

on religion, secularism, 501(c) organizations, and the jewish left
a primer in two parts, recovered from a dead website
featuring ruth messinger & jill jacobs
(unedited, but lightly reformatted & annotated)

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"missionaries at work"
posted to JVoices on 9/11/2007

whenever i start to get bored with the idea of staying vocal as one of the surprisingly few non-closeted secularists in most of the electronic jewish spaces i frequent, something like this comes up.

ruth messinger, former manhattan Borough President, American Jewish World Service president, and makher-in-chief of the current (and problematic as well as important, of which more another day¹) darfur support campaign in the u.s., had this to say about the purpose of AJWS on JSpot last week:

AJWS and its fellow “emerging [jewish] service and social justice organizations” are “all about new ways to build a meaningful faith connection for Jews seeking beyond the secular.”

it's nice, if appalling, to have the most prominent leader of the u.s. jewish liberal nonprofit sector confirm my most deeply-seated suspicions about her organization's basic intent. but it should raise a whole lot of questions for those of us who make up the secular majority of u.s. jews about what organizations we want to support, and which we want to actively critique in their work in u.s. jewish communities.

i adore AJWS' work outside of the u.s., with the exception of its past few years' focus on darfur (again, a subject for another day). it's one of the few groups that effectively does what every international funder in the global north claims to do: take money from liberal u.s. citizens and give it to radicals in the global south to do things that most of its donors would actively oppose in their own communities. which is to say it does a great job moving cash to sex worker organizing projects in southeast asia, indigenous/campesino movements in central america, street vendors' unions in africa, HIV medication access fights in the former USSR, and queer/trans struggles in south asia from donors who support

¹ as i wrote in another piece for JVoices, the "Save Darfur" campaign that had AJWS at its center was quite blatantly less about supporting darfuri people targeted by a genocidal war or expressing solidarity with darfuri resistance to genocide, or even understanding the history of the sudanese state, than it was a way to express and encourage anti-arab racism, and through that undermine solidarity with palestinian resistance to genocide in the wake of the jenin massacre and israel's 2006 war on lebanon. darfuri refugees were almost entirely absent from the campaign until it was winding down; they never had a meaningful role in its leadership.

bloomberg/giuliani/shumer/clinton “clean up the streets”/”broken window theory”/”quality of life” attacks on sex workers, street vendors, queers, transwomen, HIV+ folks and indigenous migrant workers in the u.s.²

but AJWS’ work at home has often left me cold. at times it’s been wonderful, bringing (for instance) the struggle against the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) to a substantial jewish audience in a way that didn’t dilute AJWS’ grantees’ anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal, anti-’washington consensus’ politics, and placed the issue solidly in a hemispheric context. but it’s been **almost entirely geared towards the religiously oriented minority of u.s. jews**. most of its outreach and education materials, fantastic as many of them are, are either framed through religious texts, designed to function in religious contexts (dvar-toyres, etc), or disseminated almost exclusively through religious institutions (shuln, day schools, etc), or all three.

one good gauge of this: **every one of the “jewish resources” listed on its website is religiously oriented** - written by a rabbi, published by a religious press, dealing with a religious topic, using religion as its lens to examine social justice (either halakhicly or in the loose ‘tikkun olam’ mode), or more than one of these. the closest thing to a secular volume is michael walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution*, a (fascinating) examination of how this fundamental jewish myth has influenced political traditions and the conception of revolution. **there’s not a single sign of the fairly vast literature from or about the jewish secular progressive and radical - or even liberal - movements which have been a much larger part of the past two hundred years of jewish social justice work**. even the most acceptable face of the jewish secular left - the vast participation by young u.s. jews in the african american struggles of the 1950s-70s - is replaced by the bearded visage of abraham joshua heschel, whose comparatively activist orientation and ties to the religious wing of the civil rights movement had little support from his Conservative Movement colleagues until many years later.

so in some ways it’s a relief to have messinger confirm that AJWS’ basic conception of the role of her organization in relation to u.s. jews is a missionary one. it’s far better that she’s honest (at least in jewish left spaces) about AJWS’ “faith connection” aim than to remain unpersuasively disingenuous, as she has until now, as far as i’ve seen.

