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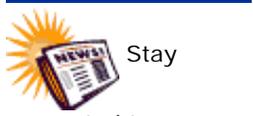
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# Nation World

## Uniting Among the Rabbis of Tomorrow

by Leonard Fein

Pigs and roosters, oxen and bulls, horses and dogs (and more dogs), a skunk and perhaps a possum — someone says a monkey — and children everywhere, and all the noises which thereunto pertain, plus a sun that is as glaring and hot as the Negev sun. This is Ciudad Romero in El Salvador.

Yes, El Salvador. Not exactly (or even approximately) a tourist mecca, but a mecca of sorts to delegations organized by American Jewish World Service (AJWS), a rapidly growing and growingly effective organization devoted to connecting Jews and Judaism to the developing world. Working in partnership with local nongovernmental organizations, AJWS engages in developing transitional education opportunities for former child laborers in India; family planning, nutrition and HIV/AIDS education in nine Ghanaian villages; development of sustainable agriculture in Honduras; microcredit and microenterprise projects in Zimbabwe, Nicaragua and Gaza that give rural women access to credit, enabling them to launch small businesses and become self-sufficient; other projects in Peru, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere.

"Elsewhere" includes El Salvador, where I somewhat improbably found myself back in January in the company of 26 North American rabbinical students and two AJWS staff people. They have come here for a week of work, study and prayer, and I to do some teaching and to get a sense of who among tomorrow's rabbis choose to come to this impoverished land and why, and also of how Conservative and Reform and Orthodox and Reconstructionist rabbinical students will get along and, more particularly, how they will (if they will) pray together.

Ciudad Romero is a very poor farming village in the southeast of El Salvador, an hour's drive from the capital, San Salvador, and a two-day walk from Honduras, a measure of some importance since that was how the family with whom I take my meals made their way out of the country and then on to Panama, where they remained during the 12 terrible years of war, the very uncivil civil war that finally ended just 12 years ago. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated much of the country, and then in 2001, two major earthquakes added injury to injury. Many of the homes here are makeshift, cinder block and

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corrugated iron, a shed for the wood-burning stove in the rear. Basic needs — shelter, food (rice and beans are the staple and our typical meal here), clothing, education — are by and large adequately met, though not without the resources provided by the roughly one out of every four villagers now working in America. Women and children are everywhere here, and teenage boys and old men, too — but as throughout El Salvador, there's a dearth of men in their prime working years. It's estimated that 1 million of El Salvador's 6 million or 7 million people have made their difficult way to the United States, where they live in a different kind of squalor, always fearful that they will be found out — they have come to the United States illegally — but managing somehow to send money to their families back home.

The putative rabbis, as might be expected, have come to their calling by very different paths, some meandering, some straightforward, some abrupt in their shifting directions. Here a former civil rights lawyer, there the survivor of a clinical depression, several the children of uneducated Jews, some raised in the religious tradition and some come late to it. Three are students at the remarkable new Orthodox seminary Yeshivat Hovevei Torah, founded just four years ago by Rabbi Avi Weiss, Dov Linzer and Saul Berman; four students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Seminary in Philadelphia; eight from Reform's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion; and 11 from the Jewish Theological Seminary or the University of Judaism, Conservative Judaism's two rabbinical seminaries. The denominational diversity lead not only to a great deal of conversation, but also to considerable negotiation. How, most urgently, to accommodate the egalitarian orientation and commitment of both women and men while not excluding the Orthodox or otherwise offending them? The three Orthodox men made their own quiet adjustments, stood some steps away from the others during prayer or without fanfare absented themselves, joining whenever their theology permitted.

Prayer (tefilot) was the constant rhythm and most substantial melody of the group. It was distinguished by the competence the participants brought to it, by its assertiveness — surely because neither as individuals nor as representatives of their denominational movements does anyone want to be thought less devoted than the others — and, to my unpracticed liturgical ear, by new melodies and spontaneous harmonies that now and then transform the collection of individuals into a choir.

