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Destination: “The Conscience of Humanity”, Occupy Jewish and Beyond

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DESTINATION: “THE CONSCIENCE OF HUMANITY”, OCCUPY JEWISH AND BEYOND

1. Occupy Jewish

Word on the street is that my eldest son, Aaron, is camping out in Occupy Tallahassee, the capital of the state of Florida.

When I went to college there in the early 1970s, Tallahassee advertised itself as the only Confederate capital never to fall in America's Civil War.

I doubt Tallahassee trumpets that on its "Come Visit Tallahassee" website.

A few months ago, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial was dedicated on the National Mall in Washington, D. C. In the 1950s, the African-American community in Tallahassee organized one of first bus boycotts in the South. This was before the Montgomery bus boycott that placed the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King on the national scene.

I doubt Tallahassee's website boasts of this either.

A feel-good city promotion is more important than a complicated history. So it goes. Yet today, as we look the other way, the crisis of humanity deepens. When think we have reached rock bottom, another subterranean level appears.

The Occupy movement seeks to address part of our apparently bottomless reality. Widening income inequalities, deepening ecological destruction and the ever-expanding militarism are only some of the issues discussed publically and in-group conversation. But since Aaron joined Occupy Tallahassee, I've wondered why the global Occupy campaign has largely been silent about history. For the most part, it has also been silent about religion and identity.

Obviously, the pressing issues of the day are economic and political. Yet if we look at religion in its social, economic and political aspects, this important part of the human journey must be addressed as well.¹

For some activists, religion is passé. For others, religion plays a significant role in their individual and communal identity. Religion can connects us to each other and the ultimate. Religion can also be a false grounding. Religion unites us. Too often religion divides us.

Religious adherents are often at war with those who affirm a different religious outlook. But the same can be true of co-religionists. Co-religionists are often at war with one another as they struggle to name the essence of their shared religion. What does it mean to be Christian or Muslim? Do these religions call their adherents to humility and compassion or do they call them to expansive missionary domination?

Diverse readings of religious traditions are fascinating. From the save texts and traditions wholly different viewpoints and actions are derived. Thought the final arbiter is thought to be God, life in our world is in our hands.

Aaron's is an American, white, male of relative privilege. He is also Jewish.

As a Jew, Aaron brings something different to Occupy Tallahassee. No doubt his fellow occupiers have ethnic, national and religious backgrounds, which also bring a special flavor to Aaron and to other Jews.

Most participants of Occupy Tallahassee are of American and Christian background. But no doubt there are those with Muslim background as well.

Perhaps there are Palestinians in Occupy Tallahassee. I hope so. Coming from Occupied Palestine, they bring urgency to the questions of justice and freedom.

It may surprise you but it is likely that Aaron and his Palestinian comrades see eye to eye on many issues facing our unjust world. Including on Israel/Palestine.

You see Aaron is part of a minority movement within Jewish life - what I call Jews of Conscience.

Jews of Conscience believe that Jewish life has gone terribly wrong. This is most obvious in the way that Israel treats Palestinians and how the Jewish establishment in America enables that abuse. But more broadly, Jews of Conscience protest how the Jewish community at large has joined the empires of the world. In America and Israel, Jews are now indistinguishable from empire.²

Empire Jews are quite new in Jewish history. For the first time in more than two thousand years "Jewish" is defined almost exclusively within the confines of empire. Or rather, Jews, traditionally defined as the prey of empire, are now part of the empire that hunts others.

The changes in Jewish life over the last decades are massive. They are so large that most Jews take those changes as a given, as if Jews were always linked with empire. Instead of being powerless, Jews are often powerful. Put simply, "Jewish" has taken on an imperial and colonial flavor.

Most Jews would be alarmed at this sentiment. Jews as partners in empire? Jews as having their own empire? Tell me it isn't so.

Such talk smacks of anti-Semitism, it is said. Indeed it is difficult to separate historic myths about Jews and the real life context of contemporary Jewish life. Conspiracy theories about Jews still abound. Unfortunately, they are often used to deflect what we as Jews are about in the contemporary world. If we don't like what we see in a critically reflective mirror, then there is a choice. We can complain about the anti-Semites or we can once again choose community over empire.

To rid ourselves of our new-found imperial and colonial flavor, Jews need an Occupy Jewish movement.

