

WE WERE MADE FOR THESE TIMES:
DIASPORISM AS AN EMERGENT JEWISH MOVEMENT

Claire Melissa Bergen

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Master's Thesis Committee

Sarah Imhoff, Ph.D.

Aziza Khazzoom, Ph.D.

Irit Dekel, Ph.D.

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¹ Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), v.

² Adapted from “Land Acknowledgement,” Indiana University Bloomington First Nations Educational & Cultural Center, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://firstnations.indiana.edu/land-acknowledgement/index.html>.

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Introduction: Diasporism Emerges

In the spring of 2018 I came across an article by Jacob Plitman, now the publisher of *Jewish Currents* magazine, shortly after leadership of the 75-year-old publication was passed on to a new generation of writers. Entitled “On an Emerging Diasporism,” the article lists, as evidence of this emergence, “large protests by organizations like Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and Bend the Arc; renewed interest in Jewish arts and culture; growing membership in independent minyans; a large Jewish infusion into socialist organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America; newly organized Sephardi/Mizrahi and Jews of Color caucuses; the appearance of new Jewish publications like *Protocols* and the revival of old ones like this magazine.” These, and other related developments, are described as reactions to the Trump presidency and “the ongoing rightward radicalization of Israel.”³

The phenomena listed by Plitman have been elsewhere described as a revival of the Jewish left;⁴ within this wide range of contemporary Jewish expression, a smaller group of self-identified diasporists are directly and creatively engaging with Jewish politics of land, place and nation. In my research over the past year in emerging diasporist Jewish communities, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz’s 2007 *The Colors of Jews* was frequently mentioned as a foundational text. Plitman credits Kaye/Kantrowitz with shaping the concept of diasporism, which she defines as “the identity and practice of Jewish antiracism.” She continues: “Diasporism...embraces diaspora, offers a place we might join with others who value this history of dispersion; others who stand in opposition to nationalism and the nation state; who choose instead to value border crossing as envisioned by the late Gloria Anzaldúa.”⁵ Based on ethnographic research over the past year, I argue here that over the past half-decade, Jewish diasporism has developed into a full-fledged, embodied movement within Judaism, one that draws creatively on resources of Jewish

³ Jacob Plitman, “On an Emerging Diasporism,” *Jewish Currents*, April 16, 2018, <https://jewishcurrents.org/on-an-emerging-diasporism/>.

⁴ Shira Hanau, “Emerging Jewish Left Posing ‘Challenge to the Center,’” *The New York Jewish Week*, August 4, 2018, <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/emerging-jewish-left-posing-challenge-to-the-center/>; Michelle Goldberg, “Mazel Tov, Trump. You’ve Revived the Jewish Left,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/24/opinion/sunday/trump-jews.html>.

⁵ Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews*, xi.

memory, ritual, calendar and activist rhetoric to live into a Judaism that reimagines homeland as relationship, in a temporality described as “the world to come.”

Methodology

Between August 2020 and February 2021, I interviewed 24 people living in the U.S., who responded to my request for “Interviews about Diasporism.” I further elaborated in my emailed request that I was seeking “self-identified Jews, who might identify as ‘diasporist’ or might not use this term, and are involved in Jewish-identified activism, cultural or ritual work, and/or community-building towards the development of diaspora-focused Jewish life. Interviewees might identify as radical, leftist or progressive.”

One-third of interview participants responded to my message circulated among members of national Jewish political advocacy organization Bend the Arc, and alumni of the Jewish service corps and domestic anti-poverty organization Avodah, both organizations in which I had previous involvement. A slightly larger group came from a message I sent to the email list for members of the Jewish Voice for Peace Havurah Network, a recent project of the U.S.-based Jewish anti-Zionist political advocacy organization Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), as well as from my outreach to the “queer Jewish chicken farm and cultural organizing project”⁶ Linke Fligl (“left wing” in Yiddish), a founding member of the Network. The remaining interviewees included participants in SVARA’s Queer Talmud Camp: Diaspora Edition, which I attended during my research, as well as personal contacts and people referred to me by previous interviewees.

While I decided to conduct my research interviews via Zoom before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the confluence of the pandemic and my project unexpectedly rendered my participation in conferences and retreats digital as well. I attended Bend the Arc’s May 2020 Pursuing Justice Conference and SVARA’s Queer Talmud Camp online instead of in person as originally planned, and I attended several online events held in lieu of the cancelled Let My People Sing Retreat during summer 2020. I also

⁶ Linke Fligl, accessed January 16, 2021, <http://linkefligl.com/>.

was able to sign up at the last moment for the week-long JVP Havurah Network Gather-In, held in lieu of its third annual in-person retreat, and attended dozens of online trainings, meetings, discussions, holiday services and other rituals held by a web of organizations I will describe below. As a result of shifting understandings of Zoom meetings as public or private spaces, I was only able to attend a handful of these events as sites of formal participant observation. However, since many of the events were recorded, I was able to draw upon videos of events I attended that were posted on public social media accounts, and I obtained permission from organizers and specific participants to view parts of other recordings that were not made publicly available.

My description of diasporism as an “emergent Jewish movement” intentionally evokes concepts of social movement, religious movement (as in “the Reform Movement”), and “movement,” used within the contemporary leftist activist community as an adjective to delineate that community’s boundaries (as in “movement spaces”).⁷ My first interviewee, a long-time activist, described his time in an East Coast independent minyan in the 90s, where “there was no distinction between political and religious...”⁸ Likewise, younger diasporists relate to politics and religion as fluid, overlapping and inseparable categories. My analysis is thus situated in the study of both religion and social movements, in particular “prefigurative” social movements who are “building the new society within the shell of the old,” including those based in “religious fellowship,” who insist “on the primacy of the moral in political decision-making.”⁹

I refer to some of my interviewees using pseudonyms, and others with their actual names, based on each interviewee’s preference.¹⁰ While not all of my interviewees were active members of self-

⁷ Priska Daphi, “Movement Space: A Cultural Approach,” in *Conceptualizing Culture in Social Movement Research*, ed. Britta Baumgarten, Priska Daphi, and Peter Ullrich (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). My use of “emergent” draws on adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017).

⁸ Interview #1a, August 12, 2020.

⁹ Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 7, 17.

¹⁰ I follow this practice for “working with people whose identities are often quite consciously negotiated, and the level of their visibility carefully chosen and managed” described by Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 224; I used a transcription style that eliminated

identified diasporist organizations, I consider them participants in the diasporist movement due to their rejection of or discomfort with Zionism, as well as their identification with Eastern Europe and other diaspora Jewish cultures as sources of Jewish identity.¹¹ The overwhelming focus on Ashkenazi Jewish identity as a site of diasporic identification reflects both an oversight in my methodology, in which only five interviewees named or implied a Jewish identity other than Ashkenazi, and none identified as Mizrahi, as well as a central tension within the diasporist movement. I elaborate on this tension at the end of my section on *doikayt* and decolonization. Over a nearly year-long period of participation in Jewish events with overlapping participants and themes, I came to understand diasporism as a distinct movement within Judaism with an identifiable vocabulary, a visual and aural aesthetic, and a shifting, rapidly developing set of values, concerns, and approaches to Jewish practice.

Zionism, Diasporism, and Antisemitism

As an emerging movement in Judaism, diasporism is embraced by primarily young Jews¹² seeking a positive Jewish identity not grounded in Zionism. In her ethnography of American Jewish Palestine solidarity activists, Atalia Omer describes a process of “unlearning received narratives about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” and “emotional processes of liberation” through prior activist involvement, college education and visiting Israel/Palestine.¹³ Likewise, my interviewees described learning about the reality of the Occupation while visiting Israel - sometimes on Birthright trips meant to strengthen American Jewish support for Israel - and while in college, sometimes as a result of meeting Palestinian students.

most “fillers,” repetitions, etc., following Harry Collins, Willow Leonard-Clarke, and Hannah O’Mahoney, “‘Um, Er’: How Meaning Varies between Speech and Its Typed Transcript,” *Qualitative Research* 19, no. 6 (December 1, 2019): 653–68. In all of this I did my best to practice diasporism’s relational ethics in my writing.

¹¹ Only one interviewee, a Bend the Arc member who stated “I love Israel....I love traveling there....It’s important for us to also live outside of Israel in order to support it” and was one of my oldest interviewees, I did not consider a diasporist. I have not analyzed her interview here, though I have counted her in my demographic analyses. Interview #2, August 13, 2020.

¹² Just under two-thirds of my interviewees were between the ages of 23 and 32; two were in their mid-30s; the rest ranged from age 42 to 65.

¹³ Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 44, 84.

As a teenager, Sophie was gradually influenced by a public school teacher who taught her class a “Palestinian narrative”; she also “started listening” to her American-born grandparents, who were anti-Zionist “super left activists,” and saw her family’s Reform synagogue in a new light:

I had at 15, 14 or 15, a major OMG moment of like, my community lied to me, my synagogue lied to me, everything - This is so messed up, I'm seeing this with fresh eyes and realizing that this is just so wrong, and feeling like, how could my community, which said it was all about *tikkun olam* and justice and all this great stuff, like how could they have taught me this stuff?

Sophie, like other diasporists I spoke with, was influenced by teachers and family members who exposed her to a narrative in conflict with that of her formal Jewish education. A subsequent NFTY (Reform Jewish Youth Movement) Israel trip that did not align with Sophie’s growing political awareness solidified her new political commitment, leading to a temporary disengagement from Jewish community until “in college I started meeting lots of lefty Jews....I just started being exposed to more and more ...non-Zionist Jews, anti-Zionist Jews....So many conservative or middle of the line people are like, people are leaving the Jewish community over Israel politics. But I felt like Israel politics was what brought me back in, because finally I saw people who shared my values, and they were proudly Jewish.”¹⁴

Anti-Zionists who are “proudly Jewish” may still seem, to some, a contradiction in terms, but theoretical precedents for contemporary Jewish diasporism have developed over the past several decades. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin claim that “Zionism...seems to us the subversion of Jewish culture and not its culmination.”¹⁵ Likewise, when Kaye/Kantrowitz says “I name this ideology and practice *Diasporism* as a deliberate counter to Zionism,”¹⁶ she joins the Boyarins in countering what became a hegemonic viewpoint in the American Jewish community starting in the late 1960s. While public American Jewish dissent has existed since the 1970s, I maintain that this viewpoint has begun to fracture in a more fundamental way only with the rise of the present diasporist movement. Because “[s]upport for Israel

¹⁴ Interview #8, September 23, 2020.

