations.[61]

Therefore, one could argue that the notion of self-interest (based on the wood *e.tz.m)* may allude to a type of human-oriented power that is created when the "many" becomes the "one." In other words, in biblical society, the more people a nation had, the more powerful they were. Similarly, in the world of community organizing, the more people who are joined together who can acknowledge their own self-interest (atzum), the more powerful they will be in the end.

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[60] TDOT 292.
[61] TDOT 296.

Pirkei Avot 1:14

אם אין אני לי מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי מה אני? ואם לא עכשיו אימתי?

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

A Closer Look:

This verse from Pirkei Avot is perhaps one of the most commonly quoted Rabbinic adages in liberal Jewish settings. Without much struggle, one could argue that this text teaches us that we must balance our own needs with the needs of others. Furthermore, based on the phrase "if not now, when," one could argue that this type of reciprocity is so important that no one should delay acting in a give-and-take manner. While this is quite similar to the interpretation proposed in the previous section, Marshall Ganz suggests that is a deeper, more subtle message embedded within this common idiom.

First, Ganze proposes that the first phrase (i.e.- "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?") teaches us that every human being has infinite moral worth because we were all created in God's image. Therefore, being for "oneself" means honoring one's resources and strengths. This means lessening our reliance upon "marketing mavens, management gurus and niche strategists" and increasing our reliance upon our internal moral compass in order to help us navigate where we came from and where we are going.[62]

Second, there very interesting linguistic anomaly in the phrase: "If I am only for myself, what am I? – וכשאני לעצמי מה אני." Ganz notes that when someone focuses too much on themselves, the Hebrew implies that they turn from a person, or a "who," ["Who am I?"] into an object or a "what" ["What am I?"]. Therefore, in order to be a true person—a "who"—one must establish relationships with others. This is a form of justice, not charity, because "relationship requires recognition of the "other" as a "self" equally created in God's image, unique and capable of choice….Entering into relationship *with* someone requires speaking and listening; exploring values, interests, and resources; discerning commonalities and differences; committing to a shared project. Understood in this way relationship is demanding because it requires *giving of ourselves*, not only of our goods."[63] Thus, in the end,

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[62] Ganz 3.
[63] Ganz 3.

our desire to build relationships with one another grow out of our recognition that we can only become our complete "selves" when we are in relationships to other human beings.

Last but not least, Ganz suggests that we must pursue this kind of ethic "now" because creative action is always risky. When things are uncertain or ambiguous people have a tendency delay their actions or decisions because of what Tolstoy calls the "snare of preparation." This concept relates quite nicely to Buber's argument that inaction is as bad as a sin. As Buber suggests, inaction often takes place when a "whirl of possibility paralyzes us. Intrigued or overcome by all that we might do, we cannot decide to do anyone one thing. We wait choicelessly and let happen what happens. In this common evildoing of will-less-ness we do the acts that come from never being able to address this person or situation as a whole self."[64]

Rather than doing something wrong or slightly spontaneous, most people become paralyzed by their desire to do something more "perfect" in a few weeks or months down the line. However, this adage teaches us that our merit does not come from being "experts" in the field who wait for all the data to arrive before taking action. Rather, it is our status as learners, "questioners who have faith that we can learn to create a new world only in the course of creating it," that can help us to change the world one step at a time.[65] Rather, doing "good" means letting an encounter with another person propel you into action.

In summary, I would suggest that this simple line from Pirkei Avot is indeed, a great source of knowledge when it comes to understanding self-interest from a Jewish lens. First, as Ganz notes, this verse teaches us to respect our own needs because everyone was created in the divine image. Second, we are reminded that if we only focus on ourselves, we become a "what" (an object) rather than a "who" (a person or a real human being). While I believe that Ganz offers us an invaluable tool for understanding the deeper meaning of this phrase, I would also like to present a more classical Rabbinic interpretation of this Rabbinic passage.

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[64] Borowitz 162.
[65] Ganz 3

Avot D'Rabbi Natan (Nusach Aleph) 12:7

הוא היה אומר: אם אין אני לי מי לי—אם אני לא אזכה בי, מי יזכה בי? לא כשם שאדם חולק
שכר לחברו בעולם הזה, כך חולק שכר בעולם הבא, שנאמר (קהלת ד:א): 'הנה דמעת העשוקים
ואין להם מנחם ומיד עשוקיהם כח ואין להם מנחם' שני פעמים? אלו בני-אדם שאוכלין ושותין
ומצליחין בבנים ובנות בעולם הזה, ובעולם הבא אין להם מנחם: שאם נגנבה לו אדם בעולם הזה,
ובעולן הבא או שמת לו מת—באין בניו אחיו וקרוביו ומנחמין אותו. יכול אף לעולם הבא כן,
תלמוד לומר: (קהלת ד:ח) 'גם בן ואח אין לו.'

"He [Hillel] used to say: **'If I am not for myself, who will be for me?'** If I do not bring
merit upon myself, who will do it for me? This does not mean that one should separate
himself from his friends reward in this world, but that he separates [his] reward in the world
to come, as it says in Ecclesiastes 4:1: 'Behold, the tears of the oppressed have no one to
comfort [them], and on the other hand, the power of their oppressors, they [too] have no one
to comfort [them].' Why does it say 'they do not have anyone to comfort [them]' two times
[in this verse]? This refers to a human being who eats, drinks and is successful for their sons
and daughters in this word, but in the world to come they do not have any rest."

A Closer Look:

       According to Avot D'Rabbi Natan, being "for oneself" means doing good deeds so as
to merit a reward for onself. However, this text is quick to point out that one should not
simply do good deeds in order to accumulate reward for oneself. In fact, this author suggests
that one needs to work together with others in this world in order to create merit for himself
or herself in the world to come. In other words, one should not simply do everything for
"oneself" so that they eat, drink and be merry without consideration for those around them.
In fact, the opposite is true. According to this text, if one only focuses on being successful for
oneself or one's own family, cosmic forces will ensure that this is not the case in the world to
come. Implicitly, this teaches us that while we should do good deeds to merit us a reward, we
must not do pursue this goal to the exclusion of another person's well-being.

Rabbi Bunim of P'shiskha

"Every person should have two pockets, each containing a slip of paper. On one should be written: 'I am but dust and ashes'[66] and on the other: 'The world was created for me.'[67]

<u>A Closer Look:</u>

While this Hasidic tale has become quite a common adage, I believe it can add another layer of significance to our already complex understanding of the concept of self-interest. Based on the verse from the Babylonian Talmud (i.e.- "the world was created for me"), Rabbi Bunim teaches that everyone should have a healthy sense of self. Or, as organizers would call it, self- interest. On the other hand, every human being must also carry another verse with him or her that reads: "I am but dust and ashes." This verse from the Book of Genesis provides us with a deep sense of humility because we are reminded of our mortality. As finite human beings we only have so much time on earth. This realization affects people in different ways. Some will be inspired to pursue actions that will directly benefit them because they realize how short life is. Then, there are those whose finitude inspires them to work on something that will last well beyond their own legacy, or that of their family.

Perhaps, however, the idea of keeping these both of these perspectives ideas in one's *pocket*, rather than in one's wallet or purse, is symbolic of a more profound message. Just as we need both legs to walk, so too do we need both pockets, or both ideas, to walk through life in an upright and balanced way. If we only present ourselves as having a healthy ego or if we only present ourselves as profoundly humble, we risk going astray in one direction or another. Much like Maimonides' idea of the golden mean, this text teaches us that our goal is to help us find a healthy balance between these two extremes. However, whereas Maimonides's spoke about the golden mean as a way to sanctify God's name, this text teaches us that our own mortality should motivate us to pursue a more balanced approach to the world around us.

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[66] Based on Genesis 18:27
[67] Based on BT Sanhedrin 38a

"We cannot today think of salvation in the same other-worldly terms as did our fathers….The salvation that the modern man seeks in this world, like that which his fathers' sought in the world to come, has both a personal and social significance. In its personal aspect it represents the faith in the possibility of achieving an integrated personality. All those natural impulses, appetites and desires which so often are in conflict with one another must be harmonized….When our mind functions in such a way that we feel that all our powers are actively employed in the achievements of desirable ends, we have achieved personal salvation.

This personal objective of human conduct cannot, however, be achieved without reference to a social objective as well. Selfish salvation is an impossibility, because no human being is psychologically self-sufficient….Although to every individual the achievement of personal salvation is his supreme quest and responsibility, it is unattainable without devotion to the task of social salvation.

In its social aspect, salvation means the ultimate achievement of a social order in which all men shall collaborate in the pursuit of common ends in a manner which shall afford to each the maximum opportunity for creative self-expression. There can be no personal salvation so long as injustice and strife exist in the social order; there can be no social salvation so long as the greed for gain and the lust for domination are permitted to inhibit the hunger for human fellowship and sympathy in the hearts of men."[68]

o *In this passage how does Kaplan define "salvation"? Do you agree or disagree with his general theory? Why or why not?*
o *What is the difference between "personal" and "social salvation"? What is the relationship between these two elements?*
o *Do you think Kaplan's idea was influenced by any of the other ideas or thinkers examined above? If so, in what way(s)?*
o *How might Kaplan's understanding personal and social salvation deepen our understanding of self-interest from Jewish philosophical standpoint?*

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[68] Kaplan 52-53.

Since ancient times the Rabbis argued that the world stands on three things: *Torah* (learning sacred texts), *avodah* (worship and ritual), and *g'milut hasadim* (acts of loving-kindness).[69] Even today, many modern-day Jewish institutions are founded upon these three pillars as a way to promote Jewish identity-building and literacy. On one hand, I would argue that these three pillars remain at the core of our work as educators and rabbis who want to create more affiliated, learned, and engaged Jews. On the other hand, in a world where many families, including an increasing number of middle class families, are one hospital visit or job loss away from bankruptcy, I believe that we must broaden the notion of *g'milut hasadim* to include actions that can bring about systemic social change.

In order for synagogues to reexamine their commitment to systemic social change they must be willing to talk about what it means to harness communal, civil, and political power. Five or ten years ago most synagogues would have never suggested that they were in the business of creating or building power. However, community organizing has taught us that if we are going to transform everyday acts of loving-kindness into real systemic social change, we must familiarize ourselves with, and acquire political and social power. As Pesner suggests, "To build the kind of power needed to win universal health care, save our disintegrating environment, and act effectively on a variety of issues reflecting our deepest Jewish values, we will need to organize and use the power of our congregations."[70] Therefore, this chapter relies upon the assumption that 21st century synagogues must be able to talk about building civic, communal and political power alongside the central tenets of

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[69] Pirkei Avot 1:2
[70] Pesner, *Activists*.

building Jewish identity, literacy and affiliation. Furthermore, as I hope to demonstrate, the creation of shared communal and political power is essential for the Reform movement to be able to truly act on its prophetic commitment to systemic social change. Thus, the goal of this chapter is to understand what it means to acquire power in a synagogue setting in order to pursue a more comprehensive notion of *g'milut hasadim*.

Most often, when people hear the word power it conjures up images of greed, violence, abuse or injustice. For many, they are reminded of the famous quote by Lord Acton: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority."[71] In reality, however, the word *power* simply means the "ability to act." As Martin Luther King Jr. suggests, "power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve a purpose."[72]

Our ability to act on our values, thoughts, ideas and interests is what makes us human. While history has taught us that the abuse of power can lead to death and destruction, the reality is that the concept itself has neither a positive or negative valence. The problem is that the word power is often associated with a type of hierarchical authority that leads to corruption and violence. However, this understanding of the word is only one type of power, and in community organizing it is known as "power-over."

Power-over is characterized by both dominance and dependency. Dominance is defined as the ability to take control of a situation, usually through aggression, fear, or manipulation. Dominance is linked to dependency because dominant people tend to acquire, and then control, access to limited resources. Therefore, dominant people, institutions, or structural systems can collect a wide array of people who are dependent on them for

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[71] Acton, John.
[72] King, "Where do we go from here?"

resources such as safety, access to a job, financial resources, etc. Examples of this type of dominance include corrupt political leaders who can manipulate their staff or constituents to do whatever they want because they control the taxes or police force in their neighborhood. Or we may think of a gang leader who rules the streets through fear and intimidation. While these are good examples of extremely dominant people or positions in our society, the reality is that most people operate from some level of a power-over mentality on a daily basis.

Society has conditioned us to believe that if we want to get something done well, we should simply do it ourselves. This sentiment seems innocent enough; although it illustrates how we can all fall prey to the power-over mentality in our own lives. Therefore, when we talk about the notion of power-over it is important to keep in mind that this not only refers to drug dealers or corrupt politicians, it also refers to the way every-day citizens operate on an unconscious level.

Acting from a power-over mentality could be as benign as making a unilateral decision that will affect a large number of people. It could also mean withholding critical information from shareholders, which could alter the outcome of a pivotal decision. In other words, power-over, in its most subtle form, can exist as slight exaggerations of the truth or as a manipulation of the facts in order to produce the results that allow one to remain in control of a situation. No one is immune from acting with this type of power-over mentality. On the other hand, community organizing tries to promote a cultural shift in which people a) are more aware of their tendency to act from a power-over mentality; b) honor, respect, and engage in a model that can counter this type of hierarchical power.

The counterbalance to a world filled with hierarchical power is something known in the world of community organizing as shared power or "power-to" or "power-with." This

type of power is defined by interdependency rather than dominance. This means cultivating a group that is characterized by collectivity and mutuality. In other words, groups that act on a power-to basis can learn from one another and challenge one another's ideas, decisions, and strategies. It means that they learn to share in, or at least respect, each other's interests, resources, and vision. This may appear to be a type of technical change in the way we think about interacting with other congregants in a polite or harmonious way. However, I would argue that developing communities based on the notion of shared power is actually a much more radical endeavor that lies at the heart of the Jewish mission. While I will explore the Jewish roots of this idea in more depth below, for now I would like to focus on what it means to operate from a sense of shared power.

A group that operates from shared power learns to make decisions in a collective manner and is willing to accept both the positive and negative outcomes of that decision. Thus, any group that bases its actions on this type of non-hierarchical system must acknowledge that no single person is to blame for something that goes wrong in the group, nor to be given all the credit for when something goes right. Rather, the assumption is that just as the group makes collective decisions it must also accept collective responsibility. Although it is incredibly difficult to develop communities or groups that always operate on a power-to level, the goal of community organizing is to create this kind of cultural paradigm shift over time.

Whether one is operating from an outlook of power-to or power-over, it is clear that power is a relational term. It can only be assessed in relationship with another person, thing or institution. In other words, people do not just have innate power. Rather, when people say that a person has "power," they are most often referring to the fact that he or she has power-

over someone else or something. They may exercise the power of persuasion or they may employ a darker method such as power through fear and intimidation. Therefore, as Ganz suggests, power is not a thing, an attribute, a quality, a characteristic, or a trait. Rather, it is a relationship.[73] In a power-over situation, one party, person, or institution tends to "win" the conversation, debate, campaign, or access to critical resource. This is called a zero-sum process where one party leaves with the spoils, and the other goes home with nothing. On the other hand, relational power is multiplicative. In other words, when you become more powerful, so do those who are in relationship with you. When your group becomes more powerful, you become more powerful as an individual. In this way relational power is mutually reinforcing rather than a zero-sum game. In order for a group to operate with shared power, the person who was traditionally at the top of the hierarchy (i.e. – the president, rabbi, executive director, board member, etc) must recognize that he or she must give up some of his or her own unilateral power in order to create a true form of shared power. Therefore, while this kind of power is indeed multiplicative, it also requires an immense amount of humility and perspective that is often quite difficult at first because it challenges our preconceived notions about what it means to be a leader. While many people associate leadership with having control, authority, or a strong influence over a group, being a leader in a group that operates with shared power means helping the group as a whole create more power to act in the world.

Now that we have analyzed what power really is, the question remains, why do we want it? On the most fundamental level, having shared power allows communities to confront, and ultimately change, the restrictive nature of power-over institutions that control access to vital resources within our society. Similar to the claim that you cannot fight

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[73] Ganz 19.

violence with violence, you also cannot effectively confront a system of injustice based on power-over dynamics, with power-over tactics. Rather, it is necessary to confront a society filled with power-over relationships with a strategy of shared power. As the Black Feminist theorist and activist Audre Lorde once said: "The Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's House."[74] In other words, using the tools of oppression, in this case the notion of power-over, will never lead to true liberation. One of the most important goals of CBCO is to create communities which have access to enough power that they will be able lead us to true liberation. That being said, how does developing shared power translate into our ability to confront systemic injustice like poor housing, lack of health care, etc?

First, community organizers argue that as more people learn to operate from a position of shared power, the more people will begin to see how change is possible. By slightly shifting the culture of power within an institution, everyone can see how shifting from a power-over to a power-to culture is possible on a larger level as well. For example, in many synagogues the vision of the synagogue is driven by the rabbis and some influential leaders, board members or donors. However, after engaging more than six-hundred members in a listening campaign, one congregation began to build its vision based on what members were saying in their one-on-one interactions and house meetings. Pretty soon congregants were able to see how their participation in a listening campaign correlated to the synagogue's new vision. For many, this type of change was unheard of in a large, urban synagogue that was set in its ways. Yet, by seeing how their own synagogue culture was able to change, they started to believe that it was also possible to make a difference in the deeply engrained problems of their city as well.

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[74] Lorde 110.

