

JUDAISM AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY: POLITICAL PERVERSION OF AN ANCIENT CREED

by Don Feder

Last December, a conference sponsored by *Tikkun* magazine brought 1,500 Jewish leftists to Manhattan to explore ways of reconciling Judaism with progressive politics.

On April 16, the Passover Peace Coalition held a rally in New York, addressed by Ed Asner among other dignitaries, which called for the creation of a Palestinian state. At the same time, *Tikkun* published its Passover Haggadah. The seder's traditional four questions are rewritten to radicalize the service. To the query: "Why do we break the matzah in two?" this response is offered: "Because the bread of affliction becomes the bread of freedom — when we share it. The Land of Israel, which gives bread to two peoples, must be divided in two...."

These are but two of the most recent expressions of the influence of liberation theology on the thinking of Jewish radicals.

The pernicious doctrine, which exerts a powerful influence on the politics of the Christian left, is seeking a foothold in the Jewish community. Though a negation of Torah values, as well as a dire threat to both Israel and the survival of the Jewish people, it is hailed as the consummate application of Jewish ethics to international affairs.

Borrowed from Avant-Garde Christianity. Formulated by Latin American theologians seeking a spiritual rationale for their radical politics, liberation theology has taken avant-garde Christianity by storm, making significant inroads in the main line Protestant denominations (the National Council of Churches has become a virtual cheering section for the creed) and the more politicized Catholic orders (the Jesuits and Maryknollers in particular). Now it is being marketed to American Jewry under a kosher label. It is, in fact, as kosher as a roast pig, stuffed with shellfish, served on Yom Kippur.

In the past two years, the B'nai B'rith Jewish Book Club, perhaps the largest book distributor of its kind, has offered no fewer than three works touting Hebraic liberationism: *Judaism And Global Survival* by Richard H. Schwartz, *On Earth As It Is In Heaven: Jews, Christians and Liberation Theology* by Dan Cohn-Sherbock and *Toward A Jewish Theology of Liberation* by Mark Ellis. Significantly, the latter were published by Orbis Books, subsidiary of the Maryknoll order, fount of liberation theology in North America.

Jewish liberation theology has its own journal, the aforementioned *Tikkun*, a bimonthly slick magazine, and its revolutionary vanguard, the New Jewish Agenda. The NJA, while relatively small (with a following of perhaps 5,000), has secured membership in the Jewish Community Relations Councils of Los Angeles, Detroit, and half a dozen other cities.

Divinely Ordained Struggle. Liberationism is an attempt to merge Scriptures with Marxist dogma. The Exodus story is viewed as a paradigm for revolutionary socialist movements in the third world. Just as G-d ordained the manumission of the Children of

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Israel from Egyptian bondage and led them to the Promised Land, liberation theology posits the struggle against capitalism as divinely ordained.

Guerrilla fighters become the neo-Moses and the future socialist state the New Israel, to be secured after the wilderness of class conflict has been traversed.

Familiar Falsehoods. Behind this religious facade lies familiar dialectical cant: capitalism is inherently oppressive; virtue resides with the proletarian/peasant class; wealth is a zero sum game; value resides solely in labor; via trade and investment, developed nations bleed the third world (raising the exploitation theory to an international plane); the distribution of riches is inequitable, both among individuals and between societies (for instance; the industrialized countries of North America and Western Europe have only 20 percent of the world's population, but control almost 80 percent of its resources); revolutionary violence is justifiable to overcome the violence intrinsic in the status quo.

Says Father Sergio Torres, a Maryknoll lecturer and prominent liberation theologian: "The process of colonization, liberation and organization is best understood in Marxist terms." Father Miguel d'Escoto, Sandinista Foreign Minister and former Maryknoll communications director, observes: "Capitalism is intrinsically wrong at its base." The chief systematizer of liberationism, Juan Luis Segundo, adds: "The history of Marxism, even at its most oppressive, offers right now more hope than the history of existing capitalism...."

Obligation to Communism. Some are even more candid. In *Communism In The Bible* (Orbis Books, 1982) Jose Miranda urges: "It is time to drop all these side issues and concentrate on the fundamental fact: the Bible teaches communism." Also, "No one can take the Bible seriously without concluding that according to it, the rich for being rich, should be punished." Therefore: "Communism is obligatory for Christians."

And for Jews as well, say Jewish liberationists. "The religious Jew needs the secular and socialist critique," proclaims Ellis. "And the secular Jew benefits from ideals and symbols spoken in a language that has languished."