¹⁵ Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” in *Postzionism: A Reader*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 331.

¹⁶ Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews*, xii.

dominates [American Jewish] public life, is part and parcel of the American Jewish consensus on what it means to be a Jew, and is voiced by a large majority of American Jews,”¹⁷ diasporism as a Jewish movement is always in dialogue – or in antagonism – with Zionism, its Jewish nationalist counterpart.

“Diaspora,” the Boyarins suggest, “offers an alternative ‘ground’ to that of the territorial state for the intricate and always contentious linkage between cultural identity and political organization. Such an alternative ground could avoid the necessarily violent ways in which states resist their own inevitable impermanence. It could also ameliorate the insistence on purity that derives from the dominant, static conception of legitimate collective identity.”¹⁸ The Boyarins, like many contemporary diasporist activists, see examples of these powers of diaspora in the Jewish Worker’s Bund in Russia, Poland and Lithuania, the socialist, diaspora nationalist party that promoted cultural autonomy and a philosophy of *doikayt* (Yiddish for “hereness”) in the Russian empire, and became the most powerful Jewish political organization in 1930s Poland.¹⁹ For Daniel Boyarin, it is the rabbis living under the rule of the Roman Empire after the destruction of Jerusalem who are diaspora’s exemplary figures.²⁰

Julie Cooper illuminates a limitation of both the Boyarins and Judith Butler’s diasporist *Parting Ways*: “they lack a compelling vision for diasporic politics....[D]iasporic thinkers should redirect their energies from theorizing the Jewish self toward defending the ability of polities other than the nation-state to ensure Jewish political empowerment,” necessary because “political Zionism is a theory about the nation-state’s ability to vanquish anti-Semitism. The recognition that emancipation did not deliver on the

¹⁷ Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict Over Israel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 4.

¹⁸ Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 10.

¹⁹ Daniel Blatman, “Bund,” trans. David Fachler, *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>.

²⁰ Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*.

promise of full enfranchisement is the impetus for political Zionism.”²¹ Diasporism, Cooper argues, must put forward an equally compelling response to antisemitism.²²

The Boyarins hint at the limitations of Cooper’s perspective when they maintain that “continued Jewish existence has *always* troubled the presumptions of the Christian West to stable centrality.”²³ Santiago Slabodsky posits an earlier point of origin for modern antisemitism: After the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain in 1492, even those formerly Jewish *conversos* who remained within the Spanish empire were subject to the Inquisition, “unable to shed their alleged immutable features according to *Pureza de Sangre* (Purity of Blood) legislation.”²⁴ For Slabodsky, the moment that leads to the possibility of genocide is not the late 18th century, but instead the late 15th century, when both Jews and Muslims were accused of “barbarism,” and “as the Inquisition had selectively conflated Jews and Muslims, this hybrid creation would then be associated with other racialized groups. In the Americas, Natives and Africans were accused of being barbarians who practiced Judaism.”²⁵

In connecting the experiences of Jews, Muslims, Native Americans and Africans during the colonial encounter to the experiences of Jews within Europe and throughout the lands touched by colonialism, Slabodsky opens up the possibility of coalition between all of these groups, toward a “pluri-versal world as a uni-versal project.”²⁶ Atalia Omer argues that Slabodsky’s “decolonial Judaism” is enacted by Jewish Palestine solidarity activists;²⁷ as I will show below, this enactment is deeply fraught, yet central to the diasporist project.

²¹ Julie Cooper, “A Diasporic Critique of Diasporism: The Question of Jewish Political Agency,” *Political Theory* 43, no. 1 (February 2015): 82-3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24571595>.

²² I follow the spelling of “antisemitism” used by Jewish Voice for Peace. See “A Note about the Spelling of ‘Antisemitism,’” in *On Antisemitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), xv.

²³ Boyarin and Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*, 14, italics original.

²⁴ Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 28.

²⁵ Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism*, 29.

²⁶ Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (May 3, 2007), 463, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.

²⁷ Omer, *Days of Awe*, 209.

Diasporism as Queer Judaism

It is no coincidence that diasporist theorists Judith Butler and Daniel Boyarin are both better known for their work on gender. Omer notes that in her research, “many young people...used their non-binary lived experiences to unlearn Zionism’s reliance on a host of binaries.”²⁸ I argue here that, rather than merely comprising a subset of the diasporist community, the lived experience of queerness is central to the diasporist movement.²⁹ Furthermore, the diasporist relationship with “Jewish tradition” is far more subtle and complex than one in which older Jewish religious practices are updated or subverted from the margins. While Linke Fligl exists within, and has been foundational in developing, an “ecosystem of alternative Jewish institutions that apply pressure on the mainstream Jewish world to align more deeply with movements for liberation,”³⁰ these alternative institutions’ relationship to tradition is one of deep respect and a desire for continuity.

In 2015, Linke Fligl’s co-founder used their inheritance to buy and gift “181 acres of land on occupied Schaghticoke territory/upstate New York”³¹ to WILDSEED Healing Village, “a Black and Brown-led intentional community, ecological farm, and healing sanctuary.”³² After receiving the “reparations gift” (also described as “person to person reparations”),³³ “WILDSEED generously offered the use of 10 acres to build toward our dream of a radical land-based Jewish community.”³⁴ On these 10 off-grid acres, a four-person staff raises chickens, sells eggs, plans and hosts community events, and

²⁸ Omer, *Days of Awe*, 6.

²⁹ That nearly two-thirds of my interviewees identified somewhere along the LGBTQ spectrum can be attributed in large part to my outreach to participants in Queer Talmud Camp and to queer Jewish chicken farm Linke Fligl. Nonetheless, I found the work of these and overlapping communities to form diasporism’s core.

³⁰ “Support,” Linke Fligl, accessed January 17, 2021, <http://linkefligl.com/donate>.

³¹ Linke Fligl, *Linke Fligl* one-pager (Schaghticoke land/Millerton, NY, n.d.); Interview #18b, January 27, 2021.

³² Wildseed, accessed January 16, 2021,

³³ “Release & Repair: Shmita and Reparations in Our Lives” conference session at Cultivating Culture conference, Jewish Farmer Network, January 31, 2021.

³⁴ *Linke Fligl* one-pager.

works with a 7-person Cultural Organizing Team to develop the theory and strategies of “Jewish relationship to land and liberation.”³⁵

Queerness was central to the project from its inception. Three Linke Fligl members described transformative experiences in the Adamah fellowship, an immersive Jewish farming program for young adults at a Jewish retreat center a few miles from Linke Fligl.³⁶ Describing several years of living and working at the center, the co-founder recalled, “during that time I kind of started to craft the idea for the project, the original idea was really just land-based, queer Jewish community.”³⁷ Just as Sophie found community among other non- and anti-Zionist Jews who shared her values and were “proudly Jewish,” other interviewees described finding and creating radical, queer Jewish community.

Megan, an organizing member of another group in the JVP Havurah Network, told me, “For most of my adult life until three years ago, I was approximately a twice a year Jew....I identified as queer, but don't really feel like queerness was specifically the thing that alienated me from institutionalized Judaism.” Rather, “I just felt very outside the process of maybe like mainstream Jewish values, like I did identify as non-Zionist.” Megan recalled the founding of their group:

I think it was after [the Unite the Right rally in] Charlottesville. [A friend] had just made a Facebook thread inviting people to come for Shabbat dinner at their house....And so we both went and we are processing anti-Zionism, antiracism in the U.S., fascism....What happened at that dinner was that people were just really struck by what it felt like to be at a Shabbat dinner where *everyone was queer and anti-Zionist*. And maybe no one in that group had had that experience before or very few or not quite like this, and so there was this huge energy to keep meeting....And I remember being so excited and wanting to get really invested in it right away because I was just like, wow, *this is so different than the Judaism I've experienced before*. And I had felt pretty bitter, or alienated....Now there's a beautiful, flourishing whole national, and especially in the north East Coast, network. And it no longer feels like if [their group] went away forever, that there's no more queer non-Zionist Judaism.³⁸

Megan's non-Zionism, not their queerness, alienated them from institutional Judaism, but their presence at the birth of a community embracing both identities led to their reentry into Judaism. Within

³⁵ “Our Team,” Linke Fligl, accessed January 17, 2021, <http://linkefligl.com/who-we-are>; Interview #16, October 19, 2020.

³⁶ “The Fellowship,” Hazon, accessed January 17, 2021, <https://hazon.org/adamah/adamah-fellowship-2/>.

³⁷ Interview #18a, October 19, 2020.

³⁸ Interview #14, October 14, 2020.

Linke Fligl’s “ecosystem of alternative Jewish institutions,” a smaller group of interconnected organizations that explicitly describe themselves as diasporist and queer include Linke Fligl; “radical, queer, collaborative, non-zionist, magical, diasporist, inclusive Jewish minyan” Nishmat Shoom;³⁹ and the Queer Mikveh Project, which “grew out of a desire to reawaken the practice of *mikveh* [ritual bathing] for Queer Jews”⁴⁰ and “honors the land it is on” as “a ritual of Jews in diaspora.”⁴¹ These, in turn, exist within a larger web of groups that are explicitly diasporist, non-Zionist, or anti-Zionist – many of them members of the JVP Havurah Network – but not explicitly queer-identified (the Shabbat group is “90-99% queer,” and “functions as a queer/majority queer space.”)⁴² Among these groups, many founded in the past three to four years, there is a great deal of overlapping membership, collaboration, and cross-pollination of ideas.

Within these groups, Jewish queerness tends to be less explicitly theorized than diasporism – likely because that work has already been done. SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva organizes Queer Talmud Camp, a “vibrant learning space that celebrates queer culture, cultivates intergenerational relationships, and reveals the deeply rooted radical queerness of the Jewish tradition,”⁴³ whose participants and instructors overlap significantly with members of the network of groups described above. SVARA’s founder, Rabbi Benay Lappe, explains that “what queerness is about is embodying a profound experience of Otherness” and a participant encourages “remembering that having a *bet midrash* with these people in it, in itself, is still a radical act”⁴⁴ – but nearly two decades after SVARA’s founding, these statements are likely far less controversial, and perhaps more easily understood as *Jewish*, than a theory

³⁹ Nishmat Shoom, accessed April 3, 2021, <http://nishmatshoom.org/>.

