

Spiritual Activism: From Confusion to Liberation

BY CLAUDIA HORWITZ

I was an activist for a long time before I ever opened myself to the gifts of the spiritual realm. Raised as a Reform Jew, I went to synagogue and Hebrew school largely out of obligation to my parents and because I figured that since I was always going to be Jewish, I might as well learn something about it. I connected with many parts of the culture — celebrating the holidays, learning Hebrew, studying stories from Torah. But somehow, I could not forge a connection with God or find what mattered most to me: greater expressions of love, more authentic relationships, and a deeper articulation of truth. I put aside hope of finding any of this through Judaism and shelved whatever inclination I had for spiritual seeking.

Finding God Through Burnout

After college, I plunged into social-change work. In my early years as an activist, I educated and organized other young people to work toward ending

hunger and homelessness. I spent weeks at a time on the road doing workshops, meeting with students and developing an analysis of economic injustice. My colleagues and I built a tight-knit community, based on shared commitment and inspiration. We were eager to overcome the isolation of a path misunderstood by family and friends and disparaged by the broader society. And our legitimate anger at the disenfranchisement of poor people led to a demonization of whichever “other” we felt was responsible.

Unfortunately, the activist lifestyle in which I immersed myself was also one prone to illness, fatigue and burnout. In the midst of twelve-hour days and hot dog lunches, it never occurred to me to take better care of myself, and no one ever suggested it. Consumed by purpose and righteousness, I did not notice the slow deterioration of my physical energy and emotional health. I was living a dangerous irony of social-change work — complete emphasis on my external commitment to help-

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ing others in need with virtually no awareness of how I was suffering myself.

The universe gave me a series of noticeable wake up calls, namely migraine headaches and a prolonged depression. Finally forced to accept my own limitations, I entered a period of painful confusion. Where I'd once been full of answers, now there were only questions: How would I find my way out of depression? Could I live a healthy life and still work effectively for what I believed in? And what would enable activists to sustain themselves for the long haul in the face of mounting injustice?

Prayer and Meditation

Thankfully, some of the most powerful transformations come when a source of pain or confusion is harnessed as a force for good. In the midst of an extremely challenging work situation, I mysteriously found myself praying. To what, exactly, I did not know, and my confusion grew. Desperate for some kind of relief, I shared my suffering with a mentor who introduced me to mediation. Shortly thereafter, I made my first trip to Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts, and was introduced to a compassion-centered approach to yoga. Together, these practices helped me to interrupt the cycle of crisis and despair.

At first I wondered, "What use could this be, to just stop and breathe, or move my body in some intentional way? With everything going on inside myself and out in the world, what was the point?" The practices themselves

answered these questions. In meditation, my mind found ways to steady itself and drop beneath the endless chatter. I didn't overreact as much and I began to feel more authentic in my words and my actions. With yoga, I felt a gentle release of the long-held aggression I had felt toward my physical form and, with it, a softening around the edges of my heart.

Miraculously, I connected with some fundamental, overarching energy that I initially called the life force, and then, more tentatively, God. With this new spiritual awareness, I could see how my pain and discomfort impacted my efforts to create change in society, how quickly I got caught up in urgency, and how I formed judgments about my own performance and the actions and words of others. As I grew stronger, I noticed an increased willingness to hold onto the many complex layers of my reality and I found a new ability to wait for the wise response.

The Seeds of Spiritual Activism

I became curious about what role a spiritual life might play in the lives of my colleagues, friends, and other activists with similar struggles. Wouldn't a growing consciousness of spirit shed light on the places of darkness (our limitations, internal demons, and ineffective strategies) and transform our work for justice?

I began helping activists deepen their own spiritual base, both to strengthen our work and to be a resource for our own liberation. We needed to honor and make manifest the inextricable link

between our evolving alignment with the divine (however we defined it) and our passion for justice and fairness. The idea of spiritual activism took hold, and I have come to believe that it is the essence of our humanity — both our birthright and our obligation.

As American Jews in a historical moment that is pregnant with possibility, we must understand that spiritual activism matters more than ever if we hope to fulfill our responsibility to *tikkun olam*. We pride ourselves on our activist history, recounting the contributions we have made to many movements for civil and human rights. But we must begin to engage our texts, our beliefs and each other in a way that fully expresses our desire to assist in repairing the world. Instead of applying this mandate consistently and universally, we often make disturbing choices to limit its reaches. Looking at the paradox inherent in our compound identity may help us understand why this is the case.

A Paradoxical Existence

Many Jews experience themselves in a place of marginalization, both in the United States and around the world. We have inherited a legacy of anti-Semitism and experienced it ourselves and, not surprisingly, we have internalized both.

It is useful to understand the distinctions. The legacy is the impact of a history that has preceded us; for my generation, this includes everything from the story of the Exodus to the horrors of the Holocaust. The impact of direct prejudice is quite different, often less

epic but more painful in its felt experience. Both have made us understandably fearful of oppression and sensitive to self-preservation.

At the same time, many Jews in the United States also experience a great deal of privilege, because most of us are white and we possess all of the power that this carries. As an identity, whiteness is easily ignored or denied because it is normative. We do not have to notice that it is our type of ethnicity running government, portrayed in popular culture, defining how history is taught, or creating institutions that govern much of our global community.