it would, however, be nice if the organization’s websites and other public faces ceased to claim that its home-community goal is “promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community”, though. that framing implies that what matters to AJWS is that jews take on progressive values and responsibilities (which, for most u.s. jews, come from secular sources), not that we “build a meaningful faith connection” (which, for most religious u.s. jews, does not imply a particularly progressive stance or global perspective).

also worrying is the fact that messinger’s new framing implies that in her vision, **AJWS uses “service and social justice” as a hook to draw jews into a “meaningful faith connection”, or to redefine “service and social justice” in faith-based terms**. this is a radically different project from the various efforts to develop a jewish theology of liberation - which in many ways looks at how faith can be used to bring jews into progressive or radical political consciousness, and to define faith in terms of liberation. the one moves liberal- and left-leaning jews into religion, the other moves religious jews to the left. the former, by endorsing the religious right’s axiom that religious belief should be the basis of political legitimacy and practice, not only **strengthens the position of the entrenched religious right in u.s.**

2 i’m less intimately informed about AJWS’ work now than 20 years ago, when my then partner was working at their headquarters, but i understand that all of this is less true today.

politics, but also marginalizes and politically delegitimizes the majority of u.s. jews, whose largely liberal to progressive politics are firmly secular in origins and expression.

it also - in the (unfortunate and hopefully temporary) absence of a much stronger jewish liberation theology movement - is very likely to have a conservativizing effect. we know from the AJC surveys as well as more anecdotal reports that while there are plenty of progressive religious jews and secular jewish neocons, conservatism correlates quite strongly with degree of religious commitment in the u.s. jewish community (see for instance [this](#) and [this](#)^{*3}). which must, if we take an evidence-based approach to life and organizing, make us sceptical of efforts whose stated aim is to increase religious identification among progressive jews, rather than either strengthening progressive and radical views among the already religious or promoting those perspectives among jews in ways that are independent of religion.

fundamentally, though, what it comes down to is the simple fact that between the christians and the chabadniks we've got too many missionaries targeting u.s. jews as it is. AJWS should decide whether it thinks the many culturally specific and secular movements it supports elsewhere in the world are a model it supports or not. if so, why not act to support such efforts at home? if not, why support them abroad?

if, however, as is more likely, it continues to pursue the path of promoting a different and in many ways opposite agenda among u.s. jews and elsewhere in the world, it's in a long tradition of american exceptionalism. and it does get props for at least supporting good work in most of the world, and even a few extra points for honesty about its double standard.

* careful readers of the notes to the latter study will have noted that its researchers found the secular respondents to the jewish population studies were somewhat more politically conservative than the Reform and Reconstructionist respondents. while this may hold true for Reconstructionists - a politically defined denomination in many ways, with a strong liberation theology strain - it is largely an artifact of the methodologies used for jewish population surveys, which undercount jews who live outside of 'traditionally jewish' neighborhoods, jews without notably ashkenazi last names, and jews who choose to distance themselves from jewish institutional life - all largely secular categories, and (in the latter case in particular) often progressive ones. which is to say, it's a lot easier to find progressive Reform jews and conservative secular jews than progressive secular jews when your survey sample is chosen based in large part on the UJA mailing list.

3 these links are to an article by lisa lerer in Politico called "The Menshes for the Job" describing hilary clinton's attempt to court the far-right Orthodox Union by emphasizing her Zionism, and an article by laurence a. kotler-berkowitz and lawrence sternberg in Jewish Political Studies Review called "The Politics of American Jews: Cohesion, Division, and Representation at the Institutional Level" arguing that "the political division between the activists and their main constituents is usually modest and does not warrant concerns about a lack of effective political representation in the organized Federation-JCRC system."

*a response to jill jacobs' reply on JSpot (posted 9/11/2007)
posted to JVoices on 9/20/2007*

(don't worry, you'll get the gist of what jacobs said from my response)

here, quite a few days later than i'd've liked (apparently the season takes its toll of busyness even on non-shul-goers like me), are some notes in reply to Jill's thoughtful response. it's rather longer than i'd intended, but i hope that this will help make what i am and am not arguing clearer; trying to be terse and succinct seems, judging by some of Jill's comments, to have made me a touch more confusing. so i hope you'll indulge me on the length

to begin with, a few words on distinctions and dichotomies.