⁴⁰ Kat Johnston, in “Under New Leadership, The Queer Mikveh Project is Creating Liberatory Space for Queer Jews of Color,” Jews of Color Initiative, updated March 11, 2021, <https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/grants-on-the-ground-under-new-leadership-the-queer-mikveh-project-is-creating-liberatory-space-for-queer-jews-of-color/>.

⁴¹ “Queer Mikveh Project,” Rebekah Erev Studio, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://rebekaherevstudio.com/queer-mikveh-project>.

⁴² Email to the author, April 3, 2021.

⁴³ “Queer Talmud Camp,” SVARA, accessed January 17, 2021, <https://svara.org/queer-talmud-camp-2/>.

⁴⁴ SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, “Queer Talmud Camp 2017,” accessed January 17, 2021, video, 4:08, <https://svara.org/queer-talmud-camp-2/>.

and practice of liberatory relationship to land in diaspora – as reflected in Megan’s story of alienation. Within diasporist groups, queerness is a presence easily taken for granted: when I and three people I interviewed jointly all went by they/them pronouns, this fact appeared unremarkable to everyone involved, and was never explicitly commented on during the interview. The ease of these shared identities reflects the language and culture of leftist “movement spaces” where queer-identified membership is common.⁴⁵

Yet meeting others with this confluence of identities, as the founders of the Shabbat group did four years ago, could still bring about surprise – reflecting a moment of rapid cultural change. Queer diasporist interviewees not involved in the Havurah Network or related groups described continued alienation: one left his synagogue because “the rabbi was very adamant about putting American and Israeli flags in the sanctuary,” and avoids the subject entirely with fellow congregants at his new synagogue.⁴⁶ While some diasporists avoid discussing the politics of land and nation, or “stop trying”⁴⁷ to integrate their values into Jewish congregations, members of the core network of queer diasporist groups highly value, and integrate their queerness and diasporism into, Jewish ritual and practice.

“A Tradition Can Be Queer Also”

In Tishrei 5781/October 2021,⁴⁸ Linke Fligl published *ushpi(zine)*, a collection of poetry, prose, liturgy, and guides to holiday observances. In the zine, a play on the *sukes/sukkot ushpizin* ritual of symbolically inviting honored guests into the sukkah, and self-published zines associated with punk and other youth subcultures, Linke Fligl describes itself as “a community land project inspired by a vision of diasporism inherited from the writings of Melanie Kaye Kantrowitz z”l.”⁴⁹ In honoring the lesbian

⁴⁵ While I began questioning my gender as a teenager, I first experimented with using nonbinary pronouns after meeting others who did so in a group of white allies of Black Lives Matter, many of whose founding members were both queer and Jewish. Megan described me – a queer, nonbinary Jew who did not participate in the Havurah Network until I began my research – as researching “from a[n] insider-outsider perspective.” Interview #14.

⁴⁶ Interview #15, October 18, 2020.

⁴⁷ Interview #20a, October 23, 2020.

⁴⁸ Diasporist organizations frequently identify the dates of events by the Jewish calendar (see final section).

⁴⁹ *Zichrona livracha/may her memory be a blessing*. Linke Fligl, “Introduction,” *ushpi(zine): a sukkot zine & diy ritual guide*, ed. Chana Rusanov, Zuriel Biran, and Sol Yael Weiss, ki li ha’aretz, vol. 1 (Schaghticoke land/Hudson Valley: self-pub., Tishrei 5781/2020): 3, <http://linkefligl.com/zine>.

feminist author where the traditional ritual honors biblical patriarchs and prophets, Linke Fligl joins a long tradition of Jewish groups reimagining older Jewish texts and practices; diasporists' relationship with tradition, expressed through yearning and desire, is central to their stance on the politics of land, place, and nation.

One Linke Fligl member playfully described their childhood Jewish community: "It was a lot of barefoot gay hippies drumming. I was really into it...and then I think classically, had some years of feeling like Judaism didn't hold me in my spirituality...and did a lot of traveling and a lot of searching, exploring other cultural expressions" until finding an "earth-based" Jewish community.

And I think that was kind of like my entry into my adult reclaiming of Judaism...I grew up in a fringe Jewish community, and I found my adult Jewish becoming in a fringier Jewish community, and then eventually...it was so on the fringe that I felt a hungering for tradition and the roots of where things came from.⁵⁰

A period of searching⁵¹ outside Judaism is seen as "classically" preceding a return to their Jewish roots, to "tradition," a progression echoed by other diasporists. This desire for tradition brought them to Adamah, where they ate kosher meals, did not need to use their phone on holidays because of the presence of community members, and learned from a staff member whose Orthodox background gave them a deep knowledge of Jewish practice. They reflected on their work at Linke Fligl: "We're also a fringe community, making up our own stuff, and to do that in some semblance of a culturally grounded way.... *a tradition can be queer also*, and it's not just about throwing everything familiar out the window. There's beauty and importance in trying different things and making space for these different parts of ourselves."⁵² In a community where queerness is so central as to be taken for granted, it is tradition that must be justified by its queerness – and longing for a closer relationship with this tradition is a core component of diasporism.

⁵⁰ Email to the author, February 4, 2021; Interview #17, October 19, 2020.

⁵¹ This term suggests comparison to the process of conversion. Interviewees included some raised Christian but experiencing a strong connection to Judaism and Jewish communities from a young age; some with one Jewish parent, and little or no childhood connection to Judaism; others raised in Reform or Conservative Judaism but "wanting more," and still others raised in *baal teshuva* families who made an earlier "return" to Orthodoxy.

⁵² Email to the author, February 4, 2021; Interview #17.

Ushpi(zine) includes hand-written instructions for “How to Build a Kleyneh Sukkah: Yiddish for Tiny Sukkah!”;⁵³ blessings from the traditional liturgy to be said in the sukkah, in traditional masculine as well as feminized Hebrew and English;⁵⁴ and detailed directions for performing *Birkas Kohanim* (the Priestly Blessing) with an introduction in which musician Batya Levine describes her heartbreak after leaving the Orthodox community. “[W]eeping in my seat for what I’ve lost, yearning still. Yearning for the reverence and awe of my upbringing, for community that prays like we believe in Hashem and in the magic of our traditional liturgy and rituals. For people who want to honor this ancient ritual and hold it with care and intention, because it is ours and it is POWERFUL.”⁵⁵ One of the core organizers of the Let My People Sing retreat, Levine’s album *Karov* functioned as a soundtrack for the diasporist movement, played frequently during Zoom meetings, trainings and rituals I attended.⁵⁶

Yearning – for tradition, community, justice and liberation – plays a central role in diasporim’s affective and political landscape. Linke Fligl’s handful of on-site staff live and carry out daily farm labor in a rural area in which “one thing we struggle with is feeling like if we want it, we have to hold it. And like it would just be really great if there [were] 20 people and we could go *daven shacharit* [recite the daily liturgy] in the morning and not have to be like, well, this is only going to happen if I wake up and do it.”⁵⁷ The organizers at the center of the movement creating queer diasporist community long for this very community, and a closer connection to tradition, themselves. But in drawing on the Bund’s embrace of *doikayt* – hereness – diasporism explicitly rejects Zionism’s yearning for the Jewish nation-state, replacing it with a complex and ethically demanding relationship to land and nation.

Land, Place and Nation: From Doikayt to Decolonization

Diasporists find “an alternative ‘ground’ to that of the territorial state” in Yiddish expressions of “hereness,” but applying this expression to their lived experience on the North American continent opens

⁵³ Ollie Schwartz and Zettie Shapey, *ushpi(zine)*, 13.

⁵⁴ David Seidenberg, ed. Chana Rusanov and Sol Yael Weiss, *ushpi(zine)*, 14, 20-21.

⁵⁵ Batya Levine and Sol Yael Weiss, “birkas kohanim,” *ushpi(zine)*, 30.

⁵⁶ Batya Levine, *Karov*, Bandcamp, 2020, <https://batyalevine.bandcamp.com/album/karov>.

⁵⁷ Interview #18a.

up complex questions about culture, racial identity, safety and power. Diasporists, I argue in this section, negotiate these questions through the concepts of *doikayt*, assimilation and decolonization, generating a relational ethics of land, place, and nation.

Jeffrey Shandler examines the confluence of queer identities and postvernacular Yiddish music, film, and other cultural expressions in the late 20th century, finding queerness and Yiddishkeit's "commonalities" in "diasporism; rootless cosmopolitanism; a penchant for transgression, border crossing, and being proudly, defiantly different; standing as a challenge to broader societies' sense of 'certitude and power.'"⁵⁸ The relationship between queerness and diasporism, then, has a precedent in postvernacular Yiddish. Shandler writes, "[t]he term *postvernacular* relates to Yiddish in a manner that both is other than its use as a language of daily life and is responsive to the language having once been a widely used Jewish vernacular. Postvernacularity...always entails some awareness of its distance from vernacularity....[I]n postvernacular Yiddish the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered – if not more so."⁵⁹ The recent growth of postvernacular Yiddish as a political expression raises questions about whose politics are being expressed – and to what end.

Writes Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Diasporism takes root in the Jewish Socialist Labor Bund's principle of *doikayt* – here-ness – the right to be, and to fight for justice, wherever we are. *Doikayt* means Jews enter coalitions wherever we are, across lines that might divide us, to work together for universal equality and justice....Where Zionism says go home, Diasporism says we make home where we are."⁶⁰

Kaye/Kantrowitz's words were echoed by a number of my interviewees, who, even when struggling with the pronunciation of *doikayt* and other Yiddish words, referred to these concepts as central to

⁵⁸ Jeffrey Shandler, "Queer Yiddishkeit: Practice and Theory," *Shofar* 25, no. 1 (September 22, 2006): 96, doi:10.1353/sho.2006.0140, referencing Alisa Solomon, "Notes on Klez/Camp," *Davka: Jewish Cultural Revolution* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 28-31.

⁵⁹ Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 22.