Second, shifting towards a model of shared power enables people to see how they can exercise control and responsibility over some aspect of their life or of their community. In many Reform congregations, the ability to create this dynamic is reason enough to engage in the practice of community organizing. Therefore, in addition to teaching Torah, prayer, Jewish values, etc, the goal of a synagogue engaged in community organizing is to help congregants envision a community in which their stories, interests and needs inform the direction and vision of the congregation. While many of our synagogues have become incredibly successful at providing congregants with services that they need and want (i.e. - religious school access for their children, high holiday tickets, or life cycle events such as weddings, bar mitzvah ceremonies and funerals), most of the time, the vision for communal life comes from a select number of clergy and professional staff. Although there have been many wonderful initiatives aimed at shifting this dynamic, such as Synagogue 3000 or the Re-Imagine Project, the reality is that many synagogues still operate with a "fee for service" mentality. Yet, this mentality deters many congregants from taking on leadership positions because they believe that in the end, the professional staff will determine the direction of the congregation. Therefore, one of the goals of CBCO is to provide an opportunity for congregants to see how their stories, interests, and needs can become the basis for communal vision and action. Rather than encouraging congregants to "join" a synagogue just like they would "join" a health club, the goal in community organizing is to encourage people to take shared responsibility for engaging in and creating the type of community that they want to be a part of. Rather than inviting people to attend pre-established events, programs or speakers, the idea behind this approach is to put lay leaders at the center of the synagogue and to help

them develop shared ideas, power, and responsibility so that they will be encouraged to take a more active and participatory role in their own community.

That is not to say that the clergy and staff must suppress their entire vision in order to build a community that operates with shared power. In fact, sometime synagogue leaders must offer classes or teach about rituals that congregants would never envision because they have not been exposed to Jewish texts, traditions or values in the same way as the professionals staff. At times it is important for the clergy and professional staff of a synagogue to drive its mission in order to push the congregation beyond its own comfort zone. For example, in the past many Reform congregations simply ignored the need to develop a policy around *kashrut*, or Jewish dietary laws, because most congregants did not pay attention to these laws. However, as Reform congregants are becoming more ritually oriented, many congregations are confronting a divide between classical Reformists who believe that *kashrut* is an archaic practice and more modern Reformers who believe that there is still value in these ancient laws. In this case, if it were up to the masses, the congregation would continue to ignore the issue because those who want a *kosher* kitchen are still in the minority. But in one congregation, the clergy has taken it upon itself to develop a *kosher* task force to bring the issue to the forefront of the congregation's agenda. By teaching about ancient *kashrut* laws and modern, eco-*kashrut* ideas, the clergy is taking an active role by pushing the majority of congregants to deal with something that they would have otherwise ignored for a few more years. This is a great example of how a power-over decision (i.e.-clergy and a few key lay leaders decide to re-examine the kashrut policy) can lead to a wonderfully transformative power-to community building process. In many cases, this is exactly how the CBCO model becomes embedded in many congregations. In other words, a

key lay leader or someone on the senior staff may learn about CBCO and they want to implement it in order to create a more relational culture in their synagogue. As long as this decision is not forced upon people unilaterally, I would argue that there is nothing wrong about a process that begins with one or two people at the top of the hierarchy and ends in a more relational and collective process.

On the other hand, I would argue that the goal of CBCO is to help congregations reflect on how much of their vision is staff-driven versus how much their vision is shaped by this notion shared power and shared leadership. In the end, opening up the center of our communities beyond the clergy, professional staff, or the board room, allows congregants to envision a congregation of shared power. Ultimately, having a stake in the decision-making process of one's own community leads people to feel a larger sense of responsibility for the congregation as well. As Larry Dressler argues, "Real change does not come from decree, pressure, permission, or persuasion. It comes from people who are passionately and personally committed to a decision or direction they have helped to shape."[75] Thus, if we want to make our synagogues a place of real change and transformation we must use the tools of community organizing to help build a symbiotic relationship between a staff-driven mission and power-holding approach, and a membership-driven vision and base of power.

The third goal of developing shared power is to create "power in numbers." This notion of power in numbers is a time-tested strategy of many different social and civil rights movements. Whether it is from our own experience or that of history, we know that demanding something from a politician as an individual citizen does not often produce the results that we would like. On the other hand, bringing a large constituency of people together to make the same demand often produces a more positive outcome. This is

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[75] Dressler 3.

evidenced by both grand gestures such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as well as smaller gestures such as a parent's association demanding to be heard during the process of hiring a new principal. In both cases, the ability to mobilize a large amount of people creates a sense of power that cannot be accomplished if one representative from a group makes the demand.

On one hand, the power created by past social movements seems like quite an admirable quality to replicate. On the other hand, community organizing is unique in that it strives to create a similar outcome with a different goal in mind. In other words, organizing is not only meant to produce mass mobilization for a cause, it is also meant to create a true sense of shared power and leadership at every level of the organization. In this model CBCO not only creates the illusion of "power in numbers," but rather a real sense of shared power in which a collective group of leaders can respond dynamically to any important decisions or challenges. The hope is that by cultivating both power and numbers and shared power, people will be able to maximize their ability to think and act collectively, while also being able to confront the power imbalances that exist within their community or within their city. Shared power, therefore, enables people to challenge hierarchical and unjust power, which prohibits people from living in the world as it should be.

In community organizing power is developed through organizing people, money and interests. In other words, as explained in the previous chapter, power comes from building relationships with people in which the line between narrow self-interest and enlightened self-interest is blurred so that people can begin to see how these concepts are inextricably bound to one another. Power is derived not only from sharing and transforming one another's interests, but also from sharing resources in order to create new resources, imagination, skills, strategies and tactics. In short, power comes from collective interests and resources

organized to meet society's demands. It is important to note that many businesses and

politicians already recognize that creating relationships and a shared vision is the key to

political power. This is why business associations and political associations exist. For

example, in Texas, which is a state that is particularly well-known for its successful

lobbyists, the two biggest business associations recently merged to create one, unified

organization called the Texas Association of Business (TAB). According to their website:

> "There is a direct correlation between the size of an organization and the impact that its members have on public policy. When numbers talk, lawmakers listen. Through TAB, thousands of employers have united under the battle cry for a prosperous state economy and the creation of new employment opportunities. Through the generations, this powerful voice has allowed TAB to emerge victorious -- a strong independent voice for Texas business."[76]

Therefore, on a day to day basis, while many of these companies compete with one another

for business, they recognize that by joining forces in one sphere of public life they can create

a political and economic environment in which all businesses will thrive regardless of the

fact that in another sphere they are marketplace competitors. Therefore, while individual

businesses may have different short-term interests they recognize that they can build more

power (which serves their long-term interest) by creating an association or a group with a

shared vision that transcends the limited interest of a single individual or company.

A similar idea is true in community organizing. Beyond solving a housing or an

educational crisis, organizing is about solving a more fundamental problem—the lack of

power among everyday citizens. By joining hand-in-hand with other individuals,

communities can create broad-based power that can challenge, and hopefully reverse, the

abuse of power that takes place when businesses or government agencies coalesce around

their own interest. In other words, organized power can only be challenged by another,

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[76] http://www.txbiz.org/about-tab/history.aspx

deeper institutional power that is shared and created across lines of race, class, religion, and ethnicity. As Gecan asks: "How do you think new and better schools will be built? Because they are desperately needed? Because it's a good idea? Because the honchos at the Board of Education wake up in the morning and decide to do the right thing? Because the city is appalled by the chronic overcrowding? No, new and better schools will be built when you have the power to force them to build them."[77] However, I am wary of Gecan's language here because I do not believe that "forcing them to be built" means employing the same power-over tactics used by those at the top of the social or political hierarchy. As suggested above, I do not believe that we can "dismantle the master's house with the master's tools." Rather, we must work together with those in charge in order to create change in a more relational manner.

A great example of how to harness this kind of shared, multiplicative, relational power is illustrated by a recent effort by a large number of uninsured people in Los Angeles to make the county health system more equitable and efficient. These patients identified two main problems that were quite universal: 1) They had a very difficult time making an appointment to see a doctor and often had to wait on the phone for more than an hour to speak to someone in order to make a appointment; 2) Even when they had made an appointment, they were waiting three to five hours at times to see their doctors. So, with the help of community organizing efforts, these Angelenos banded together to meet with the head of one of the downtown hospitals to talk about this situation. After the meeting, they organized a large public action with more than six hundred concerned citizens to speak about the issues that they were concerned about. At this public action, the head of the county health department pledged his commitment to work with patients to see that their concerns were

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[77] Gecan 37.

addressed. Through this ongoing and developing relationship with county health administrators, a group of committed, uninsured patients turned a power-over situation into a power-to collaborative effort. Rather than buying into a system that takes advantage of their vulnerability, these patients took the notion of power—the ability to achieve a purpose—and set out to make things right for their community.

Ultimately, it is important to note that creating and harnessing public power is not simply an end in and of itself. In other words, community organizing is not about developing power for the sake of having more power. Rather, community organizing seeks to redefine "power" as the ability to act. By developing one's self-interest, story, and relationships organizing can cultivate a community that can articulate its shared values and shared vision for a better future. Ideally, the combination of a shared vision and shared power will enable a congregation to assert the power they need make the world a better place.

As stated above, cultivating shared power is only one of the many goals of synagogue life. My hope, however, is that this chapter highlights the importance of creating Jewish institutions that are comfortable talking about, building and cultivating a sense of shared community power, as well as, political power. Otherwise it will be impossible to develop notion of *g'milut hasadim* that has real efficacy without engaging in the social and political power structures that surround us. Last but not least, while we must engage our congregations in conversations about power, we must also be engaging our congregations in the question: "Power towards what ends?" In other words, we must begin to develop a conversation, based in Jewish texts, about what our ideal world looks like. Whether this means drawing from portions of the Torah such as the holiness code or looking at rabbinic texts that focus on the notion of the World to Come, any conversations about power must be

accompanied by texts about what the Jewish vision of a just future looks like. While the texts

below focus on examining the notion of power from a Jewish lens, it is important to note that

any congregation engaging in the work of CBCO must also seriously examine Jewish texts

that help congregants to formulate a Jewish vision of a just society. In the end however, I

have focused my own research on understanding the notion of "power" from a Jewish

perspective because I believe that it is easier for most modern Jews to imagine the ideal

world, than it is for them to grapple with the concrete, political and civic tools needed to

transform the world as it is into the world as it should be.

"POWER DOES NOT CORRUPT. FEAR CORRUPTS… PERHAPS THE FEAR OF A LOSS OF POWER."78

If synagogues are going to pursue systemic social change, then we must be willing to talk about, build, and cultivate real social and political power. As noted above, this means building shared, or collective, power rather than hierarchical, or coercive, power. This kind of power is cultivated through building relationships, shared vision and collective action. Additionally, since talking about power is still somewhat taboo, there is an intellectual component to building power as well. We must provide people with an opportunity to talk about how power operates in the world around us. This conversation should include several fundamental questions: Is there a sacred way to build power? What can Judaism teach us about the way we use or abuse power? Is there a sacred purpose to building power and are there certain kinds of power that can lead us closer to redemption?

In the Tanakh there are many different words used to convey the notion of power. They include but are not limited to the Hebrew roots: גבר, עוז, כוח, חיל, יכל (*gever, oz, ko'ach, chayyil, yachal*). Koa'ach is the first word for "power" that appears in the *Tanakh.* In various forms it is used 124 times in the Bible.[79] The word *koa'ach* first appears in Genesis 4:12 after Cain kills his brother Abel. In this verse God warns Cain that the earth shall no longer yield its power [כוחה] to because of the sin he committed against his brother. In this example, as well as others, it is clear that *ko'ach* is a characteristic that can be possessed by human beings as well as inanimate objects. More often, however, the root *ko'ach* is used to describe God's

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78 Steinbeck, John. *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication*. New York: Viking Press, 1957: 102.
79 TDOT 122.

power. In some instances this refers to God's ability to provide comfort or security to the Israelites because of His power (e.g. – Is. 40:26). However, more often than not, God's *ko'ach* bears a destructive connotation. For example, this word is often used to illustrate God's ability to destroy other armies in order to protect the Israelites, or to punish the Israelite's for disobeying His commandments (e.g. - Ex. 15:6, Nah. 1:3).

With less frequency the word *ko'ach* is used to describe human power as well. For instance, in Genesis 31:6 the patriarch Jacob tells Rachel and Leah that he has served Laban with all of his *ko'ach*. And yet Laban continues to deceive. In this sense, the word *ko'ach* is equivalent to inner strength or power, which can lead to sense of loyalty or commitment to a particular cause or person. Similarly, in Joshua 14:11, Caleb tells his leader that he still possesses the *ko'ach* to settle the land that Moses once promised to him. Once again, this version of *ko'ach* implies an internal perseverance or strength. Thus, *koa'ch* not only implies physical power or strength, but also spiritual resolve. This is a critical element of power that is often under-emphasized in many organizing settings. Spiritual resolve is extremely important in the CBCO model because it often take months or even years before the group has built enough relational power to create political change. In synagogues filled with short-term action projects it is often difficult to sustain people's interest in a long-term social justice process. Therefore, it is more important than ever to talk about *ko'ach* as a form of spiritual resolve.

On the other hand, the Torah also teaches us that having too much *ko'ach* can be a negative attribute as well. The most obvious example of this can be found in Genesis 49:3-4, when Jacob says: "Reuben, you are my first-born, my might (*koa'chi)* and first fruit of my vigor. Exceeding in rank and exceeding in honor, yet unstable as water, you shall excel no

longer." While this is only one such example, the word *ko'ach* is often used to describe an

unhealthy use of power within the Tanakh. It appears as if this word does not acquire an

overly positive tone until the post-biblical era.

Since the biblical usage of ko'ach is often negative, I would suggest that the best

Hebrew word to describe the notion of power within the context of community organizing is

the word *gevurah*. The root *g.v.r.* appears in many Semitic languages including the Akkadian

word *gaparu* or *gapru*. Scholars suggest that this word, like its Hebrew equivalent, means

"power or strength." However, much more often it simply means "to do or to make."[80] This

is an astonishing parallel because many organizers argue that power is simply "the ability to

do, make or act." Therefore it is possible that this modern organizing idiom also has its

foundation in our Biblical tradition.

Similar to the word *ko'ach*, the Bible uses the word *gevurah* to describe both human

beings as well as God in both a positive and negative way. For instance, in many of the

historical books the word *gevurah* is used to describe military might or strength and it

implies a more destructive quality (i.e.- Jud. 8:21, 1 Kings 22:46). However, the word

gevurah is used much more often as a positive attribute. Take for instance Deuteronomy 3:24

or Judges 5:31 in which God's *gevurah* is depicted as redemptive quality.

Furthermore, in the wisdom literature the word *gevurah* no longer signifies only

physical strength, but also spiritual and intellectual strength.[81] For example, in the Book of

Proverbs, the notion of "wisdom" becomes personified almost like a mythical biblical

character that cries out and urges the Israelites to pursue knowledge. The Rabbis later suggest

the notion of "wisdom" is a place holder for the study of Torah. Regardless, however, in

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[80] TDOT 367.
[81] TDOT 372.

Proverbs chapter 8 the author suggests that wisdom leads to *gevurah*. Take for example

Proverbs 8:14 which states: "אני בינה לי גבורה [*ani binah li gevurah;* I am understanding

[and] *gevurah* is mine]." In other words, all of our power has its root in wisdom.

Furthermore, as the Torah evolves, wisdom becomes even more important than power, as it

says in Ecclesiastes 9:16: "טובה חכמה מגבורה [*tovah chochmah m'gevurah*; Wisdom is

better than gevurah]." Therefore, it is safe to say that while earlier occurrences of the word

gevurah symbolized primarily physical prowess, the word takes on another layer of meaning

in the wisdom literature of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job.

This is significant because in most community organizing campaigns congregants

spend a lot of time in training—learning, reading and reflecting—before they may participate

in an action that resembles our normative understanding of political or communal power. By

emphasizing the fact that wisdom is a form of, or even the basis of, *gevurah*, it may be

possible to cultivate the kind of spiritual patience and political know-how that it takes to run

a truly successful community organizing campaign. In other words, by connecting power and

wisdom, we may be able to illustrate how power is, in fact, a very methodical intellectual and

spiritual endeavor. Rather than simply creating a giant street protest to display the

congregation's collective power, this interpretation of *gevurah* means that real power comes

with true knowledge, which can only be achieved through study and research. This parallels a

commitment within community organizing to spend a considerable amount of time

researching and learning how to create group strategy and long-term power.

Last but not least, the word *gevurah* is often connected to the notion of righteousness

or justice. For example, in Micah 3:8 the prophet continues to castigate the Israelites for their

disobedience to God. But then Micah announces that he has been imbued with God's

gevurah and *ko'ach* in order to bring justice and righteousness back into the world. Perhaps an even more illustrative example can be found in Psalm 89:14-15:

יד לְךָ זְרוֹעַ עִם-גְּבוּרָה תָּעֹז יָדְךָ תָּרוּם יְמִינֶךָ.	**14** Yours is an arm endowed with might; your hand is strong; Your right hand exalted.
טו צֶדֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט מְכוֹן כִּסְאֶךָ ; חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת, יְקַדְּמוּ פָנֶיךָ.	**15** Righteousness and justice are the base of Your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before You.

In these verses, God's "arm" is an anthropomorphic metaphor for God's entire being, which is endowed with *gevurah*. In an example of the Bible's poetic literary style, God's *gevurah* parallels God's throne of righteousness and justice. Thus, this text implies that there is a strong connection between power and justice.

On one hand, these verses teach us that the pursuit of *gevurah* and *ko'ach* may lead to a more righteous world. On the other hand, they also teach us that righteous power can only be pursued in concert with God's own *gevurah* and *ko'ach*. Therefore, as Borowitz often suggests, we can no longer afford to believe that human beings have ultimate power over the world. If we are going to pursue true justice and ultimate redemption we need to believe in a God who works with us on behalf of this kind of transformation.

Ultimately I would argue that true redemption requires a confluence of *ko'ach* and *gevurah* that stems from both human action and divine will. In order to cultivate an even broader notion of Jewish power we must continue to examine the different root words mentioned above. For now, however, I would argue that true power comes from recognizing that *ko'ach* and *gevurah* are multi-faceted concepts. They symbolize both the internal need for patience, perseverance and wisdom, as well as the external need for physical prowess and "power in numbers." Cultivating power is neither a purely internal or external effort. It is the

combination of these processes that make an individual, or a community, successful at building power and ultimately redemption. Thus, by presenting the idea of power vis-à-vis *gevurah* and *ko'ach*, I believe that we can provide congregants with a more subtle, nuanced and inspirational understanding of the way power operates within the Jewish tradition. My hope is that the following texts will also add to our understanding of power from a Jewish lens.