first, and most incidentally to either of our points, i'm not sure where you see me making any "distinction between "'traditional' and 'non-traditional' observance". the only place in my post where the word "traditional" appears is in the phrase " 'traditionally jewish' neighborhoods", where it refers to jewish population surveys' basis in unexamined assumptions about where jews live. i (quite deliberately) said nothing anywhere about differences in forms of observance or practice among religiously-oriented jews, because they don't have anything to do with my argument.

second, i don't think there's a "strict dichotomy" between religiously-oriented and secular jewish folks (or that i implied one). i have little doubt that most of the jewish folks you know are "interested in some sort of connection to religious meaning [etc]"; i could say almost exactly the opposite. from this we learn only that the two of us move in rather different jewish social circles – one largely religiously-oriented, one largely secular. both of us could certainly name people in our lives to place at all the points on a spectrum of secularism and observance. but while my post certainly includes a critique of the willingness of progressive jewish non-profits to ignore the secular majority of u.s. jews, even this is not particularly based on a dichotomy.

for instance, a seder-going, god-believing vegetarian-as-kosher friend of mine might well not define herself as secular but remain both unreachable through synagogue-based organizing strategies and unswayable by references to traditional jewish texts' social justice implications (as opposed, say, to fliers at ABC No Rio with catchy quotes from clara lemlich and albert memmi). importantly, though, this isn't symmetrical: only some non-secular identified folks and practically no folks who do self-identify as secular can be reached through these modes; most folks who don't identify as secular can be reached through other strategies. i'm not arguing that these modes should never be used, but that it's a problem when they become a sole or dominant approach to reaching jews, precisely because there is no dichotomy exists between religiously-oriented and secular **people**.

what i do think exists is **a distinction that's strategically, politically, and culturally important between secular and religiously-oriented approaches to organizing among jews** for social justice. no distinction is absolute and rigid, but political analysis, like any other kind, is based on figuring out which distinctions lead to interesting and useful approaches to action. my basic suggestion in all of this is that if we take what ruth messinger* said seriously – assume that she meant what she said, in a pshat

kind of way – it shows us ways of distinguishing among current approaches to jewish social justice work which have very concrete and practical implications for our movements and practices.

that said, i'm not implying any "hidden goal", i'm simply taking seriously what messinger said in the context where she said it. she was assenting to your disagreement with a description of AJWS as a "secular" organization, and giving a concise definition of the specific way in which they're not secular – a definition which (not surprisingly) closely reflects the approach that the organization takes in relation to u.s. jewish communities. **being "all about new ways to build a meaningful faith connection" does not mean that AJWS doesn't care about bringing liberal u.s. jews towards supporting radical groups in the global south; but the two are simply not synonyms. and, as i've tried to point out, there are ways in which the two goals do run counter to each other.** all of which means that it **matters** which of the two is the guiding principle.

the fact that "people who do service or advocacy through AJWS or any number of other Jewish organizations will 'build a meaningful faith connection'" seems to me something worth examining, especially when it's stated as what an organization is "all about". does this serve the stated goals of the organization? what are its implications for the jewish left? for jewish political and cultural life more generally? for other communities of resistance? for our movements?

as you say, **having "a meaningful faith connection" is by no means the same as "religiously-observant". both, however, involve a relationship to jewishness through a religious/faith-based model**, as opposed to a secular approach. 'observant', 'god-fearing' and 'meaningfully faith-connected' all mark different points within the same field; what concerns me most is the frequent constriction of visions of organizing among jews for social justice to this field. or, in the terms that AJWS' mission statement uses, the assumption that "the values and responsibilities of global citizenship" can only enter "the [sic] Jewish community" through "a meaningful faith connection" that in some way goes "beyond the secular".

this desire to 'go beyond the secular' – and indeed the notion that 'faith connections' are "beyond" the secular, rather than simply different from it (or, kholile, the other way around) – is what i'm interested in and deeply worried by.