⁶⁰ Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews*, 198-199.

contemporary diasporist activism and culture. Tracy told me, “I refer to myself as a neo-Bundist. And I don’t know if I have the grounding to back that up, maybe it’s not mine to claim because I’m not Ashkenazi really. But I really do think that the Bundist idea, *doikayt*, hereness, is really central to my conception of myself as a diaspora Jew.” When I asked how she had become familiar with these terms, she answered, “I think the Bund is the most recent grandparent of modern anti-Zionist organizing.” For Tracy, like many diasporists, Bundism offers justification and cultural precedent for a Jewishness that defies “the American Jewish consensus on what it means to be a Jew” through identification with the Israeli state. Qualifying her statements several times, questioning the veracity of her own research into the history of the Bund,⁶¹ she recalled:

And so then I started diving deeper into Jewish communities, and specifically looking for other anti-Zionist Jews, so that I could be reaffirmed in my anti-Zionism as a Jewish person. And in engaging with those communities, you sort of inevitably end up with a reference to Bundism or the Bund at some point. And I am also really into labor organizing and sort of labor history, and I kind of got the concepts of the Bund and of *doikayt*. And I said like, I love all of that and if there’s more to that, I want to know about it. So I did some reading myself, and it’s kind of experiencing a resurgence. I don’t hear other people using the term neo-Bundist, or neo-Bund, because I think that would require like a little more formal organization, but that’s certainly what I feel myself to be sort of spiritually an inheritor of.⁶²

As a spiritual inheritor of an early 20th-century political and cultural movement associated with secular Yiddishism, Tracy’s words demonstrate the fluidity of politics and religion in the diasporist movement. Explaining that she wished she could show me the sticker on her laptop, an image of what Rokhl Kafrissen calls “the most famous poster for an election you’ve never heard of,”⁶³ Tracy concluded:

So that poster really said for me, in exactly as many words as it needed, a feeling that I hadn’t quite been able to nail down. Which is that I am not in mourning for a spiritual homeland from which I have been displaced, but rather, wherever we are, that’s our homeland. I am here, I am in

⁶¹ My questions may have unintentionally conveyed doubt about her authenticity as a “Jew by choice”; Tracy described this as the “least nasty” of terms for this aspect of her identity. She explained that though she had previously been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, “I wouldn’t have identified as an anti-Zionist before I was Jewish, because I wouldn’t have needed to have a position on Zionism itself.” Interview #7, September 21, 2020.

⁶² Interview #7.

⁶³ Rokhl Kafrissen, “Why Modern anti-Zionists Love the Bund,” *Haaretz*, December 29, 2019, https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-why-modern-anti-zionists-love-the-bund-1.8323974?fbclid=IwAR0OWrAlvvs2eCPTyNfWDKGZr_Di3p3A0Qiv4P19pqXQDIYwRwMueM_F5E.

America and I was born and raised in America, and this is my homeland. And I don't mourn for a place I've never been.⁶⁴

דארמען, וואו איר זענט, דארט איז אונזער לאנד!
Wherever we live that's our homeland.

Yiddish poster, Kiev, ca. 1918, YIVO.
Version with translation, 2016,
courtesy of Aharon Varady.⁶⁵



Tracy emphasized her Americanness in contrast to yearning, or mourning, for Zion, while other interviewees expressed a discomfort with and alienation from Americanness, feeling more connected with family and friends overseas.⁶⁶ Tracy's neo-Bundism is a result of her search for an anti-Zionist Judaism that reinforced her stated support for the Palestinian right of return, but it also reinforces her sense of comfort as a Jewish American. *Doikayt's* injunction to "enter coalitions wherever we are, across lines that might divide us" – a project whose challenges Kaye/Kantrowitz describes at length – becomes complicated when it reinforces Americanness, leading Tracy to ask, "What does it mean that my safety is attached to the displacement of another people, and the genocide of another people?"⁶⁷ This question could have referred to the Palestinian *nakba* as much as to the genocide inflicted on Native peoples in the Americas.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Interview #7.

⁶⁵ Aharon Varady, "Wherever I live, that is my 'Homeland' – a Response to Zionists on the Jewish and Christian Right," *Aharon's Omphalos* (blog), November 19, 2016, <https://aharon.varady.net/omphalos/2016/11/wherever-we-live-that-is-our-homeland>. Original Bundist poster, YIVO, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>.

⁶⁶ Interview #8, Interview #15.

⁶⁷ Interview #7.

⁶⁸ Etai Merav Rogers-Fett, who reimagines the Bundist poster in the 5781 Radical Jewish Calendar, writes in the calendar, "I'm grateful for this political ancestry and I feel its total inadequacy to speak to my own relationship to place and 'hereness' in my own context as a white Ashkenazic Jew and a settler on occupied Piscataway land."

Kafrissen critiques the frequent reproduction of this image as “creating the impression of a resurgent, if reductive, neo-Bundism,” condemning the “historical irony that Bundist hereness can, in one breath, be used to condemn Zionism as a fascist settler-colonial state, and in the next breath, be used to proclaim as anti-fascist a Jewish person’s mere existence within a different settler-colonial state. The mechanical meme-ification of doikayt offers no further tools for reconciling modern Jewish life with complicity in North American settler colonialism.”⁶⁹ Yet the diasporists I interviewed draw upon this very “meme-ification” as a powerful, meaningful, and even para-scriptural source of Jewish inspiration, justification and spiritual sustenance, a “memory of hope.”⁷⁰

Furthermore, they are sensitive to the possibility of accusations like Kafrissen’s, as Tracy was when she qualified her statements by apologizing for her lack of research, and as Jacob, a recent college graduate who had just completed his year in Avodah’s Jewish Service Corps, admitted:

Obviously, a lot of people romanticize the history, the Jewish labor movement of that early 20th century, the fact that a disproportionate amount of Jewish immigrants were political radicals.... It’s a really romantic history that I am worried I romanticize too much, but also, genuinely fascinating in that...Like what happened? Why did that happen? Like, why this tradition specifically, what could light that fire again a little bit?

Jacob’s connection to this “romanticized” history is personal: he had learned, while visiting his great-uncles in a nursing home shortly before COVID, that family members of his, who he described as “Bolsheviks,” had received a low-interest loan from a wealthy Jewish donor, possibly Baron Maurice de Hirsch. They had bought a chicken farm in Connecticut, which Jacob’s father had visited while growing up, and another relative had been an editor for the Yiddish *Forverts*. Even so, after I told him that I’d begun my research project to learn about his generation’s growing interest in the Yiddishist left, he responded:

I was also even conscious when I was answering your questions that some of what I was saying could have been pretty rote, in that in the Avodah and Jewish leftist community that I was in, it almost felt that what I was saying was part of some script that I was attuned to. But also, it was all new for me as of quite recently, as of a year ago. And though it feels like there’s a lot of people

⁶⁹ Kafrissen, “Why Modern anti-Zionists Love the Bund.”

⁷⁰ Ann Rigney, “Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism beyond the Traumatic,” *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 368–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018771869>.

who are engaging with these ideas and talking about this, it did still light a fire....It's gaining popularity....For me it was new, but I also am in tune with the trend that these ideas are way more beyond me, and when I started to engage with it, there were so many resources, and so many people that had been doing it for a long time.

Jacob, like Tracy, is conscious that while memory of the early 20th century Yiddish left is experiencing a “resurgence,” or “gaining popularity,” its novelty to him contrasts with those like Kafrissen who were engaged in the culture of the Yiddish left before its recent diasporist renaissance. Jacob’s sense that “what I was saying was part of some script” attests to the widespread circulation of references to Yiddish and the Bund in the resurgent Jewish left, supported by publications like *Jewish Currents*, which became the intellectual voice of that resurgence after old-guard leftist Yiddishists ceded leadership to a younger editorial staff. Being “part of some script” also suggests incomplete immersion in this culture; acknowledgement that it was “all new for me...as of a year ago” attests to rapid cultural change as new members find and join the diasporist movement, even as that movement struggles with questions and challenges, including those posed by the interpretation of *doikayt* and the use of postvernacular Yiddish.

Both Jacob and Tracy expressed another reservation: their perception that as a result of the philosophy of hereness, few Bundists survived the Holocaust. Jacob recalled:

I was talking about this with the rabbi who...worked with the Avodah house, he lived in Israel for a long time but he's a staunch leftist. And he was talking about the *doikayt* folks, and the people who, in the early 1900s – the Yiddishkayt, *doikayt*, hereness people – and he was like, it didn't work. They all died. Like most everyone who was advocating that position.

Reflecting on the aftermath of this situation for Jewish Americans, he asked, “What are they to look for next?”⁷¹ Bundism’s decimation in the Holocaust, with its implications for Jewish safety in diaspora, casts doubt on its viability as a source of inspiration for contemporary activists, who drew frequent comparisons between the pre-2020 election political moment and Nazi Germany.⁷² As the Jewish left resurged in reaction to the rise of Trumpism, echoes of Nazism and anti-Nazi resistance

⁷¹ Interview #9, September 24, 2020.

⁷² Most of my interviews preceded the 2020 US presidential election; in response to my question about “the current historic moment,” meant to elicit perceptions of time and the future, many expressed terror, overwhelm, and dread. I eventually began introducing it with a “trigger warning,” which was appreciated by interviewees.

influenced the circulation of postvernacular Yiddish. The title of the song which came to be known as *Mir Veln Zey Iberlebn* (We Will Outlive Them), based on a story of anti-Nazi resistance, was embroidered on patches in Yiddish and English and became a rallying cry of the anti-Trump Jewish Resistance.⁷³

It was in this context that the organization Never Again Action was founded in summer 2019, directly engaging Holocaust memory in the Jewish framing of its activism against immigrant detentions under Trump. Aligned with the Jewish left, but not a member of the core group of diasporist organizations, its messaging shifted in summer 2020. In an email to its members responding to the George Floyd Uprisings, Never Again Action wrote, “In our immigration work, we often speak publicly about the connections between Jewish history and the treatment of immigrants as a tool to bring attention to the struggle for immigrant rights; this is a different situation, and if we become part of the story, we are doing something wrong.”⁷⁴ Likewise, in a June 2020 *Jewish Currents* article, “Against Analogy,” Ben Ratskoff argues, “Summoning memories of the Holocaust and other experiences of antisemitism invites Jews to imagine themselves as the victims of racial violence, which can foreclose possibilities for seeing themselves, today, as complicit...But when we shift the focus away from Jewish suffering, Jewish victimhood is no longer under debate; a different terrain emerges on which white Jews can begin to consider their active implication in white supremacy....In this way, we can provoke a more productive mobilization, one capable of collaborating in a serious effort to dismantle the white supremacist police state.”⁷⁵ In Ratskoff’s view, bracketing “Jewish victimhood,” rather than recuperating memories of European Jewish resistance to state power, is necessary for white Jews to mobilize against the power of the American state in which they are implicated.