According to its adherents, liberation theology strives for the realization of Jewish ideals: peace, brotherhood, and justice. It gives new meaning to the Exodus story, making it a metaphor for Third World liberation struggles, and attempts to actualize the prophetic vision of an era of harmony and equality. Since liberationism seeks the attainment of Jewish goals, and invokes Jewish symbols toward these ends, Jews should feel a particular affinity for the doctrine, *Tikkun*, the Agenda, and their fellow travelers insist.

To one whose Hebrew education extends not much beyond Bible stories in English, and whose knowledge of politics and economics was absorbed at the knees of Jesse Jackson, this all sounds quite plausible. Liberation theology is, in fact, a betrayal of Jewish heritage — a rejection of *halakah* (or Jewish law), a deadly assault on Israel, and a stimulus for left-wing anti-Semitism.

Ideological Prism. As Rabbi Leon Klenicki, Director of the Interfaith Affairs Department of the Anti-Defamation League, explains, liberationists have distorted the meaning of the Exodus, by focusing its brilliant spiritual light through an ideological prism. Klenicki concedes: "Judaism certainly recognizes the Exodus as liberation, but maintains that the liberation from Egyptian bondage became meaningful only when Israel received the law at Mount Sinai...."

The Rabbi cogently observes: "these points are overlooked by Gutierrez and the theologians of liberation. They consider liberation an end in itself, not realizing that

physical or economic oppression can only be overcome by a freedom that has transcendental meaning. Otherwise, the liberation process ends in another form of tyranny or authoritarian dictatorship.”

Proper Role of Wealth. This distortion is duplicated in the effort to make Jewish values conform to revolutionary dogma. Unlike certain interpretations of Christianity, Judaism has never despised wealth. The Torah enjoins that property be obtained honestly, used responsibly, and shared to an appropriate degree with the less fortunate. But it has never condemned riches, per se, as a sign of sinfulness or censured the wealthy. The mere possession of property was never considered a mark of iniquity.

In his book *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics And Economic Life*, Talmudic scholar Meir Tamari, Chief Economist of the Bank of Israel, writes: “In Judaism, the merchant and entrepreneur play a legitimate and even a desirable role in commerce and therefore are morally entitled to profit in return for fulfilling their function, without need of apology.”

Key to the Jewish understanding of a humane society is the concept of *tsadaka*. Often misinterpreted as charity, it means no less than justice. The *mitzvah* (commandment) requires the observant Jew to set aside a certain portion of his income for the less fortunate, as a matter of religious obligation.

It must be noted, however, that the commitment to give is finite. It never approaches the point of confiscation or income-leveling. In Biblical times, an Israelite was required to contribute one-tenth of his income for the poor every third year (the origin of the Medieval tithes). In the other two, the corners of his field were to be left unharvested, for those in need. Even by welfare-state standards of taxation (let alone the radical redistributionism of Marxist states), this was a modest donation.

Escaping Poverty. Maimonides, the great codifier of Jewish law, identified eight distinct levels of *tsadaka*, with varying degrees of merit attached to each. On the highest plane is providing a poor person with employment or a trade, thus enabling him to permanently escape the poverty cycle.

This is a reflection of the Jewish belief that the greatest gift to the impoverished is helping them to help themselves. Is it a kindness to deliver Third World masses into the hands of Marxist regimes, infamous not only for their repressive cruelty but also their perpetuation and extension of existing poverty?

But liberation theology is worse than a mere misrepresentation of Judaism. It is a negation of the central tenets of the faith. The deity of liberationism isn't the G-d of the Patriarchs and Prophets, the G-d Jews have faithfully worshipped for the past three millennia, the G-d for whom Jewish martyrs have willingly surrendered their lives with His praises on their lips.

Judaism perceives G-d as supernatural, the creator of all life and giver of law, the one who shapes history. He is infinitely caring, and intimately involved with his creation.

History as God. For liberation theologians, history is God. When liberationist Jose Bonino states, “...there is no truth outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which men are involved as agents. There is, therefore no knowledge except in action itself,” he means essentially there is no G-d, as Judaism discerns Him.

The God of liberation theology is the personification of historical forces which, through the Marxist dialectic, are leading us to a classless utopia. With the party as its priesthood,

this divinity is worshipped through service to the revolution. Efforts to forestall the proletarian state are blasphemy, punished by temporal damnation via gulag or firing squad.