BIBLICAL TEXT

Numbers 27:1-7

א וַתִּקְרַבְנָה בְּנוֹת צְלָפְחָד, בֶּן-חֵפֶר בֶּן-גִּלְעָד בֶּן-מָכִיר בֶּן-מְנַשֶּׁה, לְמִשְׁפְּחֹת, מְנַשֶּׁה בֶן-יוֹסֵף ; וְאֵלֶּה, שְׁמוֹת בְּנֹתָיו--מַחְלָה נֹעָה, וְחָגְלָה וּמִלְכָּה וְתִרְצָה.

1 The daughters of Zelophehad, of Manassite family—son of Hepher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, son of Joseph—came forward. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

ב וַתַּעֲמֹדְנָה לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה, וְלִפְנֵי אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן, וְלִפְנֵי הַנְּשִׂיאִם, וְכָל-הָעֵדָה--פֶּתַח אֹהֶל-מוֹעֵד, לֵאמֹר.

2 They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they said:

ג אָבִינוּ, מֵת בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְהוּא לֹא-הָיָה בְּתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַנּוֹעָדִים עַל-יְהוָה, בַּעֲדַת-קֹרַח : כִּי-בְחֶטְאוֹ מֵת, וּבָנִים לֹא-הָיוּ לוֹ.

3 'Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korach's faction, which banded together against the LORD, but died for his own sin; and he has left no sons.

ד לָמָּה יִגָּרַע שֵׁם-אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ, כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֵּן ; תְּנָה-לָּנוּ אֲחֻזָּה, בְּתוֹךְ אֲחֵי אָבִינוּ.

4 Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!'

ה וַיַּקְרֵב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטָן, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה.

5 Moses brought their cause before the LORD.

ו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר.

6 And the LORD said to Moses:

ז 7 כֵּן, בְּנוֹת צְלָפְחָד דֹּבְרֹת--נָתֹן תִּתֵּן לָהֶם אֲחֻזַּת נַחֲלָה, בְּתוֹךְ אֲחֵי אֲבִיהֶם; וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ אֶת-נַחֲלַת אֲבִיהֶן, לָהֶן. 'The plea of the daughters of Zelophehad is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen; transfer their father's share to them.'

- *In what ways do you think the daughter's of Zelophehad display "power" in this text?*
- *Do you see any elements of ko'ach or gevurah in this passage, or do you see any examples of relational power, power in numbers, etc?*
- *Can this text teach us anything about building power within the Jewish community or within the CBCO model?*

A Closer Look:

The passage above is known colloquially as the "Daughters of Zelophehad." As the texts suggests, the daughter's father—Zelophehad—dies while the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness without leaving any male heirs. The problem, therefore, is that the law revealed earlier at Mt. Sinai does not allow women to inherit their father's property. This text begins when the daughters approach Moses in order to ask him to reconsider the fairness of this law.

While this is quite a short passage, I believe that this incident has a lot to teach us about the notion of power within a Biblical framework. First, having power does not always mean displaying it in an overt or overly dramatic way. Take for instance the first line of this text in which the daughters approach Moses to make their claim. The Hebrew word here is from the k.r.v., which means "to draw near" or to "sacrifice." These two concepts are connected because in the Ancient Near East offering a sacrifice was one way to "draw near" to God. Thus, rather than standing up to Moses or confronting him with an unnecessary sense of power or urgency, the Torah teaches us that the women approached Moses with a sense of humility and honor. Interestingly, this is the same sense of gravitas used to describe how Moses approaches God, as it says: "Moses brought their case before Adonai," [ויקר משה...לפני ה'] (Num. 27:5).

Second, in verse two we learn that the daughters intentionally assembled the entire community in order to make their claim. While it would have been sufficient for them to bring their case before Moses, the Torah teaches us that the daughters assembled in front of the entire community, including all of its most respected leaders. Unlike the example of Boaz in the Book of Ruth, it is difficult know whether or not the women actively pursued this audience or if they community gathered on its own volition. Regardless, however, according to the rabbinic principle that there are no superfluous words in the Torah (*ain lashon yeter*), I would argue that it is significant that the daughters present their case in an "action" that is as

public as possible. This teaches us that power is built through an extremely public display of action or will.

Third, it is interesting to note that the daughters are always introduced as a group known as the "Daughters of Zelophehad," as well as by their individual names. This indicates that there is a sense of interdependency between their collective identity and their individual abilities and interests. As the Rabbis note in Sifre 133, the daughters' names are mentioned in a different order in Numbers 27 compared to Numbers 36. The Rabbis suggest that this is because they each had a unique talent to offer to the group. No one woman was valued more than any of the others. This commitment to shared leadership and shared responsibility is a key element to building shared power.

Fourth, the daughters tell a compelling story about their shared past with the Israelites and they use strategic language to express their self-interest. For example, the first thing the daughters do is to tell a story. They tell the story about how their father was innocent because he was not associated with Korach's rebellion. Whereas before this the daughters may have been ostracized by the community, this single line story is meant to vindicate their father's honor, as well as create a closer sense of shared history with the rest of the Israelite people.

The daughters also use very strategic language to make their claim about inheriting their father's property. Rather than appealing to their need for financial security or basic human rights they appeal to the greater self-interest and values of the community at large. As biblical scholar Tamar Eskenazi suggests, "Their choice of language is astute. They use the language of loyalty to the family. By emphasizing the desire to perpetuate their father's name they speak to a timely communal and familial concern in an era of transitions."[82] This text illustrates that the daughters knew, consciously or unconsciously, that building power requires appealing to the interests and motives of the power-brokers in the community.

While their desire to honor their father's name may have been authentic, they still chose this particular story and emphasis because they knew that getting what they wanted depended on illustrating how their request benefited the entire community. In the end, this text teaches us a fundamental organizing principle about power: Sometimes getting what you want means appealing to the needs and values of those who are in charge. Then, it is important to present a claim in a way that is mutually beneficial to the power-holder and the power-seeker.

In the end I would argue that the daughters not only spoke "justly," they also succeeded in building their own power by embodying their request in the community's desire for greater continuity in a time of great dislocation. One could argue that this power-building exercise worked because in the next line daughters make a highly assertive statement that they should be given the land. Scholars note that the Hebrew – *tanah lanu* ("give us") – is strong and unapologetic. This is notable because when creating communal power it is important to know when to be humble or deferential (i.e. - verse 1) and when to be confident

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[82] WTC 972.

or assertive. In the end, the daughters' strategic thinking and collective approach earns them more than they bargained for. For example, they only requested an *ahuzah*, or a temporary possession of the land for their own use. However, Moses grants them a long-term inheritance of the land, or a *nachalah*, which they can bequeath to their children one. While this may appear to be a minor linguistic detail, this sets a revolutionary precedence for all Israelite women.

In the end, this passage represents a monumental moment because it is the first and only time that the Bible records the process by which a new law was *created* by the Israelite people. In other words, the Daughters of Zelophehad represent a success story about "democracy in action." Granted, the story does not depict a true democratic movement because Moses appeals to God to decide the law, which means that the Israelites were working with a theocratic, as well as democratic system. That being said, this story conveys the power that can be established through collective action, a large public action, and strategic language.

This story is extremely motivational because it is about a group of disenfranchised women who succeed in changing the public narrative and practice of their time. Whereas their male counterparts continually complained throughout the Book of Numbers, this story provides us with a compelling model for how to make things right, rather than simply complaining about everything that is wrong. Ultimately, the Daughters of Zelophehad present us with an inspirational story of righteous indignation that leads to fundamental social change.

Yalkut Shimoni 733

 "And they stood before Moses" (Num. 27:2). Each of the five daughters presented one of the five pleas. The first said, "Our father died in the wilderness" (Num. 27:3). The second said," (He was not one of Korach's faction who banded against the Lord" (ibid). The third said: "But he died of his own sin" (ibid). The fourth said: "He had no sons" (ibid). The fifth said: "Why should or father's name lost to his family (Num. 27:4)."[83]

- o *In the biblical account of this narrative we are not told which daughter presents her argument to Moses. In your opinion, why would the Rabbis suggest that each woman made one statement to Moses?*
- o *What could the Rabbis' interpretation teach us about the notion of public or civic power?*

Numbers Rabbah 12:10

"THEN THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD DREW NEAR (Num. 27:1). In that generation the women built up the fences which the men broke down. Thus you find that Aaron told them: 'Break off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives,' (Ex. 32:2). But the women protested against their husbands; as is proved by the fact that it says: 'And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears,' (Ex. 32:3).
But the women did not participate with them in making the calf. It was the same in the case of the spies, who uttered an evil report: 'And the men... when they returned, made all of the congregation to murmur against him,' (Num. 14:36). The decree [not to enter the Land] was issued against this congregation because they had said: 'We are not able to go up,' (Num. 8:31). The women, however, were not with them in their counsel, as may be inferred from the fact that it is written in an earlier passage of our section, 'For the Lord had said of them: 'They shall surely die in the wilderness. And there was no man left of them except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh (Num. 26:65). Thus the text speaks of a man but not of a woman. This was because the men had been unwilling to enter the Land. The women, however, drew near to ask for an inheritance in the Land. Consequently the present section was written down next to that dealing with the death of the generation of the wilderness, for it was there that the men broke down the fences and the women built them up."

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[83] Bialik 98.

ותקרבנה בנות צלפחד אותו הדור היו הנשים גודרות מה שאנשים פורצים
שכן את מוצא שאמר להן אהרן (שמות לב) פרקו נזמי הזהב אשר באנזי
נשיכם ולא רצו הנשים ומיחו בבעליהן שנאמר ויתפרקו כל העם את נזמי
הזהב וגו׳ והנשים לא נשתתפו עמהן במעשה העגל וכן במרגלים שהוציאו
דבה (במדבר יד) וישובו וילינו עליו את כל העדה ועליהם נגזרה גזירה
שאמרו לא נוכל לעלות אבל הנשים לא היו עמהם בעצה שכתוב למעלה מן
הפרשה (שם כו) כי אמר ה׳ להם מות ימותו במדבר ולא נותר מהם איש כי
אם כלב בן יפונה איש ולא אשה על מה שלא רצו ליכנס לארץ אבל הנשים
קרבו לבקש נחלה בארץ לכך נכתבה פרשה זו סמוך למיתת דור המדבר
שמשם פרצו האנשים וגדרו הנשים

- o *What can this text teach about how the Rabbis understood the daughters' long term vision or mission?*
- o *What can this text teach us about the connection between collective action and/or resistance, and our long-term ability to make change and build public power?*

A Closer Look:

Through a Rabbinic lens, I believe that these two texts have a lot to teach us about the connection between collective action and public power. For example, in the Yalkhut Shimoni, , the Sages teach each daughter presented one aspect of their argument to Moses. Each individual woman made one public statement on behalf of the entire group. Not only does this increase the public drama of this movement, it also supports the notion that building shared power means creating opportunities for collective action and shared responsibility. Rather than having one spokesperson advocate on behalf of everyone, the Sages imply that it is more effective for all of the daughters to appeal to Moses one by one. This conveys not only a sense of solidarity, but also of shared responsibility and leadership. As we learn in the field of organizing this is one way to create a sense of shared power. While many congregants may feel comfortable taking a more 'behind the scenes' leadership role, I believe this text teaches us that ultimately we must encourage people to take a more public role if we are going to attain real and lasting power in the political or communal arena.

The second text from *Numbers Rabbah* 12:10 focuses on *why* the Daughters attained their victory, rather than how they attained it. As the *midrash* suggests, the women who left Egypt and wandered through the desert were tremendously righteous because they did not succumb to the same temptations as their male counterparts. From a theological standpoint one might argue that the Daughters of Zelophehad were rewarded for their long-term obedience to God. But this text also suggests that the daughters were a part of a larger movement of women who banded together to act in a righteous manner despite all of the surrounding temptations of their nomadic lifestyle. In other words, the daughters are rewarded because *all* of the women *(ha'nashim lo nishtatfu)* participated in a form of collective action.

In the end, these *midrashim* suggest that God rewarded the Daughters of Zelophehad for several reasons. The biblical text simply explains that God changed the inheritance laws because the daughters' spoke "justly." In other words, God was simply doing the right thing. However, the Rabbinic interpretations suggest that the daughters actively earned their victory through hard work and determination. They acted out of a deep-seated commitment to collective resistance, strategic action and shared responsibility. It is through these three vehicles that the Daughters of Zelophehad serve as a wonderful example of how to create a real sense of shared power and political strength.

Zohar II, 175b

"It is taught: Rabbi Simeon said: "And the middle bar in the midst of the boards, which shall pass through from end to end," (Ex. 26:28)—this is Jacob, the perfect, holy one, as we have explained, since it is written, "Jacob was a complete man (*ish tam*) dwelling in tents," (Gen. 25:27). It is not written "dwelling in a tent," but rather "dwelling in tents," that is two [i.e.- *hesed* and *gevurah*], for he grasped both one and the other. For we have learned, what does ish tam mean? As it is translated [in Aramaic], it means complete, complete in everything, complete on both sides, that of the Atika Kadish and that of the Ze'ier Anpin, the complete of the upper realm of *hesed* and *gevurah*, complete one and the other….Jacob completes both sides. The patriarchs are the sum of all, and Jacob is the sum of the patriarchs."

שנוי אמר רבי שמעון: 'והבריח התיכון בתוך הקרשין מבריח מן הקצה אל
הקצה' זה הוא יעקב, הקדוש, השלם כמו שייושבנו שכתוב: 'ויעקב איש תם
יושב אהלים.' יושב אוהל לא כתוב אלא יושב אהלים, שנים, שהוא אוחז בזה
ואוחז בזה, אף כאן כתוב: 'והבריח התיכון בתוך הקרשים מבריח מן הקצה
אל הקצה' שאוחז בזה אוחז בזה. ששנינו: מה איש תם? כתרגומו: שלים,
שלם בכל, שלם לשני צדדים, לעתיקה קדישה ולזעיר אנפין, שלם לחסד
עליון ולגבורה עליונה, ומשלים לזה ולזה....יעקב משלים לשני צדדים.
האבות הם כלל הכל ויעקב כלל האבות.

A Closer Look:

     In this complex passage, the Zohar teaches us that patriarchs embody different aspects of the *sephirot*. On the most basic level the *sephirot* is a kabalistic representation of God's different attributes or emanations. Additionally, however, the *sephirot* can also be used to talk about how human beings relate to the world as well. According to Adin Steinsaltz, each human soul contains a unique combination and permutation of characteristics from the *sephirot*. As he states: "No soul belongs only to one *Sefirah*, even though in every soul there is a tendency to manifest more of one *Sefirah* than of others."[84]

     Thus, the text above illustrates how the three patriarchs had three different dominant attributes from the *sephirot*. As the text implies, Abraham represents *hesed* while Isaac represents *gevurah*. On a very simplistic level, *hesed* represents the notion of boundless love or mercy, while *gevurah* represents the notion of strength, power or discipline.

     Then the Zohar teaches that Jacob represents the balance, or *tiferet*, between these two extremes. In short form, Jacob represents the balance between love and power. This is monumentally important because as the namesake of the Israelite people, Jacob becomes the archetype for how every Israelite, and by extension every modern Jews, should behave. Therefore, an ideal person, or an ideal nation, should be able to balance the attribute the power and love into one mutually constitutive relationship known as *tiferet*.

     As mentioned above, in the world of community organizing it is often difficult for people to accept that power can be a good thing because it is often associated with greed or corruption. While Jewish institutions are quite comfortable teaching *hesed* as a Jewish value, we rarely encounter Jewish educators speaking about power as a Jewish value. But in order

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[84] Steinsatlz 53.

to attain the attribute of *tiferet*, as encouraged by our namesake Jacob/Israel, we must become more comfortable talking about power as a Jewish value as well.

The ultimate goal is to teach that balancing between love *and* power is a true Jewish value. In many ways I would argue that this is a Jewish version of Martin Luther King's famous statement that, "power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."[85]

In the end, until we are able to talk about power from a Jewish lens, I believe we are doing a disservice to our tradition. So whether we talk about power within the context of *gevurah*, *ko'ach*, etc, we must talk about power nonetheless. By doing so in a more explicit and public manner I believe it is possible to cultivate a sense of individual and communal *tiferet*.

MODERN TEXTS

Martin Buber

"A great historian [Jacob Burckhardt] has asserted that power is evil. But this is not so. Power is intrinsically guiltless; it is the precondition for the actions of man. The problematic element is the will-to-power, greedy to seize and establish power, and not the effect of a power whose development was internal. A will-to-power, less concerned with being powerful than being "more powerful than," becomes destructive. Not power, but 'power hysteria' is evil.

In the life of human beings, both as individuals and in groups, self assertion can be genuine as well as false, legitimate as well as illegitimate. This requires constant demarcation of one's own right from the rights of others, and such demarcation cannot be made according to the rules valid once and for all. Only the secret of hourly acting with a continually respected sense of responsibility holds the rules for such demarcations. This applies to the attitude of the individual to his own life and to the nation he is a member of."[86]

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[85] King, *Where*.
[86] Buber, *A Land* 50.

        o   *How does Buber's notion of power compare or contrast to the ideas about power presented above?*

        o   *What do you think Buber meant when he said demarcation between one's self-interest and another person's self-interest can only be determined by "acting with a continually respected sense of responsibility." If you agree, how could you cultivate a sense of continual responsibility?*

Hannah Arendt

"Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and creation new realities."[87]

        o   *In what ways does Arendt add a unique element to our understanding power from a Jewish lens?*

        o   *In what ways does Arendt's quote mirror some of the ideas mentioned above?*

        o   *In what ways may Arendt's notion of power be able to help us create "new realities"?*

Jonathan Sacks

"The difference between politics and economics on one hand, and covenantal relationships on the other, can be seen by a simple arithmetic thought experiment. If I have total power and then share it with nine others, I am left with only a tenth of what I had to begin with. If I have a thousand pounds and share it with nine others, again I am left with a tenth of what I had. But if I share with nine others, not power or wealth but *friendship* or *kindness* or *influence* or *love*, I have not less, but more. These 'spiritual goods' are unique in that the more we share, the more we have. The great Jewish institutions—the home, the synagogue, the community and the school—are all like this. They are environments in which we are bound to one another not by transactions of power or wealth but by *hesed*, covenant love. These are places where we learn to intimate grammar of reciprocity, the delicate choreography of ethical intelligence, the knowledge that love given is not given in vain, and that by sharing our vulnerabilities we discover strength."[88]

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[87] Arendt 200.
[88] Sacks, *Fractured World* 54.