Occupy Jewish is the mirror we need. By engaging the world, we can see where we are.

Without conscious intent, this is taking place in various Occupy sites around the world wherever Jews like Aaron are present. In the libraries that are sprouting up in various Occupy sites, the most sought books are by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, both Jewish dissident intellectuals. Chomsky and Zinn represent critical Jewish thought. They are critics of empire and promoters of community. For both the structure of injustice and the possibility of justice are key.³

This shouldn't surprise us. Chomsky and Zinn inherit the ancient and distinctive Jewish prophetic tradition. They speak it in language that the contemporary world can hear. You don't have to be Jewish to understand Chomsky and Zinn. But, minus their Jewishness, we can't really understand where they and their thought come from.

The Jewish prophetic tradition features voices raised and bodies present. The prophetic tradition understands that history is on the line. As it was in ancient times, so it is today.

Bonding with others of diverse backgrounds for justice is distinctive of the contemporary Jewish prophetic tradition. Many voices are raised. An interconnected and global history is on the line.

I doubt many Jews consciously understand that another struggle is being waged at Occupy sites around the world – the struggle for the heart and soul of Jewishness.

The struggle to is to keep the Jewish prophetic alive. Against all odds.

Why bring up diversity when unity is important? Here's why. If we think of social, economic and political movements in the West over the last two hundred years, there are few instances when Jews have been absent. Jews have been catalysts for justice movements - as leaders on the ground and as narrators drawing the larger picture.

Think Karl Marx, the great exemplar of social justice. Marx came from a long line of Jewish rabbis. In his lifetime, one of Marx's relatives was the Chief Rabbi of Trier, the city where Marx was raised.

Think Hannah Arendt. Arendt fled the Nazis to France and then the United States. Arendt was one of the first to address totalitarianism as an essential feature of modern life. Read her writings about Jewish matters. Though known as a secular universalist the great bulk of her writings are about the Jewish condition.⁴

At the same time, justice movements feel the negative pressures of the Jewish establishment when global issues like Israel/Palestine, the Arab Spring, Iraq or Iran come to the fore. Having Jews of Conscience say "no" to Jewish establishment power is strategically important.

Occupy Jewish. Isn't it time for Jews to reclaim the right to narrate "Jewish" in our own way?

Non-Jewish Occupy companions can help in this endeavor by listening to the heartbeat of the prophetic, which is under assault. By standing strong for justice with their Jewish companions, Jews of Conscience are emboldened to stand with others in their communal struggles.

After all, it isn't only Jews that have to battle establishments in order to narrate their own prophetic story.

Think "Occupy Islam." "Occupy Christian." But also think "Occupy Secular." "Occupy Modern." At this point in history, all identities need a critical trajectory if the beloved community that Dr. King spoke about is to be created.

Yes - Occupy Jewish. Speak it out loud to other Jews. And to non-Jews. Name it. Then take it on the road. Let everyone hear what "Jewish" could mean once again.

Know this however. Whatever the sins of Wall Street or the Euro-zone, Occupy Jewish first and foremost demands that Israel ceases occupying Palestine.

Occupy Jewish begins with a confession. What we as Jews have done historically to Palestinians is wrong. What we as Jews are doing today to the Palestinian people is wrong.

Full-stop. No equivocation.

Only then can Occupy Jewish take flight.

2. Occupy God

Could Occupy Jewish become a catalyst to take the Occupy movement to a new level? Perhaps. But certainly Occupy Wall Street, cannot stop where it is.

Think, for example, of religion and its power in society, politics and economy. Think of the role religion plays in billions of lives.

Now think of the Occupy movement spreading to religion. Think of Occupy Jewish, Occupy Christian, Occupy Muslim – and beyond.

If we Occupy the self-designated monotheistic religions of the world, why stop there? Why not Occupy Hinduism? Occupy Buddhism? Occupy Indigenous Religions? Every religious outlook can be problematic. Every religious outlook has possibilities.⁵

Those who disdain traditional religions get off too easy. In my mind we should Occupy Secular and Occupy Modern, too. Aren't these the real world religions of our time?

If ever every knee shall bow, it will be to modernity and its Gods. In fact, it has already happened. Traditional religions have become handmaidens to modernity.

People talk with their feet. In any congregation affluence is more important than the sacred texts. Of course, no religious believer would admit to such a blasphemy. But then again how do we actually live? What we live, we believe.