⁷³ The song was revived in late 2016 for a protest against the planned appearance of Steve Bannon at a Zionist Organization of America event; the patches were designed by JB Brager. Zoe Aqua, “Tsibele: Mir Veln Zey Iberlebn/We Will Outlive Them,” December 12, 2017, video, 7:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pk_1pw70Qjc; Interview #22, January 22, 2021. The phrase inspired a new Jewish anti-fascist organization, Outlive Them NYC, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/outlivethemnyc/>.

⁷⁴ Email, June 3, 2020.

⁷⁵ Ben Ratskoff, “Against Analogy,” *Jewish Currents*, June 9, 2020, <https://jewishcurrents.org/against-analogy/>.

Omer and Slabodsky counter, “By presenting this issue as a problem of ‘analogies’ these intellectuals usually overlook pre-existent historical relations between the events” – recalling Slabodsky’s contextualizing of racialized antisemitism in the colonialist encounter. They ask:

whether speaking from the enclosed positionality of “white Jewishness” ends up, perhaps inadvertently, erasing relational histories, reifying the notion of pure identities, narrowing the conversation of racism to self-identified “white voices,” and policing the emergence of a much more diverse American Jewish landscape as well as multi-racial coalitional spaces....The path forward is clear: to disengage from the whiteness into which the above-mentioned Jews became assimilated.⁷⁶

Jewish mobilization against American state power is necessarily coalitional – recalling Kaye/Kantrowitz’s definition of *doikayt*. But retrieval of Bundist anti-Zionism and anti-Nazi resistance, while powerful sources of diasporist Jewish identity, rely on a specifically Ashkenazi, Eurocentric understanding of Jewishness. Focusing the debate on the merits of this retrieval for white diasporists erases the experiences, and crucial leadership, of the diasporist Jews of Color I spoke to during my research, within the “more diverse American Jewish landscape” that diasporism envisions.⁷⁷ As described repeatedly by interviewees, who expressed an anti-assimilationist stance, resisting assimilation is one way to conceive of diasporism’s “disengag[ing] from...whiteness.” But this is only one of a range of meanings attributed to assimilation, a concept that further nuances the diasporist political project of *doikayt*.

Diasporism pushes back against assimilationist pressures originating in the power of the state, as understood by diasporists, but the process of de-assimilation, like the retrieval of Bundism, can be fraught and frustrating. First on Linke Fligl’s list of organizational goals is to “reconnect to land in diaspora by guiding participants to claim their Judaism where they are” – an expression of *doikayt* – and second is to “reclaim our culture(s) and challenge assimilation by building spiritual community and engaging tradition within a reparations and solidarity framework.”⁷⁸ Reparations, community and engagement with tradition,

⁷⁶ Atalia Omer and Santiago Slabodsky, “Introduction to Policing Analogies,” *Contending Modernities* (blog), September 16, 2020, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/theorizing-modernities/intro-policing-analogies/>.

⁷⁷ I follow the capitalization used by Shahanna McKinney-Baldon in the text of “I helped coin the term ‘Jews of color.’ It’s time for a history lesson,” *J. The Jewish News of Northern California*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.jweekly.com/2020/06/04/i-helped-coin-the-term-jews-of-color-its-time-for-a-history-lesson/>.

⁷⁸ Linke Fligl one-pager.

as described in the previous section, challenge assimilation and lead to a reclamation of (Jewish) culture(s). Linke Fligl members described growing up in varying levels of assimilation, a condition of loss or lack that leads to appropriation of other cultures. One began: “My personal story...was growing up in a pretty assimilated but still Jewish practicing household...after my bat mitzvah becoming pretty disconnected over time from Judaism....Doing Adamah was really my pathway back into connecting to Judaism, and realizing...both all the loss...[and] all the ways that I’d been looking to other traditions to try to find some sense of groundedness and structure and routine and ritual, and then realizing, oh, I actually have a tradition, like I had no idea!”⁷⁹

This member echoed their fellow Linke Fligl member who, after “exploring other cultural expressions,” felt a “hungering for tradition” – recalling Batya Levine’s “weeping in my seat for what I’ve lost” – even though this member’s synagogue “lacked any kind of, I don’t know, spirit....I don’t think [my parents] knew what they were missing, or what they should have been looking for....It was not an enjoyable, fruitful experience.”⁸⁰ The tradition this member seeks is seen as having been lost to assimilation in a previous generation, but is still accessible in Levine’s memories of her Orthodox upbringing.

Likewise, Rivka, who immigrated with their family from the former Soviet Union as a young child, described their family’s experience in the Soviet Union as having been “forcibly assimilated a few generations ago,” and continued:

My family had already gone through the next step of intermarriage and losing its Jewish identity, so I have a chunk of my childhood that was pretty assimilated and not in any kind of tradition or practice. And then my family became really religious, first slowly through Conservative stuff, and then really intensely through Chabad...I had basically almost an entire course of Jewish private school education at like a pretty high standard of Jewish learning and de-assimilation, and quite intense integration of tradition and not growing up in American culture, both because of the former Soviet part and because of the very Orthodox part. And it’s been the basis of my own identity and the lens through which I see the world, and how I make meaning of basically everything.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Interview #18a.

⁸⁰ Interview #18a.

⁸¹ Interview #16.

Immersion in Orthodox Jewish culture, after forced assimilation in the Soviet Union and the loss of Jewish identity resulting from intermarriage, is seen as an act of de-assimilation, and the dual experiences of growing up in an immigrant and Orthodox family intensify the experience of de-assimilation and connection with tradition. A second interviewee, raised in the United States with a Hasidic background, described the community in which she was raised as having “deeply anti-assimilationist roots, deep, radically anti-assimilationist. And so there’s a very clear and strong understanding of whiteness....I have a clear understanding of like, what is given up in order to be a part of the American dream, right? A very clear understanding because *I grew up with what was given up.*” This interviewee described her childhood experience of “being part of a community that very much challenged the norm” as a source of identification with communities of color.⁸² Growing up in a community that actively resisted many of the ways in which Jews have been assimilated into whiteness helps her to see whiteness as a process rather than a fixed identity, and reinforces her sense of solidarity.

Rafael explained, “as a person from a Latin American background, assimilation is a big threat.... My parents didn’t really teach us Spanish....We wanted to fit in.” Rafael, however, emphasized Judaism’s adaptability, continuing, “Assimilation is about everyone being the same. And I think one of the beautiful things about what Judaism has been historically, has just been, even if people don’t want to admit it, its willingness to shift and change according to the times and places.” Here, cultural adaptation is not in itself problematic. Assimilation, rather, is characterized by its relationship to the state – recalling Rivka’s family’s forced assimilation in the Soviet Union – “so I think when we talk about assimilation, we think about this sort of assimilation into civic culture, this Western nation state culture, as opposed to a living culture.”⁸³

⁸² Interview #13, October 12, 2020.

⁸³ Interview #21b, December 3, 2020.

Drawing on the concept of Constantinian Judaism⁸⁴ to describe the alliance of religion with state power, Rafael explained, “The Zionists fell short in that they wanted to fit in with the world powers....Part of the Zionist plan was, we're going to suck up to these countries that have colonized the world. And they're going to help us make our nation state....We've come through all these things, but then we attach ourselves to power. And what does that do to us, but it makes us into the very monsters...that we wanted to get away from.”⁸⁵ Assimilation, here, is an ethical choice.

In contrast, Rafael considered, “I think what an unassimilated, or I think that the term that people are using now is *decolonized*, way of being, is doing the research to your roots or what you think are your roots, or what feels like your roots in a way.” For Rafael, this fluid process involves acknowledging the particularities of their family’s specific history in the Caribbean and the region’s relationship to colonialism, and acknowledging and overcoming internalized racism. Deassimilation is a creative endeavor, which itself raises ethical questions:

One thing that I struggle with is trying to find which is the tradition that is mine....When I go to synagogue, when I go to *kahal* or when I want to pray by myself, what is going to be the practice that I'm taking in?...There's so many different ways to be Sephardi....My family's not from the former Ottoman Empire, we're not from Salonica or Istanbul, so do I have the right to try to claim these things?...Is that appropriation?

Rafael discussed these questions with a rabbi friend “because she is also from a family...I think they were *conversos* as well....The rabbi said, this yearning is part of the affirmation. It's the affirmation that this is maybe the right thing to do.”⁸⁶ Queer diasporist yearning for tradition is also an anti-assimilationist, decolonial yearning which, like neo-Bundism, gives rise to questions of authenticity.

This process is necessarily pedagogical, provoking related questions and frustrations: Rivka, described by a fellow diasporist as “an incredibly powerful influence and educator and teacher for us,”⁸⁷ experiences “a constant sense of isolation, of not really having a community of people that have the same

⁸⁴ See Marc H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: Foreword by Desmond Tutu and Gustavo Gutierrez*, 3rd ed. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), muse.jhu.edu/book/8396.

⁸⁵ Interview #21a, November 18, 2020.

⁸⁶ Interview #21b.

⁸⁷ Interview #17.

frameworks and references and level of knowledge that I have.”⁸⁸ Diasporists who become familiar with Jewish practices after a period of re-immersion tell ritual organizers “this doesn’t really work for me anymore, because you’re explaining everything,”⁸⁹ a dynamic, Rivka said, “that I saw a lot growing up in *baal teshuva* communities, that were returning to Judaism or returning to traditional practice. It’s not a new dynamic, it’s one that I’ve seen a lot in other pockets of people reappropriating Jewish practice.”⁹⁰ Another interviewee asked, “Who is it that we’re speaking to? Why are we explaining ourselves to ourselves?...I can’t relax anywhere. I’m always having to explain myself to someone else.... There’s an ongoing tension, that can’t be resolved.”⁹¹ This problem, however, inherent to growing communities engaged in ongoing cycles of absorbing and educating new members involved in processes of “reappropriation,” recedes to the background in comparison with decolonization’s ethical imperative, which demands a principled, intentionally unresolved unsettling.

“None of Us Should Be Here”: Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor

In answer to my question about the link between queerness and diasporism, Rivka told me, “If you’re...actually queer, that identity is not comfortable by definition. Whatever queer means, is being at the margins in a [really] uncomfortable way....If I wasn’t queer, would I as easily say, the place where I’ll push myself is this diasporism displacement feeling when all the other structures around me, my society, allow me to feel comfortable? I don’t know...” They concluded, “There’s no aiming for normativity, queerness does not aim to be gay-normative at some point and settled, and *diaspora is forever unsettled.*”⁹²

Rivka draws an analogy between the opposition of marginal queerness to “gay normativ[ity]” and the opposition of diasporism to the “settling” of land. Queerness, for diasporists, is a site of creativity and discomfort, one that facilitates an uncomfortable, risky, anti-assimilationist stance in opposition to state

⁸⁸ Interview #16.