- *Sacks argues that there is a marked difference between power and wealth on the one hand and friendship, kindles, influence and love on the other hand. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?*
    - *Have you ever experienced the difference between these two categories in your own life? If so, how?*
- *Under what circumstances, if any, would it be okay to be bound by "power or wealth"? Or do you believe, as Sacks suggests, that synagogues should be bound by hesed and the grammar of reciprocity?*
- *Do you agree or disagree with the idea that by "sharing our vulnerabilities we discover strength"?*
    - *Can you describe a time in your life when sharing your vulnerability led to more power or strength?*
    - *How might this notion be employed in the work of CBCO?*

CHAPTER EIGHT: ACTION

As I have established, community organizing can help deepen a congregation's commitment to shared leadership, shared power and shared vision. That ability, in and of itself, has an immense ability to transform the synagogue from a top-down bureaucracy into a congregation in which members help to determine the purpose and goals of their own community. Developing this shared power is one of the most important aspects of community organizing. However, if the goal of the community is to change a political or social situation, having power is essentially meaningless unless it is coupled with action.

An action is defined as any type of gathering in which more than one individual engages a person with power on a specific issue within the community. For an action to be worthwhile, the power-holders must either have direct responsibility over the issue, or they must be able to connect the group to other power-holders who have more control over the issue. Expanding on this term, Chambers defines an action as "public meeting of leaders of a broad-based organization with political, business, or other officials for the purpose of being recognized and getting them to act on a specific proposal put forward by the organization."[89]

This term is defined in an intentionally broad manner because it represents many different kinds of encounters. First of all, there are two different kinds of actions. There are collaborative actions and there are claims-making actions. A collaborative action is meant to broaden and deepen relationships among community members within the congregation or within the broad-based organization as whole. The goal of a collaborative action is twofold. First, it is meant to deepen and broaden the network of people involved in the organizing

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[89] Chambers 80.

effort and to establish more meaningful relationships between these people. Second, as discussed in detail in the previous chapters, collaborative actions are meant to build more shared power. This shared power ultimately enables people to develop deep and meaningful relationships that will lead to new ideas, new interests, new excitement and a new commitment to work with one another. Thus, a collaborative action could involve going to an informational meeting together, asking the group to fill out a pledge card after a sermon or a meeting, or inviting a new person to partake in a one to one or a house meeting.[90] Therefore, while we technically invite people to a one-on-one meeting or a house meeting, we are actually engaging in mini-collaborative actions throughout the entire cycle of organizing. As stated, the goal of these collaborative actions is to deepen the network of people involved with one another so that new energy, ideas and resources can be transformed into shared power. Ganz suggests that all good organizing must begin with collaborative action before it can proceed to any type of claims-making action.[91]

The goal of a claims-making action is to provoke a response from an individual, a group of people, or an institution, which holds power over an issue that the group has decided to address. According to Ganz, there are two kinds of ways to make a claim. The first is through persuasion and the second is through disruption. An economic boycott is a great example of a claims-making endeavor that is employed vis-à-vis disruption. Many Americans are familiar with the tactic of disruption because it is used most often by a wide array of social movements and organizations.

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[90] Ganz 75.
[91] Ganz 79.

On the other hand, another way to make a claim is through persuasion. While many people are familiar with the term "moral persuasion," a term that became famous during the Abolitionist movement, I would argue that community organizing operates with a slightly different kind of persuasion. While moral persuasion is certainly employed in faith-based community organizing, I would argue that organizing employs a type of "relational persuasion." This type of persuasion involves developing relationships with people in power, and then displaying the group's knowledge and know-how in order to persuade the power-holder to act within the community's interest.

Additionally, it is important to note that actions can be collaborative and claims-making endeavors at the same time. For example, a synagogue could create a small delegation of members to meet with a politician or civic leader in order to ask him or her to change a public policy that is negatively affecting the community. This type of action is collaborative because it requires team work, vision, communication, and courage among the community members involved. In essence, it will help created a small team of leaders with a shared vision and a shared experience specific to this small action.

Developing a small delegation of leaders to meet with a public official can also be a claims-making endeavor. For example, the leaders of a group in the beginning stages of a campaign may want to meet with a power-broker, or a potential ally, within the community in order to learn about the issue at hand. The goal of this type of meeting, which is known as a "research action," is threefold. First, as the name implies, the goal of a research action is to gather information about the issue at hand. By opening the lines of communication between the delegates and the power-broker it is possible to learn more about the complexity of the issue. The idea is to ask specific questions that will elucidate the issue so that the group can

begin to craft a strategy for social change. Some good questions for a research action include, but are not limited to: How does the bill or initiative work? Who will benefit from it? Do you think that anyone will be hurt by the bill or initiative? What motivated you to create such a bill? What is your timeline for trying to pass the bill?

While it is likely that the group can research the answers to some of these questions online, the goal of a research action goes beyond simply gathering information. The second goal of a research action is to establish a face-to-face connection with the person so the group can associate with them in a relational way. Rather than seeing power-holders as enemies, it is important to understand their values, interests, and stories as well. Ideally the relationship with the power-broker is more than a means to an end. Rather, it is an opportunity to promote a relational approach in an environment that is usually very hierarchical. While there are moments in which this relationship could become more contentious (i.e.- see chapter on action), the overall goal is establish a deep and meaningful relationship with the power-holder as well.

The third objective of a research action is to credential the organization within the community at large. When a group of committed lay leaders meets with the mayor or a local politician, the group demonstrates that their constituency cares about a particular issue and that they are willing to do whatever it takes to work on it. Even when the research action does not take place with a publically elected official or someone who makes the final decision about an issue, these actions are still critical because they establish the group's public presence. Also, the power-holder may become an ally and work together with the group on an issue. Alternatively, if that person becomes part of the opposition, it is important to have an open and honest dialogue with them in a non-confrontational setting. In the end, a

successful delegation would leave this mini-action knowing more about the values, ideals, and vision of the person in charge. Likewise, the power-holders should know more about the group's vision, purpose, and purview in the civic arena.

Further along in the organizing cycle, a small delegation may meet with public officials or power-brokers in the community in order to request a certain change in policy, or attitude, towards a particular situation. This is what is known as an "ask." An obvious example of an "ask," would be requesting that a public official vote in favor or against a certain bill. However, it is important to note that an "ask" is not simply a request or a favor. Rather, in a small delegation such as this the team would have a few people talk about how the bill will help or hurt their lives, and the lives of their community members. The key is to frame the issue so that the power-holder can see why it is in his or her interest to vote a certain way. That being said, there is no magic formula for this kind of interaction. Rather, it takes a lot of practice and experience, and even then, it does not always work out to the benefit of the delegation

In the beginning stages of organizing, when a group may not have enough power to make an "ask," it is still possible for the group to request that the power-broker change his or her position on an issue. One way to do this is by asking the power-holder to work together with the broad base to make change together. For example, in Los Angeles a group of leaders within one broad-based organization have started to work principals throughout the district in order to work together on creating a collective vision for public education in the city. Rather than asking them to change something, the leaders asked the principals to work with them in a more relational way. Although it is easy for principals to be protective of their resources in this difficult economy, this process has encouraged them to explore how this type of

relational collaboration may increase their overall power and effectiveness in the school district. This is one example of how an "ask" may be more about shifting one's attitude than a specific policy. That being said, as the relationship between the broad-based organization and the power-broker develops over time, an "ask" may become more specific, and at times, more confrontational.

On a larger scale, a public action could also entail gathering together politicians, hundreds of members and allies for a public assembly or a rally. It could also entail mobilizing people to act on a certain ballot initiative, electoral vote, or budget issue. The difference between simply mobilizing people and community organizing is threefold. First, as discussed in the previous chapters, community organizing involves actions that are built into a larger institutional context where people have already developed relationships with one another and they have worked to build sense of shared power and vision.

Second, rather than simply sending people out to canvas an area regarding a specific issue, community organizing requires that leaders are adequately trained beforehand, and that they are provided with an opportunity to reflect on their experience so they can grow as a leader, and as a actor, within the public arena. The practice of reflection will be addressed in more detail in the following chapter.

The third goal of communal action is to develop new leaders and increase the strength of the institution or the broad-base as a whole. In other words, large actions are meant to both create new leaders and deepen the knowledge and skills of already established leaders because large-scale actions take an immense amount of teamwork, skill, strategy, patience, and shared power. By developing new leaders and strengthening older leaders the institution itself becomes stronger, more knowledgeable, and more dynamic. Thus, in community

organizing the goal of an action in which large scale mobilization takes place is not only to produce certain political outcomes, but also to develop the capacity of your own own institution. The congregation's capacity is enlivened by the development of new or more skilled leaders, more relationships that built across different segments of the community, and an increased desire for public action.

Last but not least, it is important to note that one of the most effective ways to create a public action is by framing it as a drama. As we know from literature, movies, and television, a good drama builds up momentum over time and it contains a narrative arc or crescendo. Similar to good storytelling, a public drama should have a beginning, middle and an ending with a clear resolution. Whether it is a small delegation or a large assembly, most actions within the world of community organizing begin with individual stories so that the public becomes engaged with a personal narrative, which is then built upon to create a communal narrative around the issue. The "public" at a large action such as this consists of a large number of people from the broad base, a wide array of power-brokers, and the media.

Just as a good drama has protagonists that people really care about, a good action must illustrate how the issue affects individual people and their lives rather than an anonymous mass of people. Similarly, on the other side of the equation, it is important to have specific power-holders to hold accountable during a public action. As Chambers states: "The drama of an action requires that a person—not a nameless, faceless bureaucracy like "city hall" or the "administration" be up on the public hot seat, to be held accountable and urged to make a commitment to change something."[92] That being said, organizing is not meant to personally demonize a power-broker. Rather, a power-broker is put on the hot seat

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[92] Chambers 84.

for their public stance on an issue; not because the group likes or dislikes something about that person's private life or personality.

That being said, community organizers teach us that there is no such thing as *permanent* ally or *permanent* enemy. As Alinksy suggests, organizers must be "well-integrated schizoids" who know how to polarize people into action and then to depolarize once the campaign is over, even if it means winning less than one expected.[93] Thus, although it is important to polarize a certain situation, person, or institution for the sake of winning a particular campaign, the goal is to establish enough of a relationship with the power-holder so that the issue can be depersonalized or depolarized after the action. Specifically, a tense situation with a public action can be depolarized by applause, a hand-shake, or verbal recognition of what the power-holder has pledged to do for the community.

Having analyzed different kinds of actions, the question remains: What is the purpose of a public action? First and foremost, the goal of any type of action is to create a "re-action." In fact, in community organizing we talk about "actions" versus "meetings" because all actions have some kind of reaction. In our daily lives or jobs, most meetings consist of one person "uploading" or "downloading" information to another person. Or, for instance, a boss will assign a task or project to another person in the room. Far less often, we participate in meetings which value individual creativity and the development of a shared vision. However, even these meetings often end with one person who is in charge of making sure the "shared vision" is enacted in the way that he or she sees fit. In contrast, organizing is not about exchanging information or tasks. Rather, an action is built upon the desire to create many different types of reactions—depending on the different constituencies within the room.

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[93] Ganz 86.

First, the goal of a public action is to demonstrate that the CBCO group represents a wide array of community members that has a shared vision for change. In other words, one of the goals of a public action is to create recognition and respect for the dynamic and powerful nature of the broad-base. This kind of recognition is demonstrated by the power-holder when he or she says something, publically or privately, which acknowledges the group's ability to turn out hundreds of constituents to a public assembly and to articulate a clear goal or vision for the future.

The second goal of a public action is to "relationally persuade" the target to change his or her public stance on an issue. By asking the power-holder a pivotal question in front of a room full of constituents, it is difficult to avoid the issue at hand. In the long-run, therefore, it is possible to hold that person accountable for what they have committed to, or not committed to, because they have staked their claim in front of a room full of hundreds of people. I would argue that this is a good example of "relational persusion." For example, rather than persuading a power-holder to do something by picketing their office, organizing is unique because you leverage your relationship with that person in order to hold them accountable to the community at large. This is the benefit of creating an identifiable community group with key leaders rather than an amorphous movement making certain demands on an abstract entity.

The third reaction that should come out of a public action is that the target will develop a deeper understanding of what the community needs and wants. While this reaction may not take place within the assembly itself, it is possible to gauge the power-broker's understanding of the group in a follow-up conversation or from a sound-bite found in the news or media following the event. Last but not least, if a public official is visibly flustered,

angry, or emotional, this can be seen as a partial victory. As examined above, strong emotional reactions often lead people to change their behavior in some way.

Just as a public action should affect the power-broker, an effective assembly should also affect the members and allies of the broad-base as well. First, the members and allies of the broad-base should leave the action with new-found skills. Perhaps they will be better at telling their story in front of a large audience or enacting a public drama. Other skills include being able to facilitate a large meeting, or how to participate in public drama as audience member member who knows how to use applause, silence, or probing questions to advance the agenda. Another important element that should come out of a public action is the group's ability to reaffirm, or adjust, their political strategy. After presenting their cause and hearing the power-holder's reaction, the group should be able to assess whether or not they reached their goal. Public actions are one of the most important tools for understanding whether or not a strategy is working. Thus, a public action is not only meant to produce a reaction from the power-holder, but also from the community itself.

Furthermore, as discussed in previous chapters, the stories used at the action should produce a new-found sense of hope and energy. Not only should the stories told at the action create a sense of pride or renewed purpose, but the action should be the basis of a new story. Once the action is over, the community can use their political work to add on to their story. For example, after speaking with one another, many parents in one Los Angeles synagogue realized that they were deeply concerned about the state of public education in their city. After a couple years of meeting with one another, creating relationships, and developing a political strategy, they recruited approximately 700 people for a public action at the synagogue. The action served as the basis for a new political relationship with the

superintendent of the district as well as several key school board members. The group won several important funding issues at the local level. But more importantly, these leaders were able to recognize their own capacity to create an incredibly successful public action. This action has become a large part of the congregation's public narrative. The story that the congregation now relays is that it is a community that cares deeply about educational equality and that it is willing to go on public record to stand up for what is right. Furthermore, this action has greatly increased the confidence of its leaders. Now, whenever the face a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, the reflect back their public action and they realize that they are able to accomplish anything that they set their minds to. In short, at the end of the action, when the leaders reflect on what they have accomplished, they often leave with a fortified sense of confidence. This combined sense of possibility and confidence often leads the community into more action.

In addition to creating new leaders, new excitement and energy, and testing out the team's political strategy, how do community organizers measure success? There are at least two ways to measure whether or not an action was successful. First, were there any political victories? Second, were there any relational gains? As mentioned above, one of the goals of a public action is to "relationally persuade" the target to change his or her public stance on an issue. This could mean an agreement by power-holders to pass a bill that would fund more affordable housing, or it could mean agreeing to create a city-wide living wage ordinance. According to Chambers, it is important to keep in mind that in organizing, it is a victory when a political target does at least seventy-five percent of what the community is asking for. Unfortunately, however, people often believe that a victory means winning one-hundred precent of what you want. As Chambers suggests, "compromise is dismissed as betrayal of

the purity of one's vision and values."[94] This all or nothing attitude can serve to undermine a campaign because the group usually ends up winning nothing if they are unwilling to adjust their vision. Thus, organizers believe that it is better to achieve small, incremental victories rather than to deflate the esteem and momentum of a campaign by asking for everything all at once. In other words, in order to achieve long-term success, people engaged in community organizing must be willing to exchange pure, political ideals for the political reality on the ground. For some, this may feel like "selling out." But as Alinsky said, organizers must behave as "well-integrated schizoids" in order to understand that losing a short-term objective may be part of a successful, long-term campaign.

Another way to measure the success the a public action is through relational gains. As noted above, one type of relational gain occurs when the community receives a commitment from the power-holder to work together in partnership on a specific issue. This moves us a step closer to creating a model of shared power, rather than a hierarchical relationship with the power-brokers. The second way to measure the relational gains of an action is to evaluate how the experience affected its participants. In other words, the main goal of a public action is not necessarily to gather new information, but to create new experiences. In the modern world we are inundated with news and information on a constant basis. However, without a framework to interpret this information, we often feel overwhelmed, or even paralyzed, by this overstimulation.

Thus, organizers recognize that in addition to providing new information, one of the most important parts of a public action is to create a new experience for people. As Ganz argues, new experiences often trigger a new emotional response. An emotional connection to an issue, rather than pure, rational facts or statistics, often inspires us to care about a

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[94] Chambers 41.

particular issue in the end. As Ganz suggests, mobilizing our feelings helps turn passivity into participation.[95] In fact, the word "emotion" comes from the Latin root for "motor," which means to move or to take action. Thus, community organizing teaches us that public actions have the ability to provide people with new experiences and new emotions. Through the emotional arc of a public action, participants are inspired to develop a new vision for how they can work together on a problem that truly care about. Thus, a public action is meant to counter feelings of uncertainty, disbelief, and apathy, transforming them into feelings of confidence, hope, and excitement. This transformation can prompted simply by participating in an action in which every day, ordinary citizens are given a forum to stand up for what they believe in by confronting power-holders within their community. This confidence is also instilled when a group sets a goal and achieves it. Furthermore, a small, political victory is also a vehicle for the kind of emotional transformation that leads people to develop the hope and courage they need to pursue further action.