as to your comments on the distinction i drew between two religiously-oriented approaches to jewish social justice organizing:

it's absolutely true that the relationships between the notions of 'religious' and 'secular' in jewish life are complicated ones, and that the distinction between them is not part of jewish folk culture, historically speaking (like most other folk cultures). but for the past few hundred years, since the movements on the one hand to 'normalize' western european jewishness into a religion of 'judaism' and on the other to end the control of halakhic law and its practitioners over eastern european jewish communities (both complex blends of choices and contexts, neither a 'necessity', i would argue), there has been a pretty clear distinction between the two kinds of approaches to jewishness. to use your examples: **in religious approaches the toyre (tanakh & talmud, especially) is seen as a record of history and guide to conduct, in secular ones it's understood as a compilation of myth; in religious approaches a jewish sense of self and peoplehood is seen as tied to toyre (broadly speaking, and variously interpreted), in secular ones it's seen as tied to historical experience.**

the first place you point to me making that division is one where i do nothing of the kind. i didn't identify either walzer or heschel as themselves 'religious' or 'secular', and in fact cited both of their books on the AJWS "jewish resources" list as examples of the list's exclusively religious orientation. walzer's book is an account of the effects of religious tradition on politics; its interpretation of the relationship of jewishness and organizing is a religiously oriented (and very useful) one. the use of heschel's work on the list to represent the movements of the 1950s-70s – and the absence of works like, for instance, debra schultz' *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* – illustrates a choice to present the 'faith-based' face of that moment in jewish political history rather than a more comprehensive view. people's choices around observance aren't what I'm talking about here – the approach their work takes is. daniel boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct*, for me, is a great example: boyarin's orthodox practice is part of what made the book possible, and adds richness to its examination of the political, social and cultural roots and branches of the opposed gender systems inscribed in parts of the talmud (and ashkenazi folk culture) and in zionist ideology, but the book is a firmly secular work in its orientation.

your caricature of my argument as assuming that the world contains only "progressive/enlightened/liberal secular Jews who may or may not be drawn into religion through social justice; and religious Jews who may be enlightened by Jewish liberation theology" is a strange one. a liberation theology can, after all, only be created by politically radical religious folks, and the jewish liberation theology tradition extends from (in the mythic sphere) korakh's rejection of the hereditary rule of the bnei amram and samuel's critique of kingship to (historically and contemporarily) the mileitchitzer rav and the svara yeshiva. similarly, the secular neocons i mentioned are neither progressive nor likely to be drawn to religion by the appeal of social justice (at least as we would define it), and their lineage is as long as that of jewish secularism.

the dichotomy i **was** setting up (not as an iron-bound binary, but as an analytically useful distinction between distinguishable entities) was, as before, not one of people but of approaches and strategies. jewish liberation theology addresses itself to folks who share a commitment to observance and religious practice of one kind or another, and whose politics range widely. the approach messinger describes addresses itself to folks who share an interest in social justice and service (a term whose vagueness i've always found intriguing), but whose religious and secular outlooks vary. the former uses its shared ground to build a common, radical, political sensibility. the latter, to quote once more from the comment that sparked this, aims to use its shared ground to "build a meaningful faith connection". i think these are interestingly different projects, with different concrete implications. as i've implied, i think the former has much more to offer our movements and communities than the latter, though my personal commitments diverge quite strongly from either.

among the flavors of religiously oriented jews you describe⁴, it seems to me that the first and second are very much the people i see as powerfully fed by liberation theology approaches (and very much not the 'seekers' of messinger's comment; these ones have already found something, which happens not to be secular). the question i see more closely connected to this discussion, though, is how we, as folks

4 jacobs wrote: "In the world of Jews who might be interested in service/justice and religious meaning, there are: Jews who relate to Judaism primarily through religion, and come to social justice through religion; Jews who want to connect their ritual lives with their work in the world, and who don't want to feel like they're living a bifurcated existence; Jews who haven't thought much about either service/sj or religion, but are looking for something to add meaning to their lives; Jews who have a tenuous connection with religion, service/social justice, etc. and want to strengthen their understanding of all/some of the above; and many, many more".

committed to promoting social justice work in jewish communities (to adapt AJWS' mission slightly), relate to folks in the last two categories.

if the goal is jews doing social justice work, it seems to me that folks “looking for something to add meaning to their lives” should be helped to find social justice work that they find fulfilling and meaningful. bringing them into a “meaningful faith connection” (assuming that they turn out to find faith meaningful) is simply not the same thing. at best, it's a far less direct way of reaching the goal; at worst, it doesn't lead to active involvement in social justice work at all; somewhere in the middle, for the many folks who don't find meaning through religiously-oriented approaches to social justice work (whether or not they find it meaningful in other parts of life), it can discourage them from involvement in jewish social justice work, or in social justice work as jews.