Imagine if the world's religions/ideologies/identities are called to task, disciplined and reoriented toward justice and peace. Imagine if they are called to task individually. Now imagine them being called to task collectively.

While imagining religions/ideologies/identities in the service of justice and compassion, imagine an Occupy movement addressing the immediate needs of peoples around the globe - the 99% - while charting a path for the long-range future of a humanity and ecology on the brink of calamity. We know that this can only be done together – our conceptual and actual life as one.

Imagine a global movement that embraces the prophetic mandate of lifting up the last and placing them first. Then imagine the last, now first, making a commitment that from now on there won't be first or last.

Imagine the creation of a prophetic community that reaches across religious, national and geographical lines but which also has a history stretching back millennia. Instead of creating a movement from scratch, we join a tradition of faith and struggle that has been tested in history.

Occupy isn't a stand-alone. Its burden isn't to be the tipping point. Occupy needs to speak truth to power. As other movements in history have. Other movements in history will speak that same truth.

Imagine a God who is the ground of our being and is represented in religion and literature and music and movements for justice.

Imagine a God who is sometimes named and is often unnamed.

Now imagine a God and a prophetic community that walks the talk, is in dialogue with each other and can even argue and remain committed to the task at hand. Imagine that the bond of humanity is so strong that even God can't separate those who search and those who serve.

The God I imagine is one that is within and around the world's religions. The God I imagine is also outside these religions.

Since the name of God is often used as a lever for unjust power, where else can a God of Justice and Compassion dwell except with those who have been victimized by the powers of this world? Often as not, the powers of this world protect themselves through a God they invent and promulgate as the real God. What better way to protect unjust power than claiming a divine mandate?⁶

But as in all the Occupy movements around the globe, we can't simply lay the blame on others - on how *they* abused their authority and power and created a God who is there for *them*.

What role do we play in the misuse of God?

Advocates of secularity safely distance themselves from God and point the figure toward the mass of retrograde believers. The enemy is easy to spot. As well, the secular saints, progressives of every land, NGO's of exalted status, preen themselves as if they inhabit a different planet than religious believers.

Yet the retrograde religious missionary denigrated in the social justice mirror is in the eye of the beholder. Secular progressives have their own missionary thrust. The condemned religious zealot is not as far from the progressive justice and peace advocate as either would like. Progressive justice and peace advocated bring their own "Gospel" values the people need for their own salvation.

So where ostensibly there isn't a God, there is a God. It is simply called something else. The God that isn't, is an unnamed God, worshipped in various forms, including through promulgation of systems of thought and production that are deemed atheistic but which are believed in as a secular form of salvation. "Progress" is an interconnected belief system that has its own ritual and creedal affirmations. Progress needs critical evaluation as an article of faith.

Many Progress believers think that if only the backward notions of traditional worship and religious connection were jettisoned by the global majority that the world would be a better place to live. Progress belief has its own values and assumptions.

In the ancient Jewish scriptures, there is a concept that might be of service today. It might shed light on Progress as a religion. It cuts wide path. If fact, whatever our beliefs – and our actions – become tentative and suspect.

The concept is idolatry, which the Bible defines as having to do with the worship of false Gods. In the Bible, the distinction between the real God and false Gods is a battle of the Gods. In the larger sense, idolatry is about placing one's sense of ultimate reality in the wrong place. An example of idolatry is devoting individual or collective life to achieving empire or affluence through dominating others. The powerful then ascribe empire to God, as if God wants what empire demands.⁷

Occupy Idolatry. But when we see idolatry in others, we have to look inside ourselves. Idols are everywhere. Idols are among the retrograde religious. They are also among the progressive "We Are the World" minions.

Think of Occupy Idolatry in relation to Occupy Wall Street. When we occupy the sight of idolaters, think of our own idolatry. We might be surprised at what we see.

When I Occupy (my own) Idolatry, I also think of God. Is the God I affirm or deny the God that I have imagined? Since I cannot make a claim of knowing God, I can only imagine different ways of thinking God.

Now let's bring God out of the shadows of the mind and Think Jerusalem, a real city that is claimed for holiness by the three monotheistic religions. Of course, we know that this real holy city has often been a place of carnage - real dead bodies abound. And today, this real holy city is again divided by violence and oppression.⁸

In Jerusalem, things aren't cooling down at all in our progressive modern age. Things are pretty much as they have been. Bloodshed all around. Bloodshed in the waiting.