As illustrated above, public actions serve many purposes. To summarize, however, I would like to suggest that they serve three major goals. The first goal is to turn what you have into what you want. In other words, the community may have some powerful stories, interests, energy, and leaders. But ultimately, they want to build affordable housing in their neighborhood. Thus, a claims-making action is meant to turn the group's shared power and vision into political power. As detailed above, a public action is one way of turning a large delegation of constituents into public presence that has political clout. The second major goal of a public action is to find new leaders and to develop the skills and confidence of already-established leaders. The third goal of any public action is to create a strong reaction from the target as well as from the participants.

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[95] Ganz 47.

A strong reaction from the target will allow the group to assess whether or not their political strategy is working. Furthermore, depending on the reaction of the participants, the leaders will be able to assess what kind of relationship building and skills the group needs to develop. As mentioned in the introduction, a public action can either be a large or small scale endeavor. It can also be aimed at building the organization itself—a collaborative action—or it can be aimed at creating a political reaction—a claims-making action. Either way, public actions are meant to be held sporadically throughout the life-cycle of the campaign in order to supply periodic inspiration, as well as to gauge the success of the group's long-term strategy. In this way, a public action serves as the pinnacle of the organizing cycle. Public actions require stories, relationships, self-interest and shared power in order to be successful. In return, a successful public action serves to inspire new stories, new relationships, new energy, and new power. Therefore, a public action operates much like a pendulum because it requires momentum, leadership and vision to enact; but it also produces more leadership, vision and momentum in return. Thus, while all of the elements of community organizing are essential, I would argue public action is the fulcrum of the entire model.

As discussed in the previous section, an action is defined as a gathering in which more than one individual engages a person with power regarding a specific issue within the community. Actions can be large or small, collaborative or based on persuasion. For the most part people understand that action is a necessary part of social change.

Many congregants are comfortable with, or at least familiar with, the notion of a collaborative action because it means working with people to create stronger relationships, leaders, and a vision. In this scenario there is very little cause for conflict. However, far fewer congregants are familiar with the staged structure of a large, claims-making endeavor. As noted above, successful actions are created like a good story. They have a beginning, middle, and an end, as well as a point of tension or conflict at the peak of the drama. This conflict can be created by a powerful story or by asking a public official to respond to a difficult question. Thus, congregants who are new to the CBCO model can become quite uncomfortable with the notion of such a visible and contentious affair.

The goal of this section is to examine Jewish texts and concepts that may help us to grapple with some of the more difficult aspects of a public action. Experience tells me that many congregants are most troubled or concerned by this process for at least two primary reasons. First, it takes a lot of work to create an ideal outcome. Recruiting three hundred or five hundred people to attend an action is a very involved and often taxing process. Second, many people are not comfortable creating a public display of tension or a deliberate form of conflict. While I fully acknowledge that there are plenty of other challenges involved in creating a public action, I hope that the texts below can begin to help to begin to navigate

these difficulties in a uniquely Jewish way. Before delving into these particular obstacles it is important to discuss Judaism's general outlook on the abstract notion of an "action."

In Judaism, actions speak louder than words. Since the parting of the ways between early Jews and Christians, Jewish thinkers argued that that doing a good deed was more important than believing in a particular dogma or having a particular kind of faith. In fact doing a "good deed" is more than a nice thing to do; it is a *mitzvah* or a commandment. Admittedly, not all good deeds are commandments. Rather, some actions fall under the purvey of *minhag* or custom. That being said, I would argue that the Rabbis placed a very high premium on the idea of "action" as an overall virtue. As it says in *Pirkei Avot 3:22*:

> "He whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, what is he like? To a tree whose branches are many but whose roots are few; and when the wind blows it comes and plucks it up and overturns it upon its face….But he whose deeds exceed his wisdom-- what can he be compared to? To a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are many, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, it cannot be stirred from its place. As it is says [based on Psalm 1:3]: 'And he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreads its roots by the river, and it shall not perceive when heat comes, but his leaf shall be green, and it shall not be troubled in the year of drought, nor shall it cease to bear fruit.'"[96]

So while the Rabbis believed that the acquisition of knowledge was of the utmost import, they also believed that deeds and actions were even more valuable in the long run. Or perhaps, as the Rabbis taught in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 127a) the study of Torah should inspire us to perform good deeds. And yet this paragraph from *Pirkei Avot* teaches us that action is not only virtuous, but that it can make us stronger and more secure as well.

Similarly, this kind of action teaches us how to build courage, strength and fortitude by testing our leadership capacity. Some examples include pushing ourselves beyond our comfort zone by telling a story in public, confronting a power-broker, or even by calling a stranger in order to invite them to the action. While this last point may seem like a minute

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[96] Hertz 63-64.

detail, Ganz suggests that, "There is a big difference between putting the word out about a meeting and getting commitments from people to attend. This is challenging because we fear being rejected and we often fear placing others under obligation, because it obligates us as well."[97] In this way, creating a public action is a risky endeavor. Even asking someone to attend an public assembly is a challenging "action" in and of itself.

Yet each action prepares us for the next action by helping us to grow new "roots" by honing our leadership skills and by uncovering our strengths and weaknesses. Just as a deep and complex root system can help a tree weather an impending storm, so too can an action help develop someone's strength and fortitude in order to help them weather the "storm" of an even more high-stakes action in the future.

No matter how difficult or risky it is to pursue a public action, I would argue that Judaism teaches us that we are obligated to act on behalf of the public good. For example, as it says in *Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim 2*:

> "If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge or arbiter, he brings standing [or stability] to the land. But if he sits by himself at says: 'What do the pains [טרוח] of the community have to do with me? Why should I listen to their voices? Let my soul be at peace!' This brings destruction to the world."

In other words, at times it is tempting, more convenient, or even in one's self-interest to ignore a public issue or debate because it does not affect you or your family directly. However, this text teaches us that a "person of learning," or a leader in the community, should become involved in the issue or else they will cause more harm than good. Thus, despite the risks that one may incur, we are taught that it is better to become involved in an issue in order to bring "stability" or standing to the world. It is interesting to note that while many Rabbinic texts use the word צר (*tza'ar*), which means to "narrow" in order to convey a problem or an issue, this text uses the Hebrew root ט.ר.ח (*tarach*), which literally means

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[97] Ganz 72.

"pain" or "struggle" to convey a similar notion. Therefore, I would argue that the use of this somewhat stronger, and less common word, implies that by engaging in a public action one also engages oneself in the pain and struggle of the community as well. Yet, if one avoids this pain or struggle, one is seen as actively bringing destabilization or more violence into the world. For this reason I would argue that Judaism teaches us to engage in public action even when it means taking a personal or professional risk.

As mentioned above, one of the biggest risks that a congregation faces when creating a public action is the moment in which a power-holder or a politician is put on the "stand." Often such persons are asked to respond to some kind of request or demand in a very public way. Some congregants are uneasy with this model because they feel as if it is form of coercion or even public humiliation. I would argue, however, that it is neither. It is not so much a form of coercion as it is a form of persuasion. And as Frederic Douglass once said, I believe that "power concedes nothing without a demand."[98] And an action is a form of public demand and accountability rather than coercion.

Still, however, many congregants may feel uneasy about a public display of *realpolitk* in the sanctuary, or anywhere in the synagogue. Even if they do not view it as coercion, it may seem like a form of public humiliation or surprise. First, I must say that most organizers will not put a power-holder on the "stand" without having developed a relationship with him or her over time. Second, most of the time the public official who is being asked a charged question usually knows what the community's demand is long before they enter the public assembly. So unlike other more confrontational models, CBCO prides itself on creating

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[98] Douglas 204.

public actions where the demand or the "ask" is both reasonable and thought out with the power-broker ahead of time.

That being said, what if none of the stipulations above applied? What is Judaism's stance on using the public arena to persuade a public official to act in a certain way? While it is impossible to examine all of the nuances and intricacies involved in the Rabbinic investigation of public humiliation, our investigation must begin with the foundational concept of *tokhehah*. The Torah teaches that if someone commits a transgression against God or another human being we are responsible for rebuking them rather than holding a grudge against them. As it says in Leviticus 19:17: "You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but bear no guilt because of him." This law applies most aptly to interpersonal affairs or to sins committed by one person against God such as breaking Shabbat, or refusing to tithe, etc. Based on a confluence of other rabbinic texts, however, one could argue that this law could apply more broadly to rebuking a power-holder who has committed a "transgression" against the community.

In at least one halakhic instance we learn that it was normal for Israelite citizens to publically scrutinize their leaders. As it says in the Tosefta, *Shekalim 2:3*, the priests who collected money on behalf of the entire community were publically frisked as they came and left for work.[99] Just the Sages created a sense of public accountability by frisking the priests, the purpose of an action is also to create a similar sense of public accountability for elected officials and power-brokers within the community.

That being said, many Jewish texts teach that it is a sin to rebuke someone in a way that will cause humiliation. As it says in *Baba Metziah 59a,* "One who whitens a friend's

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[99] Grishaver 62.

face [by shaming them] has no place in the world to come." To reinforce this notion the

Rambam teaches in the *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 6:7*:

> "If you rebuke a friend, whether about an issue that concerns the two of you or an issue that is between him and God, you must rebuke him in private and speak to him gently with soft language, and inform him that you are only telling him for his benefit and to bring him to "the next world". If he accepts the rebuke, that is good, and if he doesn't, you must rebuke him a second time and a third time. And thus a person is always obligated to rebuke him, until the transgressor strikes him and says he is not listening."

One Jewish educator and scholar suggests that the last line of this paragraph teaches us that we are allowed to publically criticize a communal leader if there is no other way of stopping their offensive behavior.[100] On one hand, I would argue that this is a somewhat liberal interpretation of this verse. On the other hand, the Chofetz Chaim, a famous late 19th Century Musar teacher, argues a very similar case. One interpretation of the Chofetz Chaim suggests that one is allowed to publically criticize a communal leader under the following circumstances: 1) one must make sure all of the information leading up to one's accusation is correct; 2) one must first confront the person in private in order to convince him or her to the right thing; 3) The person's offense cannot be exaggerated for the sake of swaying public opinion; 4) One's rebuke must be motivated by wanting to help the person rather than hurt the person.[101] In the end, I think there is a good case for arguing that public scrutiny and criticism is okay under certain circumstances, but that one should not humiliate someone in public. Admittedly, defining the line between persuasion and humiliation would take a lot more time and research than can be managed within the scope of this project. That being said, I hope that the following texts will broaden our conversation regarding the role of scrutiny and persuasion in the public arena.

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[100] Ibid.
[101] Grishaver 62.

Ruth 4:10-2

א וּבֹעַז עָלָה הַשַּׁעַר וַיֵּשֶׁב שָׁם וְהִנֵּה הַגֹּאֵל עֹבֵר אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר-בֹּעַז וַיֹּאמֶר סוּרָה שְׁבָה-פֹּה פְּלֹנִי אַלְמֹנִי ; וַיָּסַר וַיֵּשֵׁב.

1 Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there. And now the redeemer whom Boaz had mentioned passed by and he called: "Come over and sit down here, so-and-so." And he came over and sat down.

ב וַיִּקַּח עֲשָׂרָה אֲנָשִׁים, מִזִּקְנֵי הָעִיר וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁבוּ-פֹה ; וַיֵּשֵׁבוּ.

2 Then Boaz took ten elders of the town and said, "Be seated here," and they sat down.

ג וַיֹּאמֶר, לַגֹּאֵל, חֶלְקַת הַשָּׂדֶה, אֲשֶׁר לְאָחִינוּ לֶאֱלִימֶלֶךְ : מָכְרָה נָעֳמִי, הַשָּׁבָה מִשְּׂדֵה מוֹאָב.

3 He said to the redeemer, 'Naomi now returned from the country of Moab, must sell the piece of land which belonged to your kinsman Elimelech.'

ד וַאֲנִי אָמַרְתִּי אֶגְלֶה אָזְנְךָ לֵאמֹר, קְנֵה נֶגֶד הַיֹּשְׁבִים וְנֶגֶד זִקְנֵי עַמִּי-- אִם-תִּגְאַל גְּאָל, וְאִם-לֹא יִגְאַל הַגִּידָה לִּי ואדע (וְאֵדְעָה) כִּי אֵין זוּלָתְךָ לִגְאוֹל וְאָנֹכִי אַחֲרֶיךָ ; וַיֹּאמֶר, אָנֹכִי אֶגְאָל.

4 I thought I should disclose the matter to you and say: 'If you are willing to redeem it, redeem! But if you will not redeem, tell me, that I may know. For there is no one to redeem but you, and I come after you. And he said, 'I am willing to redeem it.'

ה וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּעַז, בְּיוֹם-קְנוֹתְךָ הַשָּׂדֶה מִיַּד נָעֳמִי ; וּמֵאֵת רוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה אֵשֶׁת-הַמֵּת, קָנִיתִי (קָנִיתָ)--לְהָקִים שֵׁם-הַמֵּת, עַל-נַחֲלָתוֹ.

5 Boaz continued, 'When you acquire the property from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabite, you must also acquire the wife of the deceased, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate.'

ו וַיֹּאמֶר הַגֹּאֵל, לֹא אוּכַל לגאול- (לִגְאָל-) לִי--פֶּן-אַשְׁחִית, אֶת-נַחֲלָתִי ; גְּאַל-לְךָ אַתָּה אֶת-גְּאֻלָּתִי, כִּי לֹא-אוּכַל לִגְאֹל.

6 The redeemer said: 'Then I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate. You take over my right of redemption, for I am unable to exercise it.'

- o *What does Boaz do to convince the anonymous relative to forgo a claim on Elimelech's land?*
- o *What, if anything, can this section of the Book of Ruth teach us about the notion of a public action?*

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<u>A Closer Look:</u>

In order to understand these verses one must first understand the Book of Ruth as a whole. In summary, our narrative begins with an Israelite man named Elimelech who must leave the region of Judah because of a horrible famine in the land of Israel. He and his wife and two sons travel to Moab. Soon after, however, Elimelech passes away and his wife Naomi decides to marry off their two sons to Moabite woman—one named Orpah and the other named Ruth. Soon after, however, both of Naomi's sons also die and so the three women are left widowed. In Ancient Near Eastern society this meant that they were also left without any economic means. Therefore, Naomi decides to return to her native land in hope of consolation and protection from her extended family. While Orpah remains in Moab, Ruth says: "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God," (Ruth 1:16). After Ruth utters one of the most dramatic lines in the entire book, Naomi acquiesces and allows Ruth to return with her to the Land of Israel.

Through a much more nuanced and complex process than can be described here, Ruth convinces a well-to-do land owner, who is one of Elimelech's distant relatives (Boaz), to try to "redeem" her (see below). In the story, however, Elimelech has one closer relative who is known as a "nearer redeemer" because he has a more immediate responsibility to serve as a redeemer for Ruth, Naomi and Elimelech's land.

Before delving into this issue I would argue that Ruth 4:1-3 convey some very subtle, yet important messages about the notion of public action and the art of persuasion in ancient times. For example, in the first verse the Torah says that, "Boaz went up." From the outset this verse appears quite mundane. However, the five preceding verses all start with verbs while this verse starts with a subject (i.e.- Boaz). Bush notes that this is an intentional break in the action in order to alert the reader that there is both a sense of urgency, as well as agency.[102] In other words, Boaz realizes that he must take matters into his own hands if he wants to create a favorable outcome. Until this point Ruth and Naomi had been the active players in the narrative. Yet by switching the order of the subject and the verb in this verse, the narrator subtly imparts a message to the reader about Boaz's newfound courage and initiative.

At the end of this verse his courage even transforms into *chutzpah* as he calls the redeemer *plony alomoni*," or in English—"Mr. So and So." As Bush suggests, in such a small town it is inevitable that Boaz knew this man's name. Therefore, by using this slightly pejorative or diminutive name, it is possible that Boaz wanted to agitate or incite the redeemer in a minor way.[103]

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[102] Bush 196.
[103] Bush 197.

In the second verse Boaz does not simply wait for ten elders to appear at the city gate. Rather, the Hebrew indicates that he "took" the people he needed, which is from the Hebrew root לקח (lakah). Bush suggests that this means that Boaz went out to actively recruit the people for his assembly.[104] Similarly, when congregants are engaged in a public action it is very tempting to invite people via email rather than making a phone call or inviting them in person. However, I believe this text teaches us that when the action is really important we must also go out of our way to actively "take" or recruit people to attend.

Last but not least, Bush argues that Boaz actually goes out of his way to create a public forum for this situation. The entire scene could have taken place in the presence of a few elders who constitute a traditional *beit din* or court of law. However, Bush suggests that Boaz made this otherwise internal family affair a highly public matter in order to "compel" the closer relative into doing what Boaz wanted him to do.[105] Therefore, Boaz strategically places himself in a central location (at the gates of the city) so that there will be a lot of people who can see what is happening. By placing added pressure on the redeemer, Boaz is able to persuade him to acquiesce his claim to Elimelech's land and to Ruth the Moabite. According to this interpretation it appears as if we have witnessed the first, strategically planned public action in the Torah.

Another even more subtle act of persuasion occurs in verses 4:3-6. However, in order to understand this scene, one must first comprehend the notion of a being "redeemer" in ancient Israelite society. One aspect of being a "redeemer" in the Ancient Near East meant marrying the wife of a deceased relative. Bush argues that while the situation in Ruth is not technically a Levirate marriage, it has many of the same qualities.[106] For instance, both redemption and a Levirate marriage are based on a desire to protect the widow, carry on the name of the deceased, and to keep the land within the original tribe, family or clan.

Therefore, Bush argues that being a redeemer is a "customary obligation, which, though voluntary, was an acknowledged family obligation recognized by the community."[107] So when he nearer redeemer is ready to accept the offer to inherit Elimelech's land in verse four, Boaz reminds him of his "customary obligation" to take Ruth to be his wife as well.

All of the sudden, when nearer redeemer realizes that this transaction will not reap an unencumbered economic benefit he relinquishes his desire to redeem Elimelech's land. In this way, Boaz ultimately convinces the nameless redeemer to renounce his claim on the land by pressuring him to go beyond the letter of the law (לפנים משורת הדין, *lifnim* m'shurat ha'din) in order to do the right thing for Naomi and Ruth.