⁸⁹ Interview #17.

⁹⁰ Interview #16.

⁹¹ Interview #20a.

⁹² Interview #16.

power – as can Orthodoxy, leading some queer diasporist Jews with Orthodox upbringings to serve as teachers in diasporist communities.⁹³ This site of perpetual discomfort also facilitates diasporism’s grappling with the implications of a commitment to the decolonization of land.

Doykeit zine “collect[s] voices that speak to the cross-sections of Jewish and queer identification, and how this may inform anti-Zionist or Palestinian-solidarity projects.” Its editor, scholar and artist JB Brager, writes, “a major shift in my thinking and knowledge since the first issue of this zine is an understanding of settler colonialism particularly in the context of the United States, Canada and Australia. Being a diaspora Jew is not in and of itself a righteous opposition – if we are to be opposed to the colonization of Palestine we must also commit ourselves to decolonial hereness, to live and work for the decolonization of this place.”⁹⁴

The retrieval of Bundism and anti-assimilatory Jewish tradition replace American Judaism’s embrace of Zionism with an embrace of alternate sources of Jewish culture and identity, while decolonization applies anti-Zionism’s reconceptualizing of Israel as Palestine to questions of land and power in the United States. In my research, I frequently came across references to the article “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” in which Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that “[t]he metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence,’ that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity.... Decolonization eliminates settler property rights and settler sovereignty. It requires the abolition of land as property and upholds the sovereignty of Native land and people.”⁹⁵ Linke Fligl attempts to grapple seriously with this charge by paying “a 10% land tax to Schaghticoke First Nations on all sales and event

⁹³ Diasporism’s anti-assimilation rhetoric could be looked at through the lens of queer politics, as in Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, ed., *That’s Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*, rev. ed. (Brooklyn: Soft Skull, 2008), <https://www.mattildabernsteinsycamore.com/thats-revolting>.

⁹⁴ JB Brager, *Doykeit*, vol. 4 (Lenape territory: self-pub., 2018): 1.

⁹⁵ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 8, 2012): 1, 26, <http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

donations.”⁹⁶ To take Tuck and Yang’s call seriously is to raise a fundamental question about Jewish futurity in diaspora, provoking anxieties about Jewish safety.⁹⁷

Rivka described diasporism as a state of *not* yearning for land:

Diasporism is uncomfortable....Not claiming a land as your own and not claiming the land that you’re on, that you happen to be settling, as your own and saying, ‘I’m forever going to be in this middle ground place and actually that’s going to be my existence and I’m not yearning for something that isn’t mine on either end’... Every single day that feels [so] painful to me.⁹⁸

Eliyahu, however, cautioned against dwelling on the pain of diasporic existence, encouraging acceptance of the condition of being on “land that’s not yours”:

There is a way to be in right relationship with land that's not yours, that you shouldn't be on. But you can still be in right relationship, and it's not going to feel good and it's going to feel weird or sad, or frustrating or infuriating. But like for me, it's important to remember that none of this land, none of us should be here....Aside from indigenous people who have survived and continue to survive the protracted attempted genocide of 600 nations on this landmass....While there is grief around moving and temporality and transiency, it's also like, *it just is*. This is not our land to feel beholden to. This is not our land to keep within our circle of relationships....The land doesn't belong to anyone.

Eliyahu outlines an ethically demanding approach in which “right relationship” with land is possible for settlers, but will not “feel good”; in the face of the “protracted attempted genocide of 600 nations,” feeling good is neither possible nor desirable. Eliyahu described moving cross-country and

becoming even more intimately aware of my presence on Turtle Island as a direct consequence and function of colonialism....I have difficulty having that conversation in most, honestly, Jewish spaces that I'm in. I feel like the way we talk about our trauma as people of diaspora... some dimension is missing....Sometimes there's this sense of like, oh, my-slash-our pain is like, particular. But then there's still, I feel like, not enough recognition by non-Black and non-indigenous people [of] the legacy of chattel slavery, of colonialism and life since, quote, first contact.

⁹⁶ “Our Team,” Linke Fligl, accessed March 31, 2021, <http://linkefligl.com/about-us>. In diasporist and other activist meetings, the website <https://native-land.ca/> was often shared to allow participants to indicate the Native name for their location in their Zoom name. As this does not “eliminate...settler property rights and settler sovereignty,” it can be easily be interpreted as one of many “settler moves to innocence.”

⁹⁷ Linke Fligl also has “an agreement to be on this land for 7 years with WILDSEED, who [are] a POC collective who steward...the property that LF is a part of, but WILDSEED is not an indigenous group.” Email to the author, May 4, 2021. Seven years is the length of a *shmita* (biblical agricultural) cycle; the next *shmita* year, in which land is to lie fallow, will be observed by Linke Fligl in 5782 (2021-2022).

⁹⁸ Interview #16.

Eliyahu, who identified as Black, described retreating from Jewish communities, because “some conversations are just too hard to have, outside of Blackness, to be honest, even if the Black people I’m talking to don’t identify as culturally Jewish or religiously Jewish.”⁹⁹ His discomfort with the ways non-Black, non-indigenous Jews talk about their “trauma as people of diaspora” leaves them¹⁰⁰ alienated from Jewish community, perhaps including diasporist Jewish community, when that community does not also acknowledge the legacies of slavery and settler colonialism in that same diaspora.

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz writes “with the explicit intent of changing” a series of assumptions:

That all Jews came from Eastern Europe and spoke Yiddish. That Jewishness is only religion; that secular Judaism is a contradiction in terms; that real Jews are born Jewish. That calling (all) Jews “white” explains anything. That calling (all) Jews people of color explains anything. That American Jews and African Americans used to be best friends and are now enemies. That Jews and Arabs were always enemies and could never be friends. That life in diaspora has always been a vale of tears that all Jews aspire to escape.¹⁰¹

The “reimagining of Jewishness as multi-racial,”¹⁰² which is Kaye/Kantrowitz’s project in *The Colors of Jews*, is central to diasporism. But for the diasporists I spoke to, this reimagining is an evolving and deeply imperfect process. Just before Passover 5781/2021, the Queer Mikveh Project hosted its “first all JoC-led queer mikveh gathering.”¹⁰³ A report on the event stresses the need for the Queer Mikveh Project, with its “liberatory approach,” to “center Jews of Color,” quoting a QMP leader as saying that making JOC experiences “a centered point of view instead of like, ‘well there’s Jews, and then these Brown people who are also Jews,” pushes the Jewish community towards an “equitable and multiracial future.”¹⁰⁴

Where does diasporism’s retrieval of a Bundist past fit within this movement towards a multiracial future? Linke Fligl’s co-founder explained that all of their current and former staff are

⁹⁹ Interview #23, January 26, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ I alternate between “he” and “they” pronouns here intentionally.

¹⁰¹ Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews*, x-xi.

¹⁰² Atalia Omer and Santiago Slabodsky, “Introduction to Policing Analogies.”

¹⁰³ “Under New Leadership, The Queer Mikveh Project is Creating Liberatory Space for Queer Jews of Color,” Jews of Color Initiative.

¹⁰⁴ Rebecca Goldschmidt, in “Under New Leadership, The Queer Mikveh Project is Creating Liberatory Space for Queer Jews of Color,” Jews of Color Initiative.

Ashkenazi, and told me that, in choosing a name for the project, “it definitely felt like a question of, do we want a name that’s just Ashkenazi?...We also want to...decenter Ashkenazi [from] being the only tradition uplifted, and also we want to be in our own project of reclamation.”¹⁰⁵ Linke Fligl’s work is both an Ashkenazi “project of reclamation” and an effort to “support the leadership and vision of queer and trans Jews and BIJOCSM (Black, Indigenous, Jews of Color, Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews),”¹⁰⁶ which requires Ashkenazi “decentering.”

Diasporists oppose a Zionist ideology that originated among Ashkenazi Jews, yet led to the suppression of significant aspects of Ashkenazi culture.¹⁰⁷ The reclamation of this culture takes place alongside the reclamation of Sephardi, Mizrahi and other Jewish cultures, which were still more severely repressed. In diasporist communities, Sephardi/Mizrahi caucuses and other cultural projects engage in this reclamation work,¹⁰⁸ yet Ashkenormativity¹⁰⁹ continues to predominate in many circles, as evidenced by the popularity of “romanticized” neo-Bundism. In a widely-circulated conversation with *Jewish Currents* editor-in-chief Arielle Angel, Sephardic studies scholar Devin E. Naar addresses the limitations of Ashkenormative diasporism: “*Doikayt* speaks to me, this idea that we can focus on our struggles here and strive for more complete liberation here. [But w]hen we hold on to the Israel/diaspora dyad, we actually perpetuate the idea that Israel is the center and we are dispersed from the center - even as we attempt to assert that the former periphery is a new center.” To counter this, Naar suggests the term “poly-

¹⁰⁵ Interview #18b.

¹⁰⁶ Linke Fligl, “Support,” accessed April 25, 2021, <http://linkefligl.com/donate>.

¹⁰⁷ Zionism’s origins in Western Europe are not differentiated from Eastern Europe (from which most of my interviewees’ families emigrated) when the term “Ashkenazi” is applied to both groups.

¹⁰⁸ Galeet Dardashti told me that encountering “Mizrahim reclaiming their roots” while teaching Middle Eastern Jewish music at Let My People Sing “was a huge eye opener for me on many levels....There were all these kids that were so excited about me, and about learning with me....When I started doing this twenty years ago I had nobody who was, like me, interested in their Middle Eastern Jewish culture....[Let My People Sing participants] came up to me and wanted to know more and were so charged up....I have this responsibility. I have to share my knowledge with this next generation because they care....For the first time, in Boston [through the organization Kavod] I led a program only for Sephardi, Mizrahi and Jews of Color.” This embrace of postvernacular, anti-assimilatory Middle Eastern Jewish culture by young, often queer, members of Let My People Sing, Kavod, JFREJ and other organizations on the Jewish left is an essential component of the diasporist movement that I failed to explore in my research, in part by not reaching out to enough of these organizations. Phone interview, April 12, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ The assumption that all Jews are Ashkenazi. See Jonathan Katz, “Learning to Undo ‘Ashkenormativity,’” *Forward*, November 5, 2014, <https://forward.com/opinion/208473/learning-to-undo-ashkenormativity/>.

enracinement” or “multi-rootedness,” coined by Edgar Morin.¹¹⁰ Naar continues: “For me, the idea of multi-rootedness has a lot of potential, because it brings us out of the dichotomy between ‘there’ and ‘here’ by saying there can be multiple ‘heres.’ We should think about the multiplicity of spaces and communities we’re connected to – if that can help us make sense of the multiplicities of Sephardic experience, and the Jewish experience in general.”¹¹¹ For diasporists who seek to simultaneously reclaim and decenter Ashkenazi culture, “multi-rootedness” may help both to provide a framework for the multiplicity of Jewish cultures, as well as the postvernacular quality of their reclamation.