Some believe that Jerusalem is simply another example of retrograde religions on the prowl. No doubt this is the case. But, then the occupation of Palestine is only possible through a highly integrated, thoroughly modern social, political and economic system. Israel is the engine of this particular occupation but check out the global reach that makes such an occupation possible.

If it is true that no man is an island, no occupation can be maintained in isolation. Interests and profits are the key. Where there are occupations, every corporate, military and educational entity that can be present is.

Yes, Jerusalem the extraordinary. But in Jerusalem ordinary life is difficult, if not impossible. Yes, Jerusalem the extraordinary. But in Jerusalem believers are militarized in the name of God.

Shall we Occupy Jerusalem and its holy places - the Wailing Wall, Dome of the Rock, Church of the Holy Sepulcher? Occupying the holy places, do we banish what is (un)holy about them?

When we attempt to banish the (un)holiness found within traditions, we come face to face with a conundrum. We are forced to ask if the (un)holiness we find is an add-on, a perversion of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or if there a fatal flaw in each tradition from the beginning. The issue joined is whether reform or a radical excision is needed. Would the world be better off without religion? Jerusalem?⁹

It might be that every religion, including the religion of secularity and modernity, has two tendencies. The first is toward community. The second is toward empire. The ongoing challenge of each generation is to bend religion, ideology and identity away from empire toward community.

Would the world be better off without God? Since if we examine the base of each tradition's claims about what God wants, demands and needs from his followers, the result is mixed. Justice and compassion abide. So does violence and empire. If we ask each tradition how it knows what God wants, demands and needs, the answer is a self-justifying - "God tells us." In our time the self-justifying claim of revelation isn't enough. Such claims need to be disciplined and limited as it relates to society and the world. Are we then limiting God?

Perhaps the argument about God, like the arguments about religion, ideology and identity, involves community and empire. As with religions/ideologies/identities, God may carry this dichotomy within himself. At least as represented in most religions, God sometimes opts for community. Other times, God chooses empire. Is it time for us to challenge God when God moves toward empire?

Occupy Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By doing so, we also Occupy God. This means we interrogate God's claims. Is the voice we hear within these traditions God's voice? Interrogating God, God at least has an independent word. We listen. We also speak our independent word.

Cross examine God. Is God a God of justice for the poor and oppressed? Or is a God on the side of the empire enablers who grind the poor in the dust? On the one hand, God may seek to conquer in the name of religion. On the other, God may want to be free of those who violate others in God's name.¹⁰

When we cross examine God, we advise God - if God is unaware - how his name has been used. The violence done in God's name by God's followers is legendary. History records the violence done by those who claim to be following God's revealed truth. Perhaps God has another truth to share with her interrogators.

If we Occupy God, we are right there, so to speak, on the Wall Street of God's projection. When we Occupy God, we give God voice and a choice. Is God with the Wall Street dressed-up religions or with the often-atheistic ramshackle protestors?

There is a God who sides with Wall Street religion. There is a God who dwells among the protestors. The choice is obvious: a God of Shrines or a God of Justice. Profit God or a God of the Prophets.

One asks: Is it we who makes the choice for God? We imagine God in our own image. Perhaps. But if this is so, it means that if we Occupy God we Occupy Our Self.

Occupy Our Self. Is this the ultimate reversal? Inversion?

Occupy Our Self. Is this the ultimate homecoming we await?

3. Occupy Self

When I Occupy Jewish, I also Occupy God.

"Jewish" and "God" are deep identity/ultimate entity realities. They are also constructs.

Occupy Jewish or Occupy God or Occupy Wall Street: Are these labels that come from outside and then define us? They may be entities outside of self, which help define self. They may define us as an overlay of our "real" self. If a real self exists.

So Occupy All-That-Defines-Us. Occupy Politics, the right-wing Republican kind for sure, but even the NGO/Peace Studies/International Monetary Fund/United Nations variety.

Politics is important. It is also another projected Other. Politics is real. It is also constructed.

This means that the "real" of politics can be reconstructed. Like Jewishness and every other ethnic and religious identity. Like God and the various beliefs about God.