Therefore, in many ways, I believe that the scene depicted above is a wonderful parallel for a modern-day action. Not only does this text create a sense of urgency and the need to recruit people for this kind of assembly, but it also depicts how one of our ancestors

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[104] Ibid.
[105] Bush 245.
[106] For more information on what constitutes a Levirate marriage see Bush 221.
[107] Bush 226.

used the art of persuasion to do the right thing on behalf of Naomi and Ruth. Similarly, while a public official or an employer may not be required to do the right thing according to the law, the Torah teaches us that a public assembly can be used to place pressure on a power-holder so they feel compelled to make a make or more ethical choice.

RABBINIC TEXT

Baba Batra 119b

"It is taught: The daughters of Zelophehad were exceedingly wise, knew well how to expound Scripture, and were perfectly virtuous. They were exceedingly wise, since they chose to speak at the right time, for just then, so stated R. Samuel bar R. Isaac, Moses our teacher was engaged in interpreting the section on levirate marriage. So they said, "If in levirate marriage our status is like that of sons, give us—as a son—a possession. If not, let our mother be subjected to levirate marriage. At once, "Moses brought their cause before the Lord" (Num. 27:5). The daughters also knew how to expound Torah, for they said, "If our father had a son, we would not have spoken; or even if that son had a daughter, we would not have spoken." [108]

תנא בנות צלפחד חכמניות הן דרשניות הן צדקניות הן חכמניות הן שלפי שעה דברו דא״ר שמואל בר רב יצחק מלמד שהיה משה רבינו יושב ודורש בפרשת יבמין שנאמר (דברים כה) כי ישבו אחים יחדו אמרו לו אם כבן אנו חשובין תנה לנו נחלה כבן אם לאו תתיבם אמנו מיד ויקרב משה את משפטן לפני ה׳ דרשניות הן שהיו אומרות אילו היה [לו] בן לא דברנו

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[108] Note, one must understand that a Levirate marriage is not enforced if the deceased Israelite has had either a son *or* a daughter. Zelophehad's daughters understood this nuanced aspect of the law and they were able to highlight this point in order to emphasize the inconsistency by which male and female heirs were treated in biblical law. See BT Baba Batra 110a or 115b for more information.

- *What can the actions of Zelophehad's daughters teach us about our own actions or decision making process in a high-stakes, or controversial, setting?*
- *In what ways does the story of Zelophehad's daughters resemble or not resemble a public action?[109]*

Orhot Tzaddikim: The Third Gate-Shame

"The trait of shame is a great fence and an iron barrier against all wrong-doings, since a person does many things in private that the same person would be ashamed to do in public. As the Rabbis taught in Brachot 28b: "When Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was on his deathbed, his students said to him: 'Our teacher, please bless us.' He answered: 'May it be God's will that you have the fear of Heaven just like you have the fear of flesh and blood.' They asked: 'Why only equal fear of God versus man? Why not more fear in God?' He answered: 'It would be nice if you had even that much.' This can be proved by the fact that when a person does wrong that person says: 'Only if no one had seen me.' This is because people are afraid of shame, (Pesachim 50b).'"[110]

"The pain of 'whiteness' [humiliation] is more bitter than death, for which reason they said that one should rather fling himself into a fiery furnace than humiliate someone in public. They derive this from the example of Tamar, who allowed herself to be led out to be burned to death rather than humiliate Yehudah."[111]

- *How are these two texts similar or different?*
- *Do you think there is a role for shame or humiliation in the public domain? Why or why not?*
- *After examining the texts and concepts above, how would you define the difference between public persuasion, scrutiny, and humiliation? Which, of any, are acceptable in the public arena?*

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[109] I believe this text is a great entry point into a conversation about strategic action and timing.
[110] Zaloshinsky 83.
[111] Zaloshinsky 93.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

"Purity of motivation is the goal, constancy of action is the way."[112]

- o *What does this quote teach us about Heschel's understanding of the role of action in Jewish tradition and thought??*
- o *Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?*
- o *If you had to re-write this sentence (either the first or second half of the sentence) to align with your vision of Jewish tradition and thought, what would it say?*

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[112] Heschel, *Insecurity* 114.

Good organizing can be grouped into three meta-level processes: Relationship building, action, and interpretation.[113] As discussed in previous chapters, relationship building is about exchanging stories and uncovering one's self-interest in order to build deeper and more meaningful associations. In turn, these new relationships can be translated into new interests, new resources, and new visions or goals for the community. The energy and skills created by these relationships can then be transformed into public action. As illustrated in the previous chapter, public action allows the community to develop new leaders, test its strategy, and eventually, win political campaigns.

Ultimately, however, in order for community organizing to be successful, its participants must engage in a process of on-going public and private interpretation. In the world of community organizing, interpretation encompasses three related concepts: reflection, evaluation, and celebration. Literally, the word "reflection" comes from the Latin word, which means to "bend backwards." Similarly, in community organizing, the word reflection often refers to *self-reflection*. On an individual level many people are accustomed to engaging in self-reflection through journaling, yoga, meditation, or by talking about an experience with friends. Additionally, through prayer and other rituals, most religious traditions also emphasize the discipline of self-reflection. Moreover, many businesses create opportunities for teams, or individuals, to review their own performance. Thus, the tools of reflection are not necessarily unique to community organizing.

The difference is that the practice of community organizing encourages on-going and consistent forms of reflection that are aimed at both the individual and the group as a whole.

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[113] Ganz 73.

On an individual level community organizing encourages people to become reflective practitioners. This means that when a leader participates in an action or when he or she has a speaking role at a small meeting or a public assembly, the leaders are encouraged to analyze their own successes and failures. Practically speaking, this ideally takes place after almost every interaction. For example, leaders who are committed to a community organizing practice should be encouraged to reflect on how they conducted themselves after a one-on-one meeting, telling a story, leading a house meeting, or speaking at a public action. This kind of self-reflection can take one of many forms. One type of self-reflection, as mentioned above, can occur through journaling. But most often, organizers encourage people to reflect with another person. This could be a peer leader, a clergy person, or a trained organizer. While journaling is an important element of community organizing, being a true reflective practitioner means inviting others to comment on your work as well. It requires being open to constructive criticism from other people who can react to how your words and actions were heard and felt by others in the room. Engaging in this kind of reflective work with a peer leader or a professional organizer often leads to a much deeper sense of self-awareness because the other person can help the leader see things they may not be able to see by simply "bending backwards" and reflecting on her or her own actions. Organizing relies on the notion that we often need someone outside of ourselves to truly improve our speech and our execution of ideas and actions.

The second aspect of "interpretation" as a tool in community organizing includes the notion of evaluation. Evaluation is a form of reflection that is primarily performed in a group setting. Even though the concept of self-reflection is not necessarily unique to community

organizing, the practice of *on-going*, *public* evaluation is distinct from other kinds of performance evaluations that may happen in a job setting.

Evaluations within the field of community organizing field are unique in many ways. First, formal or informal group-evaluations are conducted after almost every meeting. In contrast to periodic evaluations to which many people are accustomed, organizing promotes evaluation as an ever-present tool that helps the group to reflect, learn, grow, and adapt to any situation they are facing. This dynamic encourages leaders to pursue a higher level of critical thinking, leading them to more strategic and creative plans.

The second way in which this kind of evaluation is unique is that it is done in a public fashion. While performance reports in the private sector are usually conducted behind closed doors, evaluations in community organizing are conducted in a public forum. Unlike the private sector, this kind of evaluation is not a one-way street. In other words, everyone in the room, including clergy members, organizers, and lay leaders, must be open to self-critique and assessment of their actions. This leads us to the third way in which community organizing evaluations are unique.

In contrast to many job evaluations, public evaluation is not meant to motivate people to action through fear. Although a negative job evaluation might motivate someone to work harder in order to keep their job, the same is not true for community organizing. Rather, public evaluation is meant to help people highlight their strengths so they can grow and expand their skills and increase their confidence to act in a public, political, or communal sphere. This is accomplished by providing both praise and criticism in a compassionate and digestible way.

That being said, although public evaluations are not meant to scorn, humiliate or embarrass people, the reality is that sometimes people have a hard time with this practice because it assumes a level of professionalism and honesty which many lay leaders are not used to expressing with other congregants. Furthermore, no matter how carefully someone tries to craft feedback in a constructive, rather than a negative way, it is inevitable that some people will become offended. In many cases this is because the other person failed to give feedback in an empathetic way. In other cases, this is because the person receiving the feedback is still too close to the issue at hand and cannot hear the feedback in an objective way until a later time.

While reflection refers to individuals and evaluation refers to team-based assessment, the truth is that they both entail a similar line of questioning. For example, some of these questions may include: 1) How did it feel to partake in this action, meeting, etc? 2) What were our goals, and did we accomplish what we set out to do? 3) Do you think the story-telling was effective? Why or why not? 4) What relationships did we build or not build? 5) Was our overall strategy effective? 6) What, if anything, did we learn about the power-holders in this community? 7) What kind of reaction did our action produce? 8) Did we learn anything in particular that could help us to make our work more effective, sustainable, welcoming, or powerful?

It is important to note that the first question raised during an evaluation is often: "How did that feel?" This is done for two main reasons. First, as discussed in the previous chapter, emotions form the basis of many of our actions. Therefore, in order to understand how we may react, we must first give voice to and understand what we are feeling. Second, because this work can be quite challenging, it is important to honor all of the emotions and

feelings in the room. For example, after an action one person might feel ecstatic, while another person may feel defeated or disappointed. Although conflicting responses do not have to be reconciled, they should at least be given equal voice. Only then, once the emotional reactions have been articulated, can people move from a subjective to a more objective analysis of their work.

As evidenced by the list above, the questions presented during an evaluation are meant to help people identify what they did well and what they could do better next time. Evaluations are intended to help people interpret their actions and their strategies in order to gauge the community's reaction.

If the community was bored, the leaders must increase the energy and excitement in the room next time. Furthermore, if the power-holder did not react in an ideal way, then the issue must be polarized more sharply. As Alinsky suggests, polarizing a situation is one of the best ways to create movement on an issue.[114] For instance, he argues that if the Declaration of Independence had listed some of Britain's good traits along with their bad traits, the American Revolution would have never occurred. Instead, movements must use polarizing language to activate their supporters. While this is likely to be a large exaggeration, his point is still relevant. Organizers must be prepared to polarize a situation rhetorically and then come together to negotiate with the other side when needed. Only by evaluating an action can the group determine whether or not they polarized an issue too sharply, or not sharply enough. Therefore, it is only through this kind of evaluation that the group will learn, grow, adapt and change in order to become more adept at being public people with civic and relational power.

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[114] Alinsky 28.

In addition to assessing the group's power or strategy, the goal of an evaluation is determine whether or not an action strengthened the synagogue or the broad-based organization as well. For example, an action can strengthen a congregation by deepening the participants' understanding of the CBCO model. Oftentimes, the most effective way for someone to learn about organizing is by attending an action. This is because although organizing is based on theory, it is a very large abstraction until it is actually experienced in person. An evaluation should also gauge whether or not new relationships, commitments, and resources were developed. Last but not least, an evaluation should also determine whether or not the action facilitated the growth of individual leaders, as well as the leadership team as a whole. In other words, did the leaders learn new skills or did they get to test out or reinforce older skill sets? Another pivotal question is whether or not the meeting or action energized people or whether it burnt them out because they did not have enough resources, social capital, or the intellectual or emotional capacity to complete their objective.

Self-reflection and evaluation are critical tools for community organizers because they help people identify and appraise their goals, whether they are relational, professional, or political outcomes. This is crucial because many non-profits use their leaders to serve the organization's needs without regard to the individuals' desire for self-betterment and understanding. In contrast, community organizing, on the other hand, recognizes that the organization must serve the needs of the leaders as much as the leaders serve the needs of the community.

Public and on-going evaluations help people analyze which relational and growth needs are being met, as well as how they are still lacking. For instance, a leader may initially join the organizing effort because he or she wants to know more people in the synagogue

who believe in communal and social change. After a while, however, leaders may want to be challenged in intellectual and spiritual ways as well. Therefore, while attending meetings or recruiting other people may help someone reach their relational goals, it is important to listen to people during evaluations for other skills that they would like to test—such as public speaking or leading a research action. Because most leaders are unable to qualify their desires as purely relational or growth needs, it is important for the organizer and the clergy to listen for these different needs during an evaluation. In the end, by promoting the intellectual, emotional and political growth of individual leaders, community organizing is a unique model for social change because it emphasizes communal and civic change as much as individual and inter-personal change.

According to Gecan, this kind of attention to evaluation and reflection enables community organizing to remain fluid, dynamic and responsive to both individual and societal aspirations.[115] This stands in contrast to many other non-profit organizations that tend to weaken their volunteer capacity by assigning routine tasks. For example, many organizations create a volunteer base that is really good at creating flyers, making phone calls, canvassing, or fundraising. In this case, organizational demands take precedence and lay leaders are fit into menial tasks. In contrast, organizing develops leaders who can articulate, reflect and evaluate their own needs and interests so that their volunteer work is a way to learn, adapt, grow and change in both personal and political ways.

Another important goal of the evaluation process is to create a sense of group accountability. As mentioned in previous chapters, no one individual or leader is responsible for the success or failure of any community organizing effort. Public evaluation helps create a dialogue in which every team member's contribution can be assessed. Furthermore, this is

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[115] Gecan 131.

carried out in a public setting because experience tells us that people are more likely to follow through on verbal commitments that are made in front of a group. However, if people verbalize a commitment at the end of an evaluation, but at the next meeting no one inquires about that pledge, then leaders will begin to see this process as a formality rather than as a powerful tool to promote the group's follow-through.

Ideally, by engaging in on-going, public evaluation in a compassionate way, the group becomes more accountable to one another. This is especially important in a group that assembles voluntarily. Unlike the workplace, where a person's performance can affect his or her livelihood, in the volunteer sector, all we have are one another's best intentions. While this kind of public evaluation is often uncomfortable to many newcomers in community organizing, it is a critical element of what makes this work both unique and effective. In many ways, it transforms run of the mill political advocacy into an opportunity for self-reflection, growth, and personal leadership advancement.

One of the most interesting benefits of both reflection and evaluation is that it promotes a culture of deliberation. According to some scholars the word "deliberate" comes from the Latin root *liberare*, which means to liberate or to free from one's assumption.[116] By deliberating over our actions through reflection and evaluation, we are able to free ourselves from assumptions that keep organizational life static and complacent. When a group deliberates over their stories and actions, they are more likely to use these memories as a source of future inspiration. As Ganz suggests, our imagination is connected to our memory. What we remember can either expand, or limit, what we believe is possible in the future.[117] Thus, by honoring the past we are able to enlarge our perspective and create more original

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[116] Ganz 64.
[117] Ganz 34.

goals and strategies. In this way, memory and imagination are unique gifts that are often overlooked due to the modern worship of intellect and will. Thus, one of the most important goals of any community organizing effort, especially during the process of evaluation and reflection is to honor past decisions and actions in order to create more imaginative and dynamic solutions, strategies, and visions for the future.

Last but not least, another important element of interpretation is the notion of celebration. Too often, volunteers become bogged down by the seriousness or difficulty of the work. Many community organizing teams meet on a weekly basis, which can be tiresome for many people because they are ideally having individual meetings with people on a regular basis as well. In the weeks leading up to a big action, lay leaders are often consumed by their work for multiple hours each week. One rabbi claims community organizing requires more time, commitment, energy, and imagination than just about anything else lay leaders are asked to do in the synagogue. Therefore, it is important to not only acknowledge the leaders' engagement, but also to celebrate it.

Typical celebrations often include food, music, a festive atmosphere, and of course, the honorees. There are also a few more key ingredients to community organizing celebration. For example, Ganz argues that community organizing celebrations must include an element of story-telling.[118] It is not simply a party; but also a forum where people can gather to honor their accomplishments and particular their future goals. In other words, enables people to catalogue important stories and events that have deepened the community's sense of pride, hope and affiliation. Since organizing can be slow and difficult work, it is important to highlight that this work is also fun and exhilarating through both large and small celebrations.

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[118] Ganz 59.

Ultimately, while reflection, evaluation, and celebration are common words, , community organizing employs these concepts in unique and meaningful ways. Through on-going, intentional, and public forms of interpretation, community organizing encourages people to become more effective at building deep and meaningful relationships that will allow them to act on their values. Through a three-pronged process of reflection, evaluation and celebration, communities are able to transform normal, every-day events into learning and growth opportunities. As a result, interpretation becomes a key tool for communal, social and political transformation.

In conclusion, community organizing exists at the intersection of action and interpretation. Thus, while some argue that the most important goal of organizing is to change the social and political landscape of a community, this cannot be achieved without serious efforts to change individual, communal, and societal patterns through the art of interpretation as described above. By emphasizing both action and interpretation as equally important elements of social change, community organizing embraces a unique balance of internal, intrapersonal, and external goals. Because of this unique blend of goals the art of interpretation becomes even more important to the success of any community organizing initiative.

"TO LIVE IS TO CHANGE. TO LIVE WELL IS TO CHANGE OFTEN."[119]

As noted above, interpretation is one of the three foundational practices in the organizing world. One could argue that interpretation serves as the center of a pendulum with relationship building on one end and action on the other end. Interpretation is what binds the work of organizing into one fluid process. As discussed, the notion of interpretation includes individual reflection, group evaluation and celebratory events.