For Jewish diasporists assimilated into whiteness who encounter Tuck and Yang’s “eliminat[ion of] settler property rights and settler sovereignty,” disengagement from that whiteness, or decolonization, involves not only a negotiation of the retrieval of past diasporist identities, but a relinquishing of whiteness’s promise of futurity. Any discussion of settler futurity may be seen as counter to the project of decolonization; in its place, diasporism reorients Zionism and colonialism’s approach to temporality, refiguring homeland as relationship – in a presentist time full of potential, described as “the world that is coming.”

The World that is Coming: Diasporism, Relationship and Time

Diasporists’ embrace of decolonization applies anti-Zionism’s reorientation of Zionism’s ethnocentric teleology to Jewish life on Turtle Island. Diasporists replace ethnocentricity with relationship – an approach to multiracial organizing that moves beyond the instrumentality of coalition – and Zionist teleology with the subtle and ever-evolving temporality of *olam haba*, the world that is coming.

Atalia Omer places anti-Zionist activists in the context of late-20th and early-21st century “Jewish humanitarianism,” the aims of which are “global rather than ethnocentric, framed through the popularized Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun olam* (or repair of the cosmos through good deeds or *tzedakah*)....When the humanitarian impulse meets the Palestinian ‘other’ as the object of solidarity and long-distance normative

¹¹⁰ Scholar Julian González Beltrez, to whom I am grateful for bringing this concept to my attention, suggests re-styling it as “*polienrasinamyento*,” as it might be translated to Ladino. Email to the author, November 29, 2020.

¹¹¹ Arielle Angel, “Are We Post-Sepharadim?”, *Jewish Currents*, October 20, 2020, <https://jewishcurrents.org/are-we-post-sepharadim/>.

commitment, Jewish loyalty to a Jewish ethnocracy crumbles,” resulting in a “moral shock” that makes possible non- and anti-Zionist Jewish identities.¹¹²

The concept of *tikkun olam* was raised frequently by my interviewees, but with an ambivalent or negative connotation. Most positive was an interviewee who told me that “all of the projects that I start and all of the jobs that I have, the underlying current is a sense of *tikkun olam*. And I'm creating community because in my various identities and my various backgrounds and experiences, I've been excluded a lot.” When I asked what *tikkun olam* means, they began with the common translation “repairing the world,” then reflected, “I was actually looking through a lot of the actual texts that talk about *tikkun olam* recently, and they don't resonate with me in the same way.” Instead, they prefer to think of *tikkun olam* as a practice that “undoes a lot of the harm” created by humans.¹¹³ Another interviewee contrasted her work in a Jewish social justice organization with her experience growing up in a Reform synagogue:

We would do different programs and learning sessions...on systemic oppression and privilege and intersecting identities...Even though there were a number of direct service volunteer components, it was much more focused on the systemic learning piece of really unpacking systems. And that was...not something that I had experienced growing up, Jewishly, like very much the *tikkun olam*, we should make the world a better place, but not really unpacking what oppression is and maybe some of the more structural ways to make change.¹¹⁴

This interviewee compared educating young Jews about systems and structures of oppression and privilege with *tikkun olam*, “mak[ing] the world a better place” – perhaps through “direct service volunteer” work – which fails to undo or even identify the harms of structural oppressions. An interviewee who grew up in a U.S. Hasidic community also connected *tikkun olam* with the Reform movement; for her, it represents an uninspiring separation between politics and spirituality, in communities “where the focus is only *tikkun olam*, and the focus is only on activism, and there's a lot less deep engagement with the mysticism and with the parts that for me are...what I love to live in. I think a

¹¹² Omer, *Days of Awe*, 45.

¹¹³ Interview #6, September 16, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Interview #19, October 21, 2020.

lot of Reform approaches, for me, feel very much like going to church and have a lot of social justice in them, but...very little of what I consider key parts of the Jewish culture.¹¹⁵

Even as activism and social justice work, which may address structural harms, *tikkun olam* as a concept fails to connect to its roots in Jewish mysticism, marking it as assimilationist. Another interviewee characterized *tikkun olam* as a neo-colonialist, “white savior” project: “We're like, ‘we're Jewish, *tikkun olam*, we're here to repair,’ but we have to be careful that we're repairing where things need to be repaired and not inserting ourselves into places where we might not be wanted or where our help might not be best fit.”¹¹⁶ And Sophie asked how her Reform synagogue, which claimed to be “about *tikkun olam*” could have taught her an “American Jewish consensus” narrative about Israel.

Tikkun olam here represents a hypocritical Judaism that preaches social justice without reflecting on its own implication in the oppression of Palestinians; a Judaism that does not examine systemic oppression and intrudes in places where it should not; a Judaism that is church-like and lacks a mystical, spiritual element. For diasporists, when “the humanitarian impulse meets the Palestinian ‘other,’” not only does “Jewish loyalty to a Jewish ethnocracy crumble,” but so does the concept of *tikkun olam*, leaving a rhetorical hole that is filled, I argue, by *olam haba*: the world to come, or alternately, “the world that is coming.”¹¹⁷

Tikkun olam and *olam haba* share the word *olam*, typically rendered as “the world” – a concept with a rich life in activism: “The whole world is watching,” chanted outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention¹¹⁸, continued to be chanted at anti-globalization protests around the turn of the millennium; the phrase “another world is possible” is associated with the World Social Forum, the

¹¹⁵ Interview #13.

¹¹⁶ Interview #5, September 6, 2020.

¹¹⁷ Interview #24, February 11, 2021.

¹¹⁸ And prior to that in the civil rights movement. Zach Goldhammer, “The Whole World is Watching Ferguson,” *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-whole-world-is-watching-ferguson/378729/>.

“articulation of an emergent global civil society” which first took place in 2001.¹¹⁹ In April 2020, novelist and activist Arundhati Roy wrote, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”¹²⁰ Like the Bundist election poster, Roy’s quote served as a para-scriptural diasporist text.¹²¹ The closing of Roy’s speech at the 2003 World Social Forum serves as meme, para-scripture and, as recorded by Linke Fligl members singer/songwriter Aly Halpert and Margot Seigle on November 9, 2016, activist liturgy: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”¹²² It is in this context, I propose, that Jewish diasporist renderings of *olam haba* as “the world to come” should be read.

Linke Fligl writes, “[W]e practice an embodied and land-based Judaism, centered in ancestral prayer and sacred text, woven with queer ritual and guided by Jewish time. Our educational programs and gatherings bring together queer, trans, and BIJOCSM (Black, Indigenous, Jews of Color, Sephardim and Mizrahim) to co-create community and pray, learn, cook, sing, dance, schlep and live into the world to come.”¹²³ Diasporists “live into” *olam haba* through a queer, multiracial Jewish liturgy, scripture and practice, “guided by Jewish time.” The *Simple Queer Mikveh Guide* represents the time of *olam haba* as an ethical state, both future and present: “We understand ‘the world to come’ as a shape of being that is currently unknown to us. It is the shape of dignity and material resource for all beings, and true loving connection, and interdependence. We also understand it as being alive and well in our current world, in

¹¹⁹ William Fisher, Thomas Ponniah, and Boaventura De Sousa Santos, eds., *Another World Is Possible: World Social Forum Proposals for an Alternative Globalization* (London: Zed Books, 2015), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iub-ebooks/detail.action?docID=2041741>.

¹²⁰ Arundhati Roy, “Arundhati Roy: ‘The Pandemic is a Portal,’” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

¹²¹ Her comparison of the pandemic to a “portal” was incorporated into the email address for a nightly Kaddish Call offered throughout summer 2020 by a group affiliated with the Havurah Network.

¹²² There is a good chance this quote is apocryphal, as editions of this speech in print and on better-vetted websites do not include it. Aly Halpert and Margot Seigle, “She is On Her Way,” Soundcloud, by Aly Halpert, November 9, 2016, <https://soundcloud.com/user-478813445/she-is-on-her-way-1>; Compare Arundhati Roy, “Confronting Empire,” *ratville times*, January 27, 2003, <https://ratical.org/ratville/CAH/AR012703.html> to Arundhati Roy, *War Talk* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2003), 103-12.

¹²³ “About,” Linke Fligl, accessed January 17, 2021, <http://linkefligl.com/about-us>.

moments where love and liberation are present.”¹²⁴ For the core groups creating queer diasporist community, the world to come represents a complex temporality, one that is above all ethical and relational. Relationships in the world to come are with land, body, and ancestors, and “co-created” with each other.

The framework of “Jewish time” is central to diasporism; interviewees frequently identified past events by naming the month or year of the Jewish calendar in which they took place.¹²⁵ As weeks turned into months of quarantine, I came to appreciate the role played by not only holidays, but extended periods of Jewish time: nightly gatherings for counting the *omer*, daily “Waking into Elul” services in the month preceding Rosh Hashanah,¹²⁶ and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice’s “40 Days of Teshuvah” leading up to Tisha b’Av’s day of mourning, in which participants gathered to “cry out” with the pain of, or confess complicity with, systemic racism.¹²⁷ Jewish time provided an affective container with cycles of anticipation, spiritual preparation and release – often organized around the practice of repentance – such that I experienced Omer’s “relentless Days of Awe”¹²⁸ as cyclical, supportive and, in the language of diasporists, “sweet.”

Supporting these observances, the editors of the Radical Jewish Calendar write, “[O]ur ancestors understood that being Jewish wasn’t solely about looking back, it is a way of living in the present, and a way of moving faithfully into the future we work to make true.”¹²⁹ This is a temporality on the border between present and future, grounded in an ethics of relationship – the temporality of *olam haba*. The

¹²⁴ Zoh Lev Cunningham and Rebekah Erev, *Simple Queer Mikveh Guide* (Lennapehoking, Philadelphia and Duwamish and Coastal Salish Territories: self-pub., n.d.), 8.