What we think about religion/God/politics has always been. What we think about religion/God/politics hasn't always been. What was isn't now as it was or how it will be. Everything changes.

Are there primal origins of self that go back before our arrival? Or does self begin at birth? Family, culture, religion, politics and language help define who we are. They don't define who we become.

Deconstructing religion and politics is essential - as essential as deconstructing self.

Reconstructing religion and politics is essential - as essential as reconstructing self.

The philosopher Morris Cohen was once asked by a student: "'Professor, how do I know that I exist?' To which Cohen replied, 'So? And who is asking?'"¹¹

If we take for granted our existence, since we do exist, then the question of who we are is important. As important is the question rather where we come from, where we are now, and where we shall move toward.

I use "we" because "we" includes "I" but doesn't stop there. I cannot exist without others. Nor can others exist without me. We are bound together.

This means that the discussion of where the Occupy movement is going and what it stands for - a constant refrain in the American media - is less relevant than the "we" it represents. Occupy are individuals engaged with one another about issues and realities of our existence.

The Occupy movement may be going nowhere. Or it may be going somewhere.

The nowhere/somewhere dichotomy confuses the issue at hand. While it seems counter-intuitive to hold nowhere/somewhere together at the same time, it may be that within the supposed dichotomy of nowhere/somewhere, the counter-intuitive is the intuitive becoming real. A "real" that is imagined and being lived.

The intuitive becoming real is instructive of how to live personal and communal life. The intuitive becoming real maps a place within and beyond nowhere/somewhere.

Obviously "nowhere" means the present. If Occupy and other movements don't help us move somewhere else, then we are fated to injustice and destruction. Though nowhere is also somewhere, the somewhere we live now is not just or sustainable. Rather than a dichotomy, nowhere - the present - and somewhere - a possible future - represent possibility and hope. What has been constructed can be reconstructed.

Reconstructed, as in the question of what production, wealth, status and power should be all about. Knowing that we live in a material world, "somewhere" is a challenge. The challenge is to understand where certain kinds of materiality lead and at what cost. Who benefits from economic growth or even economic recession? As economies expand does political freedom expand with it? If we think of "somewhere" being sustainability, does more and more for all, or more likely more and more for the few, make life more livable or less?

The "real" charts Wall Street progress. Euro-zone progress. China progress. India progress. Does progress make the world better off?¹²

The "progress" slogan holds fast. Sacrifice many now and the future is ours for the taking. Empire's mantra is familiar.

Those of us who have been through the industrial/urban/technological/Silicon Valley revolution(s) know that future arrives in plastic, and that the destruction accelerates. Still the arrived can hardly lecture the as yet un-anointed many.

We see this in the lionizing of the late Steve Jobs or in the elevation of Facebook to iconic status. The whole world is texting, tweeting, "friending".

The week after Jobs died, the *New Yorker* featured a captivating cover. The cover depicts Jobs greeted by an angel as he awaits entry into heaven. The angel checks his listings on an iPad. We don't know whether the angel is searching for Job's name among others or calculating his actions to begin the judgment on his life.¹³

Perhaps this is the way we will be judged - iPad at the ready, with calculations at a fraction of a second. Soon the Google algorithms will be so fast that we won't have time to assent to, let alone challenge God's verdict.

Be careful of the saints we name. We might become what we worship. Or perhaps we already have.

iPhoned. A truncated destiny. Perhaps we should Occupy I (fill in the evolving technology).

To many, Steve Jobs is more than a saint. He is like God. In commentary on Jobs life where this God lead us and who is left behind has been absent

This isn't to disparage the high-tech revolution. But, then, if the future is technology, why are Occupy movements turning up around the world? It seems that in the end, the Occupy movement has something to do with self - with I - and with community - with we - and with the question of what our lives mean individually and collectively. Our meaning cannot be summed up in i.

The Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas wrote that "we speak words that shake themselves free of their distorting context, we speak words that begin in the person who utters them, we rediscover the word that penetrates, the word that unties, the prophetic word." This may be the same question answered by Professor Cohen but now extended to the very power of our existence. We exist, therefore we have a word to say. That word might untie the injustice and violence of our iPhone world.¹⁴

But first we must free ourselves and our word from distortion. As well, we must pry ourselves and our word away from the world that distorts them. In an increasingly interconnected and monitored world, the challenge to regain the power of our word is complex. We can get caught up in a search for purity which leads to paralysis. Disdaining the search for purity, Occupy Self is an engagement with the iPhone word and our word. Which one will be our determining guide?