The goal of interpretation is manifold. For example, interpretation is meant to encourage members to think more critically about their past strategy, as well as their future action plan. It is also meant to help people process the emotional aspect of this difficult political, as well as public venture. At times this means celebrating with people, inspiring them to act, or helping them to absorb the fear and loss that occurs after a setback. As Cornel West once said, while religion requires a leap of faith, politics requires a leap of hope.[120] For this reason, organizers spend a lot of time interpreting their actions in effort to create an open atmosphere of care and camaraderie. I believe the most important lesson that organizers try to teach is that "courage is not acting without fear, but rather acting in spite of fear."[121] The only way to cultivate this kind of courage, however, is to facilitate a strong group ethic in which people are engaged with one another on a deep and meaningful level. One way to create this kind of group sensibility is through group evaluations, which are meant to create a sense of shared ownership, shared power and shared vision. This is accomplished by

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[119] Ganz 38.
[120] West 12.
[121] Ganz 47.

opportunities for peer-critique, which is meant to enable leaders to assess their strengths and weaknesses in a collaborative, yet forthright manner. However, as mentioned above, I believe that cultivating an environment in which people feel comfortable giving their peers open and honest feedback is one of the most difficult aspects of the CBCO model. Not only does it take an enormous amount of honesty, it also requires an immense amount of grace, humility and professionalism. Therefore, in the biblical section below, I will analyze a couple of texts that I believe can help us come to terms with this difficult process from a Jewish lens.

Most importantly, interpretation should not *only* be understood as a pragmatic, organizing tool. I believe that the notion of interpretation lies at the heart of the religious endeavor. As Martin Luther King Jr. who once said:

> "Science investigates; religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge which is power; religion gives man wisdom which is control. Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary."[122]

In this 1963 speech King argues that the purpose of religion is to help us interpret the world around us, which ultimately leads to wisdom and control. I would argue that this notion applies quite significantly to the Jewish tradition as well.

In Hebrew, the word for interpretation comes from the root *d.r.sh* (דרש). In modern times, the word *drash* most often conveys the meaning of a "story" or an "interpretation" of a story. However, the biblical use of this word has a much wider semantic range. For example, it can also mean: "To demand, to inquire, to reckon, to seek out, to examine, to petition, etc." As a noun, the word *midrash* only appears twice in the biblical text.[123] In both these instances the word *midrash* simply refers to a "story" or a "book" in the historical or material sense of

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[122] King 15.
[123] See II Chronicles 13:22 & 24:27

the word. It is not until the rabbinic era that the word *midrash* came to signify a creative interpretation of a biblical passage.

In truth, there is no simple way to categorize the meaning of the word *drash*. On the other hand, I would argue that the Hebrew root *d.r.sh* contains an important clue as to how we can see the work of interpretation not purely as a pragmatic tool, but also as a sacred deed. For instance, this verb appears in Genesis 25:22 when Rebekah goes to *inquire* of God (*l'drosh et YHVH*). Rebekah wants to know why God has forced her to suffer. First, she suffered because of her infertility and now she is suffering because her twin sons are at "war" in her womb. A simple reading of this text would suggest that Rebekah went to ask God for an answer and God gave her one, as it says in the next verse: "And YHVH *answered* her, 'Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body. One people shall be mightier than the other, and the other shall serve the younger."[124] Therefore, one understanding of the word *l'drosh* can mean to communicate directly with God in search of an answer.

However, later commentators suggest that there are many different ways to interpret the meaning of *l'drosh* in this verse. In fact, Rashi provides us with two different *drashot*, interpretations, of the word *d.r.sh*. First, he suggests that the phrase "going to inquire" (ותלך לדוש) means that Rebekah went to the *beit hamidrash,* the house of study, in order to try to get one of the rabbis to act as a prophetic intermediary for her. Rashi also notes that the phrase *l'drosh et Adonai* (לדוש את ה') means that she prayed to God to give her an answer. Even from this one, single verse we encounter at least three different ways to render the word *drash* (i.e.- to speak to God directly, to request an answer through an intermediary, or to pray to God).

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[124] Genesis 25:23.

Regardless of how one renders this verse, it is clear that the word *drash* goes beyond the simple meaning of the word and into the spiritual realm. Many biblical scholars suggest that every "act of translation is really an act of interpretation." Here, I would like to suggest that perhaps every act of interpretation is really an act of piety. As rabbinic scholar Hannah Hashkes argues, the Rabbis believed that people encounter God not only through experience, but also through intellectual query and through the art of interpreting our sacred stories.[125] She adds that the study of *midrash* shows us that it is inseparable from the very act of living and reacting to the world around us.[126]

Therefore, I would like to suggest that when congregants begin to reflect on their actions in a more systemic way, perhaps we are also encouraging them to participate in a form of *midrash* on their own lives. Like Rebekah, we can encourage congregants to seek out God—either directly or through prayer. And while we no longer seek out prophetic intermediaries, perhaps the CBCO model of a peer-to-peer feedback can serve as our own, modern-day form of "seeking out" a colleague who can help us gain wisdom.

Admittedly, there are many more ways to render the word *drash*. However, I would argue that even if they are translated in a unique way, they all have one thing in common— the understanding that a *drash* cannot occur in isolation. Whether the word is used to inquire of God, or to seek out another person's opinion, or to bestow revenge, the word never occurs without a co-actor. Therefore, I would argue that the concept of relies on an underlying assumption that we cannot do this kind of work alone. As Borowitz so aptly describes: "We need to have a certain realism about our limits if only so that we can appreciate how individuality implies community, not only with other people but with God. Acknowledging

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[125] Hashkes 151.
[126] Hashkes 152.

this would allow for a reverse *tzimtzum*, a sufficient contraction of our human self-importance that would leave room in our lives for our community and for God's presence."[127]

Ultimately, I would argue that this quote from Borowitz is the most accurate way to summarize the goal of interpretation in the CBCO model. As discussed above, while there are many different goals for engaging in reflection and while there are many different ways to translate the word *drash*, the ultimate goal is to help people see that communal work is a spiritual practice. It allows us to see that "individuality implies community" because we cannot accomplish everything on our own. Our survival depends on recognizing our limits as human beings who are in need of community and God. By engaging in peer-to-peer feedback and reflection, I believe we are enacting Borowitz's notion of a "reverse *tzimtzum*." By contracting ourselves we allow room in our lives to learn from God, as well as, our community. This is the ultimate way to envision the art of interpretation from a Jewish lens.

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[127] Borowtiz, 168.

<u>A Word of Note</u>:

Before delving into the texts below, it is important to note that word "rebuke," or the concept of *tokhehah*, has a wide range of implications. Some commentators suggest that this concept only applies to transgression of any of the 613 *mitzvot*. Others suggest that this concept applies more broadly to any kind of wrong-doing that may negatively affect us even if it is not technically a "sin" in the traditional sense. In this thesis, I am using this word less with the connotation of sin or wrong-doing and more in the context of constructive criticism or feedback. While I admit that this is somewhat of a liberal understanding of the word, I would argue that many people are so unaccustomed to providing one another with constructive or critical feedback that it often feels like engaging in a form of rebuke. Therefore, I hope that the following texts will allow congregants to see how this kind of "rebuke" can be understood not only as an effective organizing tool, but also as a way to bring more love and wholeness into the world.

Proverbs 27:5

Better is open rebuke than love that is hidden

טוֹבָה, תּוֹכַחַת מְגֻלָּה מֵאַהֲבָה מְסֻתָּרֶת.

- o *In your opinion, what is the difference between "open rebuke" and "love that is hidden"?*
- o *Do you agree or disagree with this notion?*
- o *Have you ever experienced either of these things in your private or public life? If so, how did it feel?*
- o *Do you think there is a place for rebuke in a communal setting such as the CBCO model of evaluation and reflection? If so, how would you pursue it in a way that is more helpful than harmful?*

Breishit Rabbah 54:3

והוכיח אברהם את אבימלך וגו (בראשית כא:כה). א״ר יוסי בר חנינא התוכחת מביאה
לידי אהבה שנאמר (משלי ט:ח): 'הוכח לחכם ויאהבך.' היא דעתיה דרבי יוסי בר חנינא
דאמר כל אהבה שאין עמה תוכחה אינה אהבה. אמר ריש לקיש תוכחה מביאה לידי
שלום והוכיח אברהם את אבימלך היא דעתיה דאמר כל שלום שאין עמו תוכחה אינו
שלום

"And Abraham rebuked Abimelech," (Genesis 21:25). Rav Yossi Bar Haninah said that
rebuke brings about love, as it is said in Proverbs 9:8: 'Reprove a wise man and he will love
you." Then Rav Yossi Bar Haninah thought and said, 'All love unaccompanied by rebuke is
not real love.' Reish Lakish said, "Rebuke brings about peace, as we are told that Abraham
rebuked Abimelech. And so he [Reish Lakish] said: 'All peace that is unaccompanied by
rebuke is not real peace.'"

- *Do you agree or disagree with this statement above? Why?*
- *In what ways might it be possible for rebuke to lead to more love or peace in the world?*
- *How might you imagine incorporating this principle into your private life or your public affairs?*
- *What challenges or benefits do you foresee if you were to increase the practice of rebuke in your public or communal life?*

Exodus Rabbah 47:8

"And he was there 40 days and 40 nights," (Ex. 34:28). How did Moses know how many days he spent on the mountain? Above there is no night…How did he know? Because in one place it is written: "And I stood on the mountain, as I did the first time (Deut. 10:10); while in another place it is written: "And I sat on the mountain forty days and forty nights…" (Deut. 9:9). You learn from this that while God spoke with him, he would stand, and when God departed from him, *he would sit and revise what he had learned*. That is, be both stood and sat. When God spoke with him, he knew it was day, and when God told him, "Study your Torah," he knew it was night, as David wrote: "Day to day makes utterance, night to night speaks out (Psalm 19:3)."[128]

מדרש רבה שמות פרשה מז סימן ח

ד״א מנין היה משה יודע כמה ימים עשה כתיב ויהי שם עם ה׳ ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה ומנין שאין למעלה לילה שנא׳ (שם קלט) גם חושך לא יחשיך ממך ולילה כיום יאיר כחשיכה כאורה ומנין היה יודע שנא׳ (דברים ז) ואנכי עמדתי בהר כימים הראשונים וכתיב ואשב בהר אמור מעתה בשעה שמדבר עמו היה עומד ובשעה שמסתלק ממנו היה יושב **ושונה מה שלמד** נמצאת מקיים ואנכי עמדתי בהר ואשב בהר בשעה שהיה מדבר עמו היה יודע שהוא יום ובשעה שהיה אומר לו למוד תורתך היה יודע שהוא לילה וכן דוד אומר (תהלים יט) יום ליום יביע אומר ולילה ללילה יחוה דעת

- *In addition to teaching us about how Moses "kept time" when he was on Mt. Sinai, what might this text teach us about the practice of reflection or evaluation?*
- *If we were to use this as an analogy for the practice of interpretation within the CBCO model, what would it mean for us to "sit down" while we are reflecting on our actions?*
- *What significance does sitting down or standing up have in the text above? How might this apply to our lives today?*

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[128] Translated by Zornberg 442.

<u>A Closer Look:</u>

While Zornberg translation suggests that Moses would stand when God addressed him and that he would sit down and "revise" what God imparted to him during the day, the original Hebrew word *shoneh* comes from the root ‎ש.נ.ה. (Sh.n.h), which can also mean to repeat, retell, or recount. In this way, the literal understanding of the word "repeat" is often used to signify the connotation employed above by Zornberg—meaning to review or to revise.

This text is interesting because even though Moses' task is to write down God's commandments word for word, he takes immense care in reflecting on his work. This is illustrated by the fact that he stays up every night to review his work. While I would never suggest that organizing is analogous to revelation, I would like to suggest that the pursuit of systemic social change may be a modern form of putting the words of revelation, as well as the covenant, into action.

Just as Moses takes time to repeat and review the words he has written down, so too must we take time to reflect on and interpret our own actions. Perhaps the Rabbis teach us that Moses takes such great care in reviewing his work because he knows that it will affect the entire community as well as every future generation of Jews. If we are lucky, the actions we take during an organizing campaign will also affect the community in a positive way. Therefore, it is paramount that we too take time to re-examine our actions on a daily or weekly basis.

Perhaps one way to attain a more intimate relationship with God, as Moses once did, is to see the act of reflection as a spiritual practice that occurs when one enters into deeper relationship with God. In the end, I hope that this text illustrates how the act of interpretation is not simply a utilitarian endeavor, but also a holy enterprise.

Abraham Isaac Kook

"There are those who mistakenly think that world peace can only come when there is a unity of opinions and character traits. Therefore, when scholars and students of Torah disagree, and develop multiple approaches and methods, they think that they are causing strife and opposing shalom. In truth, it is not so, because true shalom is impossible without appreciating the value of pluralism intrinsic in shalom. The various pieces of peace come from a variety of approaches and methods that make it clear how much each one has a place and a value that complements one another. Even those methods that appear superfluous or contradictory possess an element of truth that contributes to the mosaic of shalom. Indeed, in all the apparently disparate approaches lies a light of truth and justice, knowledge, fear and love of God, and the true light of Torah."[129]

> o *What do you think Rav Kook means when he says that true peace is impossible without acknowledging the pluralism intrinsic with the notion of shalom?*
> o *Rav Kook argues that there is a connection between the acceptance of plurality and the "light of truth and justice." Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment and why?*
> o *How might any of Rav Kook's ideas play out in an organizing campaign?*
> o *Is there anything that this text can teach us about the art of evaluation in a Jewish context?*

Abraham Joshua Heschel

"The human will cannot circumvent the snare of the ego nor can the mind disentangle itself from the confusion of bias in which it is trapped….Should we, then despair because of our being unable to attain perfect purity? We should if perfection were our goal. Yet we are not obliged to be perfect once and for all, but only to rise again and again. Perfection is divine, and to make it a goal of man is to call on man to be divine. All we can do is try to wring our hearts clean in contrition. Contrition begins with a feeling of shame at our being incapable of disentanglement from the self. To be contrite at our failures is holier than to be complacent in perfection."[130]

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[129] Kook, Olat Re'iah Vol. 1.
[130] Heschel, Insecurity 140.

o *In your opinion, what is Heschel trying to tell us about the pursuit of perfection?*
o *What do you think Heschel means when he says that it is better to be "contrite at our failures" than "complacent in perfection"?*
o *In what way can this idea add to our understanding of organizing as an on-going spiritual practice?*

A Closer Look:

Rabbis and teachers in the Jewish social justice field often teach the famous rabbinic maxim from Pirkei Avot 2:16 which states: "You are not obliged to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it." In many settings this serves as a much needed source of inspiration and encouragement after, or during, a long-term or difficult campaign. It inspires people by encouraging them to recognize that while our tradition promotes on-going action, it also recognizes our limits as mortal, human beings.

This is crucial because otherwise it is very easy to become deterred by fear or become caught up in the "snare of preparation." But in addition to simply teaching us that we should act in the moment, Heschel warns us about the spiritual danger of seeking perfection. He implies that seeking perfection is akin to idolatry. Since only God is perfect, seeking perfection is tantamount to putting ourselves on par with God. This is a religious prohibition.

Thus, Heschel adds a spiritual dimension to an otherwise pragmatic or utilitarian idea that we are required to "act for today." Rather than becoming paralyzed by the "snare of perfection," Heschel teaches us that we must recognize our own humanity, and this means pursuing action regardless of our inevitable imperfections. In effect, by accepting our limits as human beings, I would argue that we are also acknowledging God's presence and power in the world. Thus, in the end, a conversation about how we must act regardless of how "ready" we feel, may serve as a foundation for a more theological conversation within the CBCO model.

CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

In the end, I hope to have illustrated how community organizing not only promotes real and sustainable social change, but also how it encourages a fundamental form of synagogue transformation. First, as demonstrated above, the relational aspect of this work encourages a culture in which members are encouraged to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with one another. Second, organizing enables us to identify and develop new leaders. While most institutions are sustained by a small group of lay leaders who serve on multiple committees, organizing has the ability to expand the leadership base in a crucial way. In part this is because leaders are developed around their own interests and concerns, rather than being placed onto a pre-existing committee or project. Furthermore, organizing recognizes good leaders have more than simply charisma. They have a strong sense of self, curiosity for others, and a diverse social network. Good leaders are also those who can sustain a long-term commitment because they care about the relational process as much as they do about the final outcome. Third, organizing creates an opportunity for the synagogue to develop a narrative and a vision that has been shaped by the majority of its members. Research suggests that the more people who have a stake in the mission and vision of an organization, the more people will work to transform this vision into a reality. In the end, therefore, a long-term commitment to the CBCO model has the ability to strengthen our community, identify untapped leaders, and enact new visions, thereby achieving real and lasting social and communal change.

Furthermore, I fundamentally believe that community organizing can be adopted as a profoundly spiritual endeavor. By bringing Jewish texts and philosophy to the center of this

work, I hope to have illustrated how community organizing can be a profoundly Jewish act. In order to reinforce this idea I have created a theory, or spiritual framework, I like to call the "spiritual justice ladder." Similar to the Rambam's ladder of *tzedakah*, this ladder is meant to help people identify their motivation for why they are involved in the synagogue's social justice effort. Like the Rambam's ladder, over time, the goal is to help move people higher up on the spiritual justice ladder because each rung represents a higher level of spiritual and religious commitment or awareness.

In part, my idea was inspired by the Kabbalistic notion that every human being has five different levels of awareness that correspond to different levels of their soul. "The higher levels of our soul are figuratively closer to their source, while the denser levels of the soul— *ruach* and *nefesh*—are much closer to the range of human consciousness and can be affected by the way we live our lives."[131] With this in mind, the Kabbalists believed that every mitzvah has the ability to bring us to higher level of consciousness. Ultimately, our goal is to reach the highest level of consciousness, which is identified with an aspect of the soul known *yehidah,* or unity.

Similarly, I would like to propose that it is possible to climb a parallel ladder of awareness if we can begin to perceive social justice as a spiritual practice. While this ladder may have many "rungs," for now I would like to propose that *b'tzelem elohim*, *tzedek* and *hesed* should serve as the primary rungs on this new-found spiritual justice ladder. As I hope to demonstrate below, I believe that these three concepts reflect three different levels of spiritual awareness as they relate to Jewish social justice. The goal, therefore, is to move ourselves along a path by which our motivation for pursuing social change shifts from the notion of fairness and equality (*b'tzelem elohim*), to righteousness (*tzedek*), and finally to

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[131] Cooper 106.

covenantal love (*hesed*). Granted, while most people are motivated by a complex, interconnected web of principles, my goal is create a theoretical framework that can help us to articulate the values that motivate us to pursue social justice within a Jewish framework. My hope is that teaching about these three concepts will enable people to articulate different aspects of their motivation for pursuing social justice in a synagogue setting. The ultimate goal is to help people climb the spiritual justice ladder in order to, eventually, achieve a sense of unity, or *yehidah*, with God.