Enunciating this collectivist catechism, Father Ernesto Cardenal, Sandinista Minister of Culture, proclaims: "Marxism is the only solution for the world. For me the revolution and the Kingdom of Heaven, mentioned in the Gospel, are the same thing. A Christian should embrace Marxism if he wants to be with G-d and with men...As mankind matures, religion will start disappearing slowly until it vanishes completely."

Dialectical Deity. Religion will become obsolete, when humanity rejects the supernatural G-d of antiquity for the new dialectical deity, fathered by historical forces, leading its chosen to the land promised by Marx and Lenin. In this secular messianic vision, clearly there is no place for Judaism, with its insistence on a G-d above and outside of history and obedience to His dictates, revealed in the Oral and Written Law. Thus, while proclaiming its Jewishness, Jewish liberation theology seeks the extinction of normative Judaism.

Before offering hosannas, and sacrificing whole nations, to comrade golden calf, it would be well to scrutinize the claims of its prophets. Is capitalism the great satanic exploiter which must be vanquished for virtue to reign?

True, the first world uses the preponderance of the earth's resources. How else could it produce the majority of its manufactured goods and agricultural exports? From automobiles to wheat, and electronic equipment to medicines and refrigerators, most of the necessities of civilized living come from nations with relatively free economies.

Michael Novak, the lay Catholic scholar, highlights another flaw in the liberationist analysis of Third World economies. "There are serious problems with the theory of dependency, whence socialism in Latin America seeks to derive its legitimacy," Novak writes. "First countries such as Canada and the U.S. have become far larger exporters of raw materials — grain, lumber, coal, etc. — than all of Latin America put together."

Case for Capitalism. Henry Hazlitt, the dean of free market economists, summarized the moral case for capitalism. "Capitalism has enormously raised the level of the masses. It has wiped out whole areas of poverty. It has greatly reduced infant mortality and made it possible to cure diseases and prolong life. It has reduced human suffering. Because of capitalism, millions live today who would otherwise not have been born. If these facts have no ethical relevance, then it is impossible to say in what ethical relevance consists."

In fact, liberationists have set up a straw man. The nations of Central and South America are no more capitalistic than they are (in most instances) democratic, or than Imperial Russia was *laissez faire* prior to 1917 revolution. Says Novak: "the fact seems to be that Latin American economies are pre-capitalistic, disproportionately state-directed. The leading social classes are government officials, land-holders and the military. Yet it is precisely here, in its economic theories, that liberation theology most borrows from Marxist analysis."

In these nations, anywhere from half to three-quarters of the economy is state controlled, including banking and basic industries. The government makes most investment decisions, acts as employer of first resort, heavily subsidizes consumer goods, and directs the development of natural resources. If the masses indeed are mired in poverty, the problem would appear to be not too much capitalism but too little.

"Gospel Put Into Practice." The Canaan of Liberation theology is a land not of milk and honey but blood and barbed wire. Their utopian models are the Stalinist states of the

Caribbean and Central America, whose dubious blessings they would bestow on the rest of the continent.

Maryknoll publications speak of Nicaragua having made "its passover through the Red Sea, leaving behind its slavery and now moving toward the Promised land." Of his first visit to Castro's island gulag, Ernesto Cardenal raves: "I saw that Cuba was the Gospel put into practice."

In Nicaragua, liberation theologians are more than mere armchair enthusiasts for the revolution, having joined the upper echelons of the *commandantes*. Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, the Maryknoll priest who founded Orbis Books in 1970, is the Sandinista foreign minister. Father Ernesto Cardenal Martinez, another padre who exchanged the clerical collar for the commissariat, serves as the regime's minister of culture.

This, then is the culmination of the liberationists' spiritual quest. Their exodus leads to a new bondage, more implacable, more ferocious, more dedicated to the absolute regimentation and exploitation of humanity than any which preceded it.

They speak of liberation, but the Central American reality is a statist nightmare from which there is no awakening: neighborhood informers, divine mobs, imprisonment of dissidents, the exile of priests who remain true to their vows, the slaughter of Indians and mobilization of an entire nation to create the largest army in the region.

The socialist elite prove taskmasters of surpassing severity. Hyper-inflation, rationing, bread lines, the destruction of independent labor unions (strikes resolved at bayonet point) are ubiquitous. This is not the repair of the world (*tikkun olam*) but its laceration, all the more bitter as the atrocities are committed in the name of the old ideals.

Latin Anti-Semitism. And how have the Jews fared in lands conquered by the cause liberation theology has consecrated? Nicaragua's small but vibrant Jewish community was obliterated, its members forced into exile. Reminiscent of the Nazi degradation of Viennese Jews during the Anschluss, in the early days of the Sandinista junta, Jewish leaders (including 80-year-old Abraham Gorn, unofficial head of the community) were forced to sweep the streets.