When we Occupy Self, we rediscover our word. Together with others who also have their word to speak, we might begin to untie that which is done in our name. And all that we do in our name. Then what is constructed for us and by us has a chance, if only for a moment, of being brought to light.

When injustice and violence is brought to light, life becomes transparent. A decision is before us. We can continue on this path or choose another way.

When we Occupy Self, we return to who we are and who we might be.

When I turn toward others, I untie myself and the Other. We untie each o/Other. In untying each o/Other, we already inhabit a future beyond where we were.

4. Occupy Conscience

At the end of “Jewish” - or any religion, ideology or practice - God and self, we arrive at conscience. Or perhaps we begin with conscience, only later adding these named and unnamed realities. Like religion and God, conscience is embattled. It is always on the verge of being overwhelmed and subverted to injustice.

Conscience is our compass. When we travel off course it is conscience that rights our journey. That is why Occupy movements combine thought and action, mind and body. Only with this combination can conscience be mobilized in the world.

Occupy movements are an attempt to convert what is to what could be. Business and religion, politics and philosophy remain. They are (re)converted to their primary inspiration, to create and nourish life, to serve humanity.

Still the Occupy movement should be seen in the larger context of other movements of conscience. Thus the relevant response of the Gaza bound, break-the-blockade organizer, Ehab Lotayef, when asked by the Israeli Navy for his boat’s destination: “The conscience of humanity.” No doubt the Israeli commander was dumbfounded so he inquired again. Lotayef replied: “The betterment of mankind.”¹⁵

Empire and its representatives are like that. They know only one destination, power over others. Breaking the Gaza blockade is a challenge to the Israeli empire. That is why Lotayef was correct in his comeback. Clearly the Israeli commander had lost his conscience bearings. On his empire map, he could not locate the conscience of humanity. Nor could he locate the betterment of mankind.

The conscience of humanity is a destination. Obviously the Israeli naval commander, whose job it is to keep the Israeli control of Gaza strong, did not understand Lotayef’s initial response. The corollary – “The betterment of mankind” – made little more sense. Being an unjust occupier, the inability to understand was built in. It wasn’t about language facility. Since the Israeli naval commander’s conscience was in service to the Israeli state the very concept of an informed and practiced conscience was unavailable. Conscience has its own map and coordinates.

Conscience in service to the state is more or less the same everywhere. Even when the oppressed are liberated very soon that liberation is put to the conscience test. What once could be spoken truthfully as the duty of all in service to the oppressed is pressed into the service of status and power over others. Thus, conscience has to be always on guard. The cooptation of conscience is the first target of power.

Practicing conscience is being on the outlook for those on the margins of all political, economic and religious systems. This means that conscience has to be alert, informed and active. Clearly religion, God and self remain. However, they constantly need prodding. Just as each can be

levers of change, they can also be directed toward a self-satisfied self and communal aggrandizement. Jews know this as well as anyone. This is especially true when Jews use the suffering of the Holocaust as a lever of power over the Palestinian people.¹⁶

Jews who refuse to allow the Holocaust to enable injustice have a break through point. That point is conscience. Conscience raises the issue as to whether the Holocaust should be used as power over others or as a bridge of solidarity to all those who are suffering. No doubt this is a universal conscience point of view. A history of suffering should never be used to oppress others.

Yet conscience becomes even more poignant when an injury to a particular community is used to oppress another ostensibly for its own well being and members of the previously injured community refuse that equation. Refusal can be based on strategy – power alone will not achieve security. Still another stage is reached when the refusal is based on the conscience proposition that injury to one is injury to all.

The refusal to abuse newfound power carries risk, since in that refusal the previously injured community might become vulnerable again. In the Jewish case, courting justice for others after the Holocaust is a risk. Only conscience can bear this peril because something other than security is at stake. One's humanity and one's Jewishness is at stake. Jews of Conscience court this danger.

Perhaps this is this what Lotayef, a Canadian of Egyptian origin, was communicating to the Israeli naval commander – and by extension to the Israeli state, Jews within Israel and Jews everywhere – that conscience is a risk worth taking for the “betterment of mankind.” Of course, Lotayef was speaking to others as well, perhaps specifically to his fellow Egyptians and Canadians. He was saying out loud that the conscience of humanity plies the waters of this world and that conscience refuses to recognize borders that are occupied unjustly.