for the tenuously connected folks seeking understanding, all of the above applies, and more. looking for a deeper understanding of jewish religion doesn't imply an interest in identifying with it (in any form), practicing it (ditto), or building any kind of a jewish “faith connection”. i can present myself as an example: i'm fascinated by many aspects of jewish religion and actively study the subject to gain a greater understanding of it, though with no more interest in identifying or faith-connecting with it than in the forms of protestantism and islam which i also study. again, if our goal is jews doing social justice work, the clear organizing task with this type of person is to help them move from expanded understanding to action in the sphere of social justice, while supporting their investigations into the many forms of jewishness. setting a goal of developing one specific kind of relationship to jewishness – that “faith connection” again – is a different project.

finally, you write:

I would also note that the major codifiers of Jewish law didn't distinguish between the “religious” and the “secular” aspects of being a Jew. After all—the Shulchan Arukh and every other major code of law includes not only sections on ritual law, but also Choshen Mishpat, which focuses on civil laws (paying workers, renting apartments, and all of the other “secular” aspects of life).

clearly, these law codes don't separate out a ‘religious’ area of jewish life to legislate separately. however, like the various schools of sharia and christian canon law, they are religious law codes – their authority derives from the divine; their practitioners are religious figures; etc. that they include legislation which applies to areas in which states' nominally secular legal systems now claim to supercede all forms of religious law doesn't have much to do with this. consider, for instance, that it's precisely the contemporary jewish communities which rely most on the authority of the *Shulkhan Orekh* (the ones in my neighborhood favor the ashkenazi pronunciation, as do i) who are most concerned with separating themselves from secular life of any kind. calling the subject matter of the Khoshen Mishpat ‘secular’ makes about as much sense as identifying the shifting legislation of the catholic church on usury and loans for interest as ‘secular’ – both are areas of religious law relating to economic life which were enforced on entire communities (with state assistance when possible and felt to be necessary) until that became impractical in most cases with the rise of modern nation-state legal systems. while the secular/religious distinction did not exist when these legal codes were written, they are still very clearly positioned on one side of that line. the communities, from new skver to mea shearim, which use them are the best examples of this.

to the extent that the question of these halakhic law codes has to do with “aspects of being a jew”, i think it only serves to emphasize that secular jewishness is a comparatively recent phenomenon (150

years⁵ vs 1500⁶), and one which is at odds with the halakhic tradition in particular, as well as the other kinds of religiously-oriented jewishness. many forms of jewish secularism share with halakhic approaches an integrated vision of jewishness which does not involve separate spheres of synagogue/ritual and ‘civil’ life. the difference is that **secular approaches generally place history and culture at the center, recognizing the validity of religious forms of jewish life but not their claim to an exclusive right to define what acts, people, and identities are jewish, while halakhic approaches place toyre as the defining center of all aspects of jewish life, thus rejecting the notion that there could exist a secular definition of or approach to jewishness.**

and, to end more or less where i began, it is this restriction of jewishness to judaism – of jewish life in all its forms to “faith connections” – which i see as the heart of the problematic aspects of messinger’s description of her organization’s goals for those it touches in the u.s. jewish community.

* oy, don’t [sic] me again – messinger didn’t capitalize her name in her header; if she wants to join me in the traditionally jewish practice of rejecting case differences, let her... i’ve capitalized you, since you capitalized yourself, but i do think it’s an assimilationist act and prefer not to be capitalized myself when i use the roman alphabet. <grin>

5 i was being conservative here, and thinking only about explicitly stated rejections of rabbinic authority (personal, institutional, and textual/canonical). i now see what we’re stuck calling “jewish secularism” as part of a vernacular jewish tradition of rejecting priestly and then rabbinic authority that goes back as far as we have evidence for the communities and cultures that became jewish. you can read about that in *Circle Aleph* #1, or on meansof.org under “essays”.

6 anything resembling either jewishness or judaism as we understand them first appears a few centuries into the christian era; the Talmud was most likely compiled in the 500s AD (and possibly as late as ~650AD), and the current form of the Tanakh (the Masoretic Text) was established during the 600s AD at the earliest (though some version of the compilation may be as early as the 100s AD).