The music they so expertly sing is post-Carlebach; they know the melodies that were new for me 10 and 15 years ago and that I so much enjoy, but those are old and tired melodies to their ears. Their unfamiliar music is altogether lovely — and their praying to that music was very nearly interminable. We were awakened at 6 a.m., morning prayers began at 6:20 a.m. and did not end until an hour later, the liturgy interspersed with commentary is sometimes learned, sometimes heartfelt, and then there were the afternoon prayers and then the evening prayers, each again a musical experience, each also an opportunity for these rabbis-to-be to offer insight to the words of the prayer, to the purpose of the prayer, or to the immediate purpose that brought them here, to this dusty corner of this distant land.

The wealthy who own so much of this country live quite well. We drove one day through neighborhoods of San Salvador that are marked by homes that would not be at all out of place in parts of Beverly Hills. Their owners shop in Miami, vacation where they will,

conduct their business affairs with skills learned in MBA programs in America's best universities, all this less than an hour's drive from the squalid — and graciously welcoming — place that was our host community for the week. There, oxen and cows lumber along the dusty roads — there are no paved streets — and somehow know to move aside when a car comes along.

There was work, physical labor to be done, and that was part of the program for our delegation. It was real work — clearing fields, digging furrows — the work of an agricultural community. There was some of that on three of our days in Ciudad Romero, and one day there was little else. The uncalloused hands worked with hoes under an unrelenting sun for four hours in the morning and then again after lunch, until it was time for mincha, the afternoon prayers. Some sat slumped in the field, exhausted; most joined in the prayers, leaving nothing out — but this time, racing through. At the conclusion the AJWS staffer announced that the yellow school bus that had brought them to this field had arrived to take them back. It was 4 p.m., there would be no shame at all in leaving now. But no, the furrows were not quite done, and with renewed energy and their bare hands, people knelt on the ground and only an hour later finished what they started. I thought of A.D. Gordon, the storied worker of a Jewish settlement in Palestine during the early years of the last century, whose way it was to insist that the ditches he dug be works of art — and I wondered, inevitably, how many of these imminent teachers and leaders of our community have heard Gordon's name. And I thought, more generously, of the moving example of avodah, the word our language offers that means both labor and religious service.

The purpose of our visit to San Salvador was in part to visit the synagogue that serves the 75 Jewish families who live here. They are a tight-knit and proud community, prosperous and very much at home. We were greeted in the sanctuary — the entire large and rambling structure was once, incredibly, a private home — by the young rabbi, come here from the Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires, founded more than 30 years ago by the late and quite extraordinary Rabbi Marshall Meyer and for years now the principal institution for the training of South and Central American rabbis, and also by the elegant president of the synagogue's sisterhood. As many Jews, she lived outside El Salvador during the time of the civil war, but she makes it very clear that her home is here and not in the Atlanta where she stayed for 10 years. Her El Salvadoran patriotism reminds me of Jews I met in Puerto Rico some years ago, Cuban expatriates who, in the 30 or so years their families had lived in Cuba, sank roots so deep that our evening together in San Juan concluded with their singing of the Cuban national anthem. Our parched people apparently sink roots wherever there's a hint of water. Here, we're told, almost in the same breath and with only a hint of awareness of the irony, that Jews are welcome everywhere, at any club on any board, and that they've learned to keep "a low profile." And we are reminded, with evident pride, that El Salvador is one of only two countries whose embassy in Israel is located in Jerusalem, not, as are all others, in Tel Aviv.

We've also come to San Salvador to pay our respects to the late Archbishop Oscar Romero, by all accounts a humble conservative who was murdered in 1980 while celebrating Mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital for terminally ill cancer patients. In what was to prove his final homily, Romero — by now radicalized in the face of the escalating repression in El Salvador — spoke these words:

"In the name of God and in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise up to heaven more loudly every day, I ask you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!"