And more, Lotayef in his declaration, like Emmanuel Levinas in his understanding of the prophetic, “unties” history and the claims made upon it by those in power. It even unties those who make claims in response to suffering undergone in history, especially when sufferers claim new victims in history's name.

The heart of the prophetic is conscience, the ultimate judge of power and history. Does this mean that prophetic is informed by conscience? Or is conscience only practiced when it is informed by the prophetic?

It could be that the prophetic and conscience are one and the same. Here the question of what the Occupy movement can accomplish is transformed. Movements of conscience may not be able to convert national and global institutions toward justice and compassion. Modernity, with its established bureaucracy, advanced technology and complex social organization, may not be capable of an about face.

With the globalization of manufacturing and distribution and the industrialization of food production, as well as the dependence of nations on arms production and purchase, not to

mention the ever-increasing demand and dependence on fossil fuels, can the world slow its pace and reorient itself to create a sustainable global community? Creating a sustainable global community is only possible with the end of empire. Since history is replete with empires, it might be more productive to think of ways of creating community within empire. This is what Peter Maurin, the French peasant who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s with Dorothy Day, meant when he spoke of creating the new society within the shell of the old.¹⁷

If the Occupy movement continues to expand or, more likely, if it diminishes over time, it will take its place in the broader history of faith and struggle. As it has been through history, the challenge is to bend empire toward community and live that community for years or days or moments as a witness to the possibility of a world beyond the one we live in today. In this broader history of faith and struggle, as in life itself, there are no final victories. Yet in performing the prophetic, in reaching out to those in need and witnessing to a world of justice and compassion, the goal of sustainable global living remains alive.

Endnotes

¹ Occupy Tallahassee's general mission statement: "WHAT IS OCCUPY:TALLAHASSEE? Get corporate influence and funding out of politics, media, and education! We take action alongside the nonviolent protests which started Sept. 17th on Wall Street in Liberty Plaza and are still going strong. Let's take a stand in Tallahassee in coordination with all other world wide Occupys! We want all of our brothers and sisters who currently Occupy Wall St. to know that we stand with them in solidarity, all across the country. And for all of those who are struggling to make your friends and family take notice of what is happening, do what you must to wake up those who are in a deep sleep. We are demanding exposure and disclosure of fraud and deception, among many other things! Get involved." See Occupy Tallahassee website <http://www.occupytally.org/about/>

² For an extended discussion of Jews of Conscience and the rebirth of the prophetic in Jewish life see my *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel* (New York: New Press, 2009).

³ Jess Bidgood, "Occupying Boston and Beyond, With Tent Libraries for All," *New York Times*, October 22, 2011.

⁴ On Karl Marx, see the new biography, Mary Gabriel, *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011). For Hannah Arendt, see Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2007).

⁵ An example of needing to Occupy a religion that is often portrayed as the peaceful antidote to rigorous monotheism see a useful study of Buddhism and Japanese militarism in Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁶ This abuse of God and the possibility of God for justice are found in liberation theology. For a documentary history of that movement *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed., Alfred Hennelly (New York: Orbis, 1990).

⁷ For a modern interpretation of idolatry see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.)

⁸ For a recent history of Jerusalem see Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

⁹ For my understanding of Jerusalem as the broken-middle of Israel/Palestine see *O'Jerusalem: The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

¹⁰ Here Judaism may make yet another major contribution to the Occupy movement, especially in relation to the ability to argue with God. See Anson Laytnor, *Arguing With God: A Jewish Tradition* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1998).

¹¹ Saul Bellow, "A Jewish Writer in America," *New York Review of Books*, LVIII(October 27, 2011): 26.

¹² For a fascinating discussion of the progress in the modern world see Richard Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

¹³ *New Yorker*, October 17, 2011.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "Monotheism and Language," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1990), 180.

¹⁵ Isabel Kershner "Israel Intercepts 2 Boats Challenging Blockade of Gaza; No Violence Reported," *New York Times*, November 5, 2011.

¹⁶ For the Jewish use of the Holocaust as a lever of power see Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (New York: Verso, 2003).

¹⁷ See my biography *Peter Maurin: Prophet in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).