Of 10,000 Jews in Cuba, prior to the revolution, fewer than 200 remain. The Falashas, or black Jews of Ethiopia, had to be rescued by an Israeli airlift from a famine unleashed by the nation's Marxist rulers.

In lands where the dreams of Ellis and company have been realized, Jews are persecuted for their relative prosperity. Rabbi Klenicki, an Argentinean by birth, ironically notes this reversal of traditional Latin American anti-Semitism. "Anti-Semitism was influential in Argentina in the 1910s and 1920s, when conservative groups accused Jews of being agents of Marxism and promoters of Bolshevik revolution. Fifty years later, followers of liberation theology accuse the Jewish community of being agents of Wall Street and American imperialism."

Under the Sandinistas, Jewish businesses were confiscated, homes ransacked, and rather convincing death threats made to encourage emigration (all thoroughly documented in a 1983 report by the Anti-Defamation League, which calls Nicaragua: "a country without Jews, but not without anti-Semitism").

In a vivid illustration of its true loyalties, the New Jewish Agenda made a much-publicized fact-finding trip to Nicaragua in 1984, to refute the ADL's charges. The

firebombing of the Managua synagogue by Sandinista guerrillas, during a Shabbat service in 1978, was held to be the work of Somoza provocateurs, posing as rebels.

The exile of Nicaragua's Jews was rationalized on the grounds that they were all Somocistas. Even the pronounced anti-Semitism of the Sandinista newspaper *Nuevo Diario* (which once editorialized that "the world's money, banking and finance are in the hands of descendants of Jews, eternal protectors of Zionism") was excused as revolutionary hyperbole.

Faith of Marxism. The NJA's "findings" were foreordained. When the Los Angeles chapter presented its "People of the Book" award to Ernesto Cardenal, in December 1983, one of the members present described the conversion of the Managua Synagogue into a social club for children of the oligarchy as "a kind of consecration," which from the perspective of Jewish liberationists it most certainly was, Marxism not Judaism being their true faith.

In marked contrast to their condition in communist states, Jews have prospered under democratic capitalism, perhaps more than any other group. In America today, the children and grandchildren of penniless immigrants (peddlers and garment workers) are professionals, successful entrepreneurs, academicians, and CEOs. None of this was possible under the feudal economy of Czarist Russia. Nor have the Jews of the Soviet Union, where wealth accumulation is impossible (for other than the party elect), experienced comparable fortune.

If capitalism is the epitome of exploitation, why have Jews done so exceptionally well under free markets? The Marxist critique attributes this phenomenon to Jewish malevolence. (Marx himself, though of Jewish ancestry, was a raving anti-Semite). Indeed, one might say that the persecution of the Jews in communist states is entirely consistent with their theoretical foundations.

In reality, economic freedom rewards hard work, diligence, and creativity at which the Jews excel. Jewish success in the free world is due to Israel's virtues, not its vices.

Liberationists and Israel. No examination of Judaism and liberation theology would be complete without a consideration of the creed's potential impact on Israel. At a time when the Jewish state is condemned in the court of world opinion, which has conferred the status of liberation struggle on Arab violence in Judea and Samaria, supporters of Israel must be particularly sensitive to such considerations.

If Israel were to receive a fair hearing anywhere on the liberationist spectrum, it should be from Jewish exponents of the creed. Consider then the treatment afforded Israel and Zionism by Marc Ellis.

In *Toward A Jewish Theology of Liberation*, Ellis informs us: "A practicing Jew within the liberationist perspective sees the state of Israel as neither central nor peripheral, but rather as a necessary and flawed attempt to create an autonomous presence in the Middle East."

Necessary and flawed? The defects alluded to are Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, in the elucidation of which Ellis repeats and amplifies the most outrageous slanders of the hate-Israel crowd. "A Jewish theology of liberation is unequivocal in this regard," says Ellis, "the Palestinian people have been deeply wronged in the creation of Israel and in the occupation of the territories. As we celebrate our empowerment, we must repent our transgressions and stop them immediately." But how can we recompense a people "deeply wronged in the creation of Israel" other than by abolition of the same?

Of what did these transgressions consist? Acceding to the transfer of two-thirds of the territory of Mandate Palestine to the Arabs? Providing those Arabs who remained in Israel with more civil liberties and prosperity than the inhabitants of any other nation in the region?