STAGE ONE: B'TZELEM ELOHIM

The first rung of this ladder is the notion of *b'tzelem elohim* because, for many Jews, this concept forms the basis of our ethical treatment of other human beings. This phrase first occurs in Genesis 1:27: "In the beginning, God created *Adam* in His image, in the image of God (*b'tzelem elohim*) He created him; male and female He created them." At first glance this biblical imagery seems removed from any kind of ethical mandate. It appears as a value-neutral image of humanity's relationship with God. Therefore, many of the early Rabbis argued over what it means to be created in God's image. Some suggested that it means that human beings have dominion over the earth just as God has dominion over all of creation. Or, it meant that human beings have creative powers, much like God. The Rambam argued that *b'tzelem Elohim* means that human beings have a unique intellectual capacity that surpasses that of the animal kingdom.

In one midrashic interpretation the Rabbis suggest that regardless of what it means to be created *B'tzelem elohim*, this concept requires us to act in an ethical manner.

> Rabbi Akiva says: "Love your fellow as yourself'" (Leviticus 19:18) is the greatest principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai says, "'When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God (*B'tzelem Elohim*)." This is the greatest principle in the Torah. You should not say: Because I have been dishonored, let my fellow be dishonored along with me…" Rabbi Tanhuma explained: "If you do so, know whom you are dishonoring – 'He made him in the likeness of God.'" (Genesis Rabbah 24)

While this passage is most famously quoted for Akiva's lesson about "treating your neighbor as you would like to be treated," Ben Azzai argues that *b'tzelem Elohim* is the most important concept in the Torah. While Ben Azzai represents the minority tradition, I agree with him because without the notion of *b'tzelem elohim* it would be hard to argue why we must treat others with respect. In other words, we must treat people as we would like to be treated *because* each human being is imbued with a spark of divinity.

This interpretation of *b'tzelem Elohim* has been used for generations to support the notion that Judaism demands us to treat others with the utmost respect, fairness, and equality. As Sacks argues, "Judaism contains many mysteries, but its ultimate purpose is not mysterious at all. It is to honor the image of God in other people and thus turn the world into a home for the divine presence"[132] If we do not honor the spark of divinity within every human being by treating them with respect, dignity and fairness, then we are essentially driving God's presence away from us. Thus, treating others with dignity and respect is not only an ethical goal, but also a spiritual ideal. Sacks argues that we can make room for the divine presence by acting as "God's question-mark" against the conventional wisdom of the age.[133] This means challenging the status quo by working together to build a more just world-- not only to bring more justice into the world, but also to bring us closer to God's presence.

Undoubtedly, the concept of *b'tzelem elohim* is a very important and necessary idea

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[132] Sacks 4.
[133] Sacks 28.

that we must continue to promote as we pursue social justice in our congregations. It serves as an ethical and spiritual platform for almost all of the other moral teachings in the Torah. However, the problem with this concept is that, at least in its biblical context, it does not call us to a particular type of action. While the author of Genesis makes a profound statement about the connectivity of all humankind, it is still remains as an observation rather than a specific call to action. Therefore, while we must continue to use this concept as the foundation for our social justice work, we must simultaneously move beyond the concept of *b'tzelem Elohim* to create a more nuanced and complex understanding of our mandate to pursue justice.

STAGE TWO: TZEDEK

The second and probably most common biblical concept used to explain the Jewish call for social justice is the concept of *tzedek*, which can be found most strikingly in the verse: "*Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdoff.*"[134] (Deut. 16:20). As a banner cry for Jewish social justice enthusiasts worldwide, this sentence has evoked a myriad of rabbinic and contemporary interpretations. However, for the sake of this paper, I would like to focus on the first appearance of this word in the Tanakh, which can be found in Genesis 18:19.

The root *t.d.k.* first appears in the book of Genesis as God is deliberating whether or not to tell Abraham about his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In the end, God decides to tell Abraham about His plan because one day Abraham is supposed to become a "great and

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[134] Deuteronomy 16:20

powerful nation" that will follow in God's path and do the work of "*tzedek u'mishpat.*"[135] In

order to fulfill our covenant with God, and to become a successful and fertile nation, we must

pursue that which is right and just in the world. Interestingly, however, this verse does not

tell us to "pursue" *tzedek u'mishpat.* Rather, it says that we must follow "*derech YHVH,*"

God's path, which ultimately provides us with God's eternal protection and reward. By using

the phrase *derech YHVH*, the Torah teaches us that justice work is not only an ethical pursuit,

but also a spiritual process that fulfills our covenant with God.

Furthermore, rabbinic scholar Jill Jacobs argues that the word *tzedek* has an

interesting semantic range. In Ugaritic, it means "legitimate," and in Aramaic it means

"loyal." In Arabic it means "true, courageous or dependable." In all three of these languages

the semantic range of *tzedek* revolves around a positive, stable, and authorized sense of

"correctness" that takes courage to obtain. Adding to this sentiment, in Syriac the word for

tzedek invokes a sense of "responsibility or duty."[136] After analyzing the aforementioned

concepts, I would argue that the word *tzedek* means pursuing a legitimate or correct path,

which may require courage, truth and loyalty to oneself, as well as to God.

Furthermore, Judaism teaches us that the concept of *tzedek*, and by extension

tzedakah, the giving of charity, is not simply a "nice thing to do." Rather, it is a mitzvah or

an obligation. Rabbi David Saperstein notes that in Latin the word for charity comes from the

root word *caritas*, which means love. Similarly, the word for philanthropy comes from the

Greek root *philo* (love) *antrhopos* (man). Therefore, Saperstein argues that in the Greco-

Roman culture, people gave alms to the poor out of a voluntary sense of love or compassion

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[135] Genesis 18:18-19
[136] Jacobs 42.

for those in need. [137] In contrast, Judaism teaches us that giving *tzedekah* is about doing what is right (*tzedek*).

In the Jewish tradition, pursuing justice is not an emotionally inspired favor; rather, it is a commandment. In part, this is because the Torah teaches us that while we may *possess* wealth, we do not truly *own* it. This theology comes from the concept in Exodus 19:5 when we are told that "all of the earth is God's." Therefore, whatever wealth we have accumulated we owe to God's grace rather than to our own, true merit. Therefore, pursuing *tzedek* or giving *tzedakah* can be viewed as a form of redistributing God's wealth and grace.

Relatedly, Sacks argues that *mishpat* embodies "retributive justice," while *tzedek* represents "distributive justice." According to the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, retributive justice represents laws which allow individuals to pursue their own self-interest as long as it does not infringe upon the rights and freedoms of others. However, in this system, even when people follow the letter of the law, the possibility of injustice still exists. On the other hand, distributive justice, or *tzedek*, represents going beyond the letter of the law. Thereby, Sacks suggests that *tzedek* means going beyond what is simply "right," in order to do what is "good" for society. [138] The Sages called this notion-- *l'fnim mshurat hadin.*

The ultimate question, however, is whether our mandate to pursue *tzedek u'mishpat* applies to both Jews and non-Jews alike. On one hand, it seems clear that retributive justice, or the law of the land, must be followed for both Jews and non-Jews alike because of the Talmudic concept of "*dinah d'malkutah dina.*"[139] That being said, are we also obligated to follow the mandate of *tzedek* for Jews and non-Jews alike? According to David Saperstein, the answer is a resounding "yes." While it is true that halakhah only mandates how Jews

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[137] Saperstein 19.
[138] Sacks 33.
[139] See Bava Kama 113a, Nedarim 28a, Bava Batra 54b-55a , Gittin 10b

should treat other Jews, he argues that the moral requirement for providing for the poor is a universal concern. His proof-tex lies in the concept of the Jubilee year, in which Jews were required to proclaim freedom to *all* the inhabitants of the land.[140] In fact, Saperstein argues that the Jubilee year, in theory, was the first "publically run tax-financed social welfare system."[141]

Similarly, Rachel Adler uses the concept of *peah,* an agricultural law that mandates leaving the corners of the field for the poor, to support the idea that distributive justice applies to both Jews and non-Jews alike. As it says in Leviticus 19:10, the corners of the fields should be left to both the "poor and the stranger." Eventually, the Rabbis used the concept of *peah* as the foundation for the rabbinic notion of *tzedekah* as a monetary donation rather than an agricultural contribution to society. Furthermore, this is the basis for Maimonides placing the laws of *tzedakah* within the agricultural section of the Mishneh Torah. Thus, I believe Adler is correct when she argues that in order to be a holy nation one must engage in righteous acts whenever we encounter any of God's children.

In sum, it is clear that the biblical and rabbinic rendering of *tzedek* serves as a cornerstone for our modern mandate for Jewish social justice. This concept illustrates, in no uncertain terms, that the pursuit of justice is a Jewish obligation, rather than a voluntary activity. While it is difficult to convey the binding nature of a *mitzvah* in a Reform setting, I it is important to present this idea as a way to challenge ourselves—both spiritually and religiously. My hope is that by presenting a more nuanced understanding of the notion of *tzedek*, more people will be inspired to attain a higher level of Jewish practice and faith.

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[140] Leviticus 25:10
[141] Saperstein 19.

Beyond the concepts of *b'tzelem elohim* and *tzedek*, we must begin to focus on

the idea of *hesed* if the Jewish social justice movement is going to become a more holistic

spiritual endeavor. *Hesed* is usually defined as an act of "loving-kindness." The Rabbis

suggest that hesed includes acts such as visiting the sick, caring for mourners, welcoming

guests, giving to charity, etc. The proof-text for this idea can be found in the Babylonian

Talmud, *Sotah 14a*:

> R. Hama son of Haninah said, What does [the Torah] mean when it says, You shall
> walk after the Lord your God (Deut 13:5)? Is it possible for a human being to walk
> after the divine presence? Does it not say, For the Lord your God is a consuming fire
> (Deut. 4:24)? Rather, the meaning is: you shall walk after the attributes of the Holy
> One, blessed be He. Just as he *clothes the naked*, as it is written, And the Lord God
> made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them (Gen. 3:21), so shall
> you clothe the naked. Just as He *visits the sick*, as it is written, And the Lord appeared
> to him by the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1), so you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One,
> blessed be He, *comforts the mourners*, as it is written, And it came to pass after the
> death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son (Gen. 25:11), so you comfort
> mourners. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, *buries the dead*, as it is written, And
> He buried [Moses] in the valley (Deut. 34:6), so you bury the dead."

While the word *hesed* does not appear in this passage, a few lines later Rabbi Simlai suggests

that Torah begins, and ends, with God's display of loving-kindness in order to teach us that

hesed is one of the most important ethical teachings in the entire Torah. This is further

supported by the Rabbinic proposal that *hesed* is greater than *tzedakah*. [142] This may come as

a surprise to many Reform Jews who often believe that *tzedek* and *tzedakah* refer to acts that

address the root cause of an issue, whereas *hesed* usually refers to activities that simply

relieve short-term pain and suffering.

　　　　While it is true that the Rabbinic understanding of *hesed* usually refers to temporary

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[142] BT Sukkah 49b

support, it also has a lesser known, but much more revolutionary meaning. In the Tanakh, the word *hesed* often refers a type of loyalty and commitment that exists within a covenant. This idea is supported by the verse: "I remember the affection (*h.s.d*) of your youth, the love (*a.h.v*) of your betrothal- how you were willing to follow Me through the desert in an unsown land."[143] Unlike a short-term contract, *hesed* represents an open-ended commitment, which is fulfilled even in the face of unknown obstacles and uncertain outcomes.

Hesed is more than short-term term relief, as well as more than an exchange based on a quid pro quo expectation. Beginning with social theorist Thomas Hobbes, many scholars have argued that the notion of democracy was born out of individuals' desire to achieve personal safety and security, rather than an overtly moral or ethical ideal. As Hobbes once wrote: "Some of us are stronger than others, but none of us so strong that we are invulnerable to attack….Therefore it is in the essential interests of each of us, as a minimal precondition of peace and security, to hand over some of our powers as individuals to a supreme authority that will make laws and enforce them. This, the social contract, brings into being the "great Leviathan" of the State, and thus is born political society."[144] In other words, rather than viewing democracy as an idealistic moral experiment, Hobbes argues that it was a utilitarian way to achieve our self-interest.

On one hand, Sacks agrees with Hobbes. Human beings are perfectly capable of surrendering their power in order to achieve long-term peace and security.[145] On the other hand, he argues that this view is short-sighted because it does not explain the breadth of human experience or motivation. As he states:

"The single most influential story we have told ourselves for the past three hundred

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[143] Jeremiah 2:3
[144] Sacks, *Civil Society 13*.
[145] Sacks, *Civil Society* 13.

years—is a picture of humanity as a collection of rational self-seeking individuals; of society as the conflict of interest; of their resolution by a central power given legitimacy by a social contract in which individuals recognize that it is in their interests to yield up part of their unfettered freedom; and of the emergence of governments as the course of power through which conflicts are mediated." [146]

Sacks suggests, however, that it is time to reclaim a much more ancient theory about human behavior. He argues that the Torah teaches us that humanity is driven by *hesed*, rather than self-interest. Hesed, as a form of covenantal love, is much more powerful than the quid pro quo nature of a social contract. The difference between a social contract and a covenant is that, "parties can disengage from a contract when it is no longer in their interest to continue with it; a covenant binds them even—perhaps especially—in difficult times."[147]

Furthermore, living life from a place of *hesed* suggests that we include all of humanity as a part of our universe of obligation. Sacks argues that if we believe in God as the Ultimate Creator, then all human beings constitute a single family within this covenant of *hesed*. Therefore, the Torah teaches us that if someone becomes poor, we are obligated to help them. Not because it is in our direct self-interest to do so, but because we are linked by a covenant of kinship and fraternity. This idea is extended to the stranger, as it says in Exodus 23:9: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." Thus, Jewish tradition teaches us that *hesed* surpasses the notion of self-interest. Whereas the political arena primarily centers on power and self-interest, Jewish faith and tradition relies primarily on the concept of *hesed*. This is why the concept of *hesed* has the potential to be such transformative value in the field of Jewish social justice.

Last but not least, I would argue that achieving a genuine sense of *hesed* requires us

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[146] Sacks, *Civil Society* 14.
[147] Sacks, *Civil Society* 15-16.

to develop a real relationship with God. As established above, *b'tzelem elohim* and *tzedek* can be achieved by imitating God's righteousness through the concept of *imitatio dei*. On the other hand, the ideal form of *hesed* is achieved by "following after God." This metaphor suggests, however, that in order to "follow God," one must be close enough to "see" Him. This language implies a level of intimacy that supersedes the notion of *imitatio dei*. Uniquely, therefore, I would argue that the pursuit of *hesed* requires us to be in relationship with God, rather than simply imitating God's righteousness from afar. Additionally, the concept of *hesed* requires us to be in covenant with other human beings, which provides us with a religious basis for the work of community organizing. This is why I believe *hesed* should be at the top of the spiritual justice ladder.

In conclusion, I would to suggest that this ladder can help people understand their work as a spiritual practice that brings them into a closer relationship with God, as well as other religious and spiritual issues. Just as the Rabbis developed the notion of creation, revelation, and redemption as a three-part foundation for Jewish liturgy, I would like to suggest that *b'tzelem elohim, tzedek*, and *hesed* can serve as a three-part model for the pursuit of *tikkun olam*. By pursing this threefold path, we can encourage people to articulate their commitment to social justice in a more complex and Jewishly literate way.

The ultimate goal of this paper was to demonstrate the incredibly transformative power of congregation-based community organizing. Congregations throughout our movement have already proven how this model can enliven the power and capacity of our communities. As the same time, however, I believe that we must do more to anchor this model in Jewish thought and tradition. Otherwise, we run the risk of simply promoting another great social justice "program." The goal, however, is to present community organizing as a leadership philosophy that has the potential to impact many different areas of the community.

First, organizing has the ability to transform social action committees into long-term campaigns for systemic social change. Second, it has the ability to enliven synagogue life and leadership. Third, it can provide congregants with a new way to understand their commitment to social justice as a vehicle for spiritual elevation. In an era where many Reform Jews are still uncomfortable or unfamiliar with many different aspects of Jewish prayer and ritual, I believe that presenting social justice as a spiritual practice will enable more congregants to engage a meaningful spiritual endeavor. In other words, most congregants who are involved in social justice initiatives at the synagogue are not necessarily the same people who attend Shabbat services or Torah study. Therefore, by presenting organizing as a spiritual venture I believe that we can inspire more Reform Jews to engage in serious Jewish study and reflection.

By framing the pursuit of social justice through the lens of *b'tzelem elohim, tzedek,*

and *hesed,* I hope to encourage congregants to articulate their commitment to social justice in a more profoundly Jewish way. By anchoring the CBCO model in serious Jewish study, I hope to transform what is often a pediatric understanding of *tikkun olam* into a more nuanced, authentic, and engaging enterprise. This project is meant to help modern day Jews understand that our mandate to pursue social justice is a complex and multi-faceted enterprise that encompasses many different philosophies, texts, and perspectives.

By infusing the community organizing model with serious Jewish texts and learning, I believe that it can serve as a rubric for transformative social justice, as well as a fundamental tool for Jewish spirituality and growth in the Reform Movement. Because organizing requires patience, discipline, self-reflection and determination, it allows us to present this work as a unique form of spiritual practice. Furthermore, as Buber and Levinas suggest, each one on one encounter provides us with a unique opportunity to encounter God's presence as well. And as we encourage people to traverse the bridge between narrow self-interest and enlightened self-interest, we challenge people to view organizing as a form of covenantal love. In the end, I believe that organizing has the potential to transform our communities for the myriad reasons analyzed above. Above all, however, I believe that organizing is such an incredibly compelling tool because it empowers congregants to live out the Jewish social justice mandate through the power of covenant, commitment and community.

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