My friend Tema Okun is a member of the anti-racist training collective Changework and an activist with Jews for a Just Peace in North Carolina. After years of working to help people dismantle racism in multiple forms, Tema explains, “This is how our culture works. It gives white people privileges just because we are white and then teaches us to believe that is because we deserve it. We cannot escape this experience or this message; we swim in it every day.” I know that I have sometimes had great difficulty reconciling these two seemingly contradictory elements of our identity. At times, I deny one element — my whiteness — while favoring the other — my Jewishness — without actually mining the lessons of either.

The Middle East

This paradox is very alive in our response to what is happening in the Middle East. As Jews, we can use our

visceral and intellectual understanding of what it means to be perceived as “the other.” This could be the wellspring of compassion for individuals or groups of people who are similarly thought of as “other” and oppressed as such. As white people, we can make the choice to keep moving beyond guilt and shame to a place where we can use the privilege we have for good, even as we attempt to dismantle it. It happens through deep engagement with others and ourselves in an ongoing commitment to find space for the wide range of reactions and questions inherent in the question of how peace will finally come to the region.

We can, for example, take the ache we feel every time we hear of another senseless suicide bombing in Israel and let this ache nurture our reverence for life. Throughout history, Jews have suffered humiliations not unlike the levels of humiliation Palestinians suffer in the course of everyday life. Remembering the devastation of the Holocaust might help us collectively imagine what it feels like for innocent Palestinian citizens to have their homes destroyed and gainful means of employment taken away. Perhaps by recalling our history of being oppressed by stronger, wealthier nations we can acknowledge the vast financial and military resources of the Israeli government and think well about how these might be employed in the service of peace.

When we are willing to see the breadth and depth of the paradox, we have access to a broader spectrum of creative response. The Jewish community here in the United States is just

beginning to sustain meaningful dialogue about the Israeli government's prolonged combination of closure and curfew in the Palestinian territories. In the face of staggering complexity, groups like Jews for a Just Peace, Brit Tzedek, the Shalom Center, and *Tikkun* magazine are creating spaces for this difficult conversation in the context of a moral, ethical framework and providing outlets for action. With these available resources, I have been perplexed by the slow pace of engagement and saddened by the reluctance of the broader Jewish community to embrace this conversation.

Embracing Our Confusion

After much deliberation, I can only conclude that we are in a period of profound confusion. I mean this with all seriousness and I say it with a mix of compassion and frustration. (We can take some comfort in knowing we are not alone. Increased levels of military force without justification, irresponsible globalization policies, and visionless “leaders” have made the world a pretty confusing place for everyone.) Our ancestors spent forty years in a desert of confusion. The problem comes when we react out of our emotional response and rush toward the quick fix when we might be greatly aided by resting in our discomfort and unknowing. Our spiritual challenge is to make space for this confusion and to have faith in whatever clarity will follow.

A colleague once told me that “periods of confusion are usually followed by great breakthroughs,” and I have

found this to be the case repeatedly in my own life. Confusion signals the brink of transformation, a readiness to release a previously limiting belief. What if our intellectual and emotional confusion about the Middle East holds the key to the liberation of this very holy land from endless cycles of violence and despair? What if our uncertainty is the doorway to redefining our entire concept of security? It might even allow us more fully to comprehend our complicated identity. We will never know until we make a collective commitment to embrace our confusion and extract its many possibilities.

Being With What Is

So, how do we sit with our confusion? How do we create the capacity and infrastructure for deliberate, ongoing, profound reflection on our behavior and its effect on us and on other people?

Hopefully, we can look to our spiritual life for assistance when we feel confused or encounter pain. In these times, we usually look for the escape route, a way to avoid feeling unhappiness, fear, or anger. But we can make a revolutionary choice to experience whatever arises, to simply be with what is. This is a profound teaching: to surrender into the totality of the moment, whether it is our grief over an act of senseless violence or our anger with outdated policies. Instead of meeting crisis with fight (aggression) or flight (denial), we open ourselves to new re-

sponses and actions. We find an intelligent and expansive peace on the inside that points the way. When we are brave enough to go through this process, we can find a liberation we might not have imagined was possible.

Compassionate Attention

It takes courage to face the world with compassionate attention, to be candid about the injustices we understand, and to probe those we do not. We try, stumble, and try again. Consciousness is a daily walk. When we turn inward, we find stillness and rest, truth and chaos resting together. We can ignore what we find or we can embrace it — all of it. When we turn outward, we see levels of suffering that mirror and exceed our own. We know this world is not what it could or should be for far too many people.

The path may not be easy, but that does not make it less necessary. Living a life where our values manifest in daily actions — actions that promote the basic health and welfare of all we can possibly imagine — is within reach for us. It is not something that will rest only in the hands of our rabbis or politicians. We are all seekers. In the midst of an ever-complex, ever-quickenning universe, we can create ways to remember what matters most. In the face of suffering, we can uncover new and better ways to respond. As spiritual activists, we can learn to move more freely between confusion and liberation; our global future depends on it.