But let that pass. The Palestinians “are discriminated against in employment, education and land use,” Ellis insists. “Resisting these injustices can result in blacklisting and arrest, often without legal remedy. Once Palestinians are imprisoned, brutality and torture are commonplace.”

Ignoring Islamic, Marxist Oppression. Nowhere in Ellis’s diatribe is there mention of the oppression of Jews and Christians in Islamic lands, just as his fellow liberationists ignore the plight of the masses (the poverty, denial of basic freedoms and state terror) in Marxist states.

Reality is subverted by dogma in Ellis’s description of the war in Lebanon, which is made to conform to the Leninist dictum of domestic suppression fostering external aggression. “In some ways, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June, 1982 is an extension of this [Israel’s] internal colonialism. The atrocities committed by the Israel military are well-documented [by whom?], and Feuerlicht cites the July 18, 1981, bombing of Beirut, almost a year before the official invasion began, as a reflection of the brutality with which the Arabs within Israel are treated.”

What is to be done with such a malign, racist entity? First we must make unspecified amends to those we have wronged, including the creation of a PLO state on the West Bank. (Jewish liberationists, Ellis declares, support “a Palestinian state formed by the Palestine Liberation Organization.”)

Ellis looks forward most eagerly to a time “perhaps a hundred years from now,” when “we can speak of a confederation of Israel and Palestine and how out of tragic conflict a healing took place to the benefit of both communities.” Perhaps even sooner?

Israel’s role in the liberationist scheme is acquiescence to annihilation, to atone for its sins against the oppressed of the Third World. For Jews to express such an ideology, gives new dimensions to the expression suicidal.

Out of the Realm of Theory. Acting in solidarity with the Middle Eastern forces of liberationism, Nicaragua and the New Jewish Agenda take Ellis’s advocacy out of the realm of theory. In an article in *Commentary* (“Sandinista Anti-Semitism and Its Apologists” September 1986), Joshua Muravchik *et al.* detail the operations of the Beirut-Managua-Tripoli Axis. “The Sandinistas had close and long-standing ties with the PLO and Libya. Many [of the *commandantes*], including Nicaragua’s Interior Minister Tomas Borge, had received guerrilla training in PLO camps in Lebanon, and some had participated in PLO operations, such as the 1970 hijacking of an EL AL airliner....Both the PLO and Libya began providing economic and military aid, including training, and the PLO opened a fully accredited embassy in Managua, employing scores of operatives. Borge publicly pledged to Yasir Arafat that ‘the PLO cause is the cause of the Sandinistas.’”

The New Jewish Agenda is an essential component of the anti-Zionist movement in this country. It abets such redoubtable haters of Zion as the American Friends Service Committee and the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee in attacking the

Jewish state at every turn (while simultaneously allowing them to deflect charges of anti-Semitism, by pointing to “Jewish” participation in their activities.)

Interview with Arafat. At public forums, NJA has shared the podium with PLO representatives. In 1987, an Agenda delegation spent a week in Tunis conferring with PLO officials. After a meeting with Arafat, Hilda Silverman (an NJA leader from Philadelphia) gushed: “He spent two hours with us!” Oh joy unbounded.

That Israel is a target of liberation theology cannot be doubted. Both rhetorically and physically, its forces are arrayed against the Jewish state. In perhaps the movement’s ultimate irony, the misconstrued message of the prophets is being marshaled for the destruction of a resurrected Israel.

Jewish liberation theology is a distortion of *halakah*, a betrayal of the Jewish mission, a menace to Jewish communities in the diaspora and a direct and substantial threat to Israel.

Fundamental Difference. An immeasurable chasm separates Judaism and utopianism in its myriad forms, including liberation theology. In their popular introduction to the faith of Israel (“Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism”), Dennis Prager and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin illuminate a fundamental difference of approach.

“Judaism,” the authors state, “aims to solve the problems of an unjust world, but it rejects revolution as a solution since the roots of evil and injustice lies not in economics but in man himself. Consequently, Judaism is a system designed to change individuals before it and they can ever hope to succeed in perfecting the world. This is admittedly a considerably slower, hence less romantic process than fomenting revolutions, and many people will find its demands restrictive compared with the personal moral anarchy of revolution making. But Judaism’s method is infinitely more effective in achieving its results, for when Marxist revolutionaries attain power they are at least as cruel as their predecessors.”

The promise of liberation theology is a grotesque lie. As a cynical perversion of language it ranks with the slogan posted above the portals of Auschwitz by another revolutionary movement: *Arbeit Macht Frei* – Work frees. The freedom which liberation theology proffers is the oblivion of the crematoria.