Those words and the courage of the man who uttered them are of particular significance to this group of rabbinic students, because the theme that unites them across denominational divides and that has brought them to this place is the theme of tikkun olam, of social justice. They are, all of them, seized of the more than intimate, of the organic relationship between the Jewish tradition — our texts, our history — and the pursuit of justice. And they are aware, with pain and shame, of the particular burden of responsibility the United States bears for the grim events that so recently took place here. The killing of Romero was plotted by Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson, an especially savage ultraright leader of the kind that with American complicity and sometimes active partnership have with disturbing frequency played a central role in Central American history.

Today, there is peace of sorts here. In Ciudad Romero and the other 85 villages of the region, which together compose La Coordinadora del Bajo Lempa, former members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces and former guerillas of the FMLN live near one another and seek, with modest success, to develop a sustainable and environmentally responsible economy. The founder and guiding spirit of the effort is a former priest, Jose "Chencho" Alas, who also manages the Foundation for Self Sufficiency in Central America. Chencho spends considerable time with our group; he is its principal teacher, and painstakingly presents his theories of development and community organization. As a longtime champion of liberation theology, of land reform and of the peasants in general, of a free and just and democratic El Salvador, as a man who was hunted and persecuted for those beliefs, and as the founder of La Coordinadora, he is immensely and appropriately admired by the group, his teaching received with attention.

But the more or less formal teaching, Chencho's and mine and even by the students themselves, each of whom has selected a brief text to share with the group, is almost incidental to the main themes of our week. The fact of El Salvador, of this place and of its people, provides the setting for the venture but is mainly its subtext. Vastly more central, even urgent, is the easy cross-denominational interaction and, again and again, tefilot, prayer. In off times, too — the breaks between lectures, the spare moments here and there — there's singing, and the singing is almost invariably liturgical, Carlebach and post-Carlebach songs of devotion. For me, this is the sharpest evidence of generational change. In my younger days, when social justice advocates gathered, it was "Solidarity Forever" or "There Once Was a Union Maid" we'd sing, or songs of the Spanish Civil War, and then, for relaxation, the songs of Pete Seeger and the Weavers, later of Peter, Paul and Mary, and always, of course, the songs of the Second Aliyah and of Israel's early years. Years ago, when it dawned on me that my own children would know very few of "my" songs, I feared for the future of the Jewish people. Then one day, fresh from summer camp or from the day school they attended, they began to teach me new songs, their music, and I relaxed: there was renewed hope for our future. Here in El Salvador, with mostly 20-somethings listening to the still-newer songs, confidence in our prospects borders on headiness, even as I remain bemused by the unrelenting liturgical content of the songs, wonder what, if anything, that says about the state of the Jewish people as distinguished from the state of Judaism.

One of the classic and enduring tensions in the history of the Jewish people is between the rabbinic tradition and the prophetic tradition. The rabbis taught that societal order is a prerequisite to social justice; the prophets taught that social justice is a prerequisite to societal order. Both were right, each a matter of emphasis rather than a single-minded insistence on the one at the expense of the other. In the course of time, however, the healthy tension between the two perspectives became a break, each claiming exclusive priority. Here, among these mostly young people, the break is healed, the tension relaxed. The best of them reflect, represent, defend and extend both traditions.

But that, too, is a footnote. Here, finally, is the text: On Friday evening, as we gather to welcome the Shabbat on the patio outside our dormitories, the children of Ciudad Romero drift in. Three or four, then 10, soon 20, the young ones, the ones in their single-digit years, and they know somehow to sit quietly and listen to the music of our prayers. When some members of the group break into dance, they encourage the children to join the circle. When the dancing's done, three or four members choose to stay with the children, amusing them, involving them, a different way of affirming the Sabbath peace, a different boundary breached. These becoming rabbis, who know a great deal, whose citations from sacred text come trippingly off their tongues, know some other things, too. They know about embracing the stranger, and about hugging little children.

*Leonard Fein is the author of "Against the Dying of the Light: A Father's Story of Love, Loss and Hope" (Jewish Lights, 2001).*

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