¹²⁵ Tracy told me, “I had my mikveh in Kislev of last year, so that would’ve been in December of 2019”; Eliyahu recalled, “So I stayed in contact and ended up going to Linke Fligl’s Sukkot in 5780, so like about two months after I started grad school.” Interview #7; Interview #23.

¹²⁶ “Waking into Elul Daily Ritual 08/21-09/18,” Fringes: A Feminist, Non-Zionist Havurah, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://fringeshavurah.com/waking-into-elul-daily-ritual-08-21-09-18/>.

¹²⁷ “40 Days of Teshuvah (Return) Toolkit,” Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.jfrej.org/assets/uploads/40-Days-of-Teshuvah_Toolkit.pdf.

¹²⁸ Omer, *Days of Awe*, 267.

¹²⁹ Jessica Rosenberg et al., *Radical Jewish Calendar 5781*. See <https://www.radicaljewishcalendar.com/>.

Golden Dreams of Olam HaBa, The World to Come 5781 calendar is a spiral-bound daily planner with instructions for rituals and space for journaling, whose authors envision *olam haba* as a time:

when there is acknowledgement of the deep trauma of our past, the wounds of slavery and oppression have opportunity to heal, and those who have been most hurt guide us to a new way of life....As you write your dreams and visions, share them with your loved ones and the world, you join in this collective dreaming project and bring about the World to Come, *Olam haBa*.¹³⁰

Olam haba, here, is a utopian vision of global reciprocity and healing that the reader can “bring about” through their dreams, which may seem far from the material reality of “eliminat[ing] settler property rights.” Francesca Polletta acknowledges that “prefigurative goals risk sounding very much like expressive ones,” but argues that the practices of prefigurative social movements can themselves be strategic.¹³¹ Through creating affinity groups and other activist formations, “joint action can create new and hybrid identities” and “novel associational forms” that “provide a space within which participants can experiment with new behaviors knowing that other participants are also committed to the enterprise and will be supportive of their efforts. The resulting relationships can then encompass a variety of behaviors in diverse settings.”¹³² Drawing on these strengths, “despite their detachment from everyday life, or perhaps because of it, social movements have historically been the source of ideas, identities, practices, and organizational forms that endured long after they ended.”¹³³

During the height of the uprisings in June 2020, Linke Fligl wrote to its email list, “Notice where you stand as the systems around us crumble. Notice the ground beneath you. Keep your ancestors close. Pray and sing louder.” They quote Arundhati Roy, then continue:

We are in the pangs of labor as the world that we have prayed for is on its way....We have been growing the muscle of imagination for this moment – to dream a new world into being. We know so many of you are in the streets and organizing your communities to fight for an end to police brutality and structural racism. Now is the time to stand with the folks at the front and give our

¹³⁰ Rebekah Erev and Nomy Lamm, “Dear Reader,” in *Golden Dreams of Olam HaBa, The World to Come* 5781 (Steh Chass/Squaxin Island, Nisqually, Chehalis, and other lands: self-pub., 5781/2020).

¹³¹ Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, 7.

¹³² Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, 223-4.

¹³³ Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, 227-8.

time, money and bodies to #AbolishPrisons, #DefundthePolice, #DefendBlackLife, and birth a new world. Thank you for believing in another world and fighting for it.¹³⁴

Despite the apocalyptic imagery of the crumbling of one world and the birth of the next, I would like to argue that beyond the historic movement moment of June 2020, it is the ongoing, daily prefigurative practice of *olam haba*, in the tension between present and future, organized through ritual, enacted through relationship, that may endure in the future of Judaism on Turtle Island. Another word for this temporality is *emergence*. adrienne maree brown writes, “emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies,” and Emergent Strategy consists of “plans of action, personal practices and collective organizing tools that account for constant change and rely on the strength of relationship for adaptation.”¹³⁵ brown’s writing travels in similar networks to Arundhati Roy’s in contemporary social movements. Emergent Strategy is “nonlinear and iterative,”¹³⁶ and brown’s account of “small actions” in the context of “constant change,” based in relationship, provide further context for the diasporist world to come.

A Radical Jewish Calendar illustration “inspired by Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’” reads, “These are not headlights or floodlights, illuminating a straight line of progress from here to there. These are sparks in a crowded sky. They ‘flash up in moments of danger’: Rescue flares & the spark of resistance. We are gathered against militarism, beyond marriage, apart from any elections, against chosenness & manifest destiny – all of us in the constellation, all of us accounted for.”¹³⁷ *Olam haba* is neither apocalyptic nor, for most diasporists, messianic (unless invoking, possibly, Benjamin’s “weak Messianic power”¹³⁸). It is ongoing, iterative, leaning into each moment as the future becomes present. Rabbi Dev Noily, an instructor at Queer Talmud Camp, told me:

People have always felt like the world was about to end...not always, but that has come in cycles....There's an *olam haba* that's beyond us and there's an *olam haba* that's within us....Even

¹³⁴ Email, June 5, 2020.

¹³⁵ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 3, 14.

¹³⁶ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 103.

¹³⁷ Nava Etshalom and Irit Reinheimer, *These are Not Headlights*, 2018, Radical Jewish Calendar, <https://www.radicaljewishcalendar.com/pastyearsartists/1ypj3zx01dlnr87jz2fkrbttl45h6h>.

¹³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 254. Italics original.

the grammar of it. People have taught that you can translate *olam haba* as the world that will come, or you can translate it as *the world that's coming, moment-to-moment*. Like it's constantly coming."¹³⁹

Olam haba's temporality of emergence blurs not only the line between the present and the future, but the line between time and space. Liel Green, a friend of Linke Fligl, further elaborates on the linkages between queer diaspora's intentional unsettling, "multi-rootedness," and its emergent temporality:

I, too, theorize and dream of a third space in between 'here' and 'there.'...In a Jewish Zionist context, the desired and longed for 'there' is the State of Israel and the 'here' is the here of diaspora...I theorize and dream of creating homes in between here and there, between the present and the future, in time through our performances and each other...I find queer diasporic musings around home and liminality as sites of emergence. Through these modes we can begin to imagine how to practice building horizontal homes in time that allow us to stand in better, stronger, and unwavering solidarity and coalition with one another, between 'here' and 'there.'¹⁴⁰

Green describes a queer Jewish temporality, merging José Esteban Muñoz's exploration of queer futurity with Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath*, creating temporal "homes":

For being queer is relinquishing our grasp on what is, and allowing ourselves to soften into, to fall in love with, and to feel what could be. To feel the not-yet and to will it into existence, we must relinquish our anxious hold on the future. Shabbat, as a realm of time, teaches 'not to have but to be, not to own but to give.' We must release into the not-yet that exists in the moments in between. It is in these moments that we arrive home.¹⁴¹

Diasporism's prefigurative, emergent temporality of *olam haba* is intertwined with an ethics of relationship. Long-time JVP leader Rabbi Alissa Wise writes:

Redemption is the quintessential Jewish project. Secular Jews may find it in socialism, Orthodox Jews have it in the concept of the *moshiach* (messiah), liberal Jews speak of *tikkun olam* – healing the world. Still others might find it in moments of connection and courage. The Jewish concept of *olam ha'bah* (literally, "the world to come") is often understood as the next world, a messianic future at the end of days, a world of possibility and of justice.... We are a part of history – it is not happening to us. We can reach *olam ha'bah* even as we sit in *olam ha'zeh* [this world].... What divides [the two worlds] is an ethical border, not a temporal one.... When we are in *olam ha'bah*, it is only and always together."¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Interview #24.

¹⁴⁰ Liel Green, "'Anticipatory Illuminations': The Performance of the Jewish Sabbath as Queer Futurity" (Honors Project Thesis, Smith College, April 17, 2020), 120-122.

¹⁴¹ Green, "Anticipatory Illuminations," 123-4, quoting Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 3.

¹⁴² Alissa Wise, "Building Toward the Next World," in *On Antisemitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 207, 211-212.

In this present, ethical, relational *olam haba*, Wise organizes in solidarity with Palestinians. Rabbi Noily writes of the limitations of temporal homelands:

Heschel and Boyarin have taught us that we can be fully Jewish anywhere in the world where we can build a community, and that Judaism can thrive in diaspora. But while my *spirit* is fed by the cycles of sacred time, and by the trans-generational community that lives in the portable homeland of holy text, my *body* still lives in a place, in a specific location on the earth.¹⁴³

Rabbi Noily is a co-founder of the organization Jews on Ohlone Land, which strives to “maximize Jewish participation” in paying the Shuumi land tax,¹⁴⁴ “a voluntary annual contribution that non-Indigenous people living on traditional Lisjan Ohlone territory make.” The land tax “directly supports Sogorea Te’s work of rematriation, returning Indigenous land to Indigenous people, establishing a cemetery to reinter stolen Ohlone ancestral remains and building urban gardens, community centers, and ceremonial spaces so current and future generations of Indigenous people can thrive in the Bay Area.”¹⁴⁵

Rabbi Noily told me:

It's like a mechanism for people living there to actually do *teshuva*, to come into right relationship with the land where we live. And because that exists here, it felt like such an invitation...to build Jewish participation in it. And that also touches on being Jews in diaspora...Humans, I think, need to be in relationship with earth and with space and with place. And ideally in relationship with the space and place where we are and *not with a space and a place that's far away from us or that's mythical, or that's aspirational*. So being in relationship to this place where I live and that I love, in relationship with the indigenous people who are here, is a gift, unlike anything I've experienced.

They described the specific relationships they have cultivated with indigenous communities:

The Indigenous elder leader that we are in relationship with is a woman named Corrina Gould...Corrina always invites people, all of us, to come be part of prayer and ceremony and things in those places. And that invitation is something I just had never experienced before. And it's been very profound for me to have somebody whose ancestors have lived here for literally hundreds of generations, thousands of years, to say, you're welcome to live in this place. We welcome you to live in this place.

Rabbi Noily described a group of indigenous dancers invited to a festival at an art center built on ancestral burial grounds, construction indigenous activists had tried, unsuccessfully, to stop:

¹⁴³ Dev Noily, “Chesed plus Emet = Teshuva,” *Jews on Ohlone Land* (blog), Kol Nidre 5779, <https://www.jewsonohloneand.org/jewsonindigenouslandblog/blog-post-title-one-6f7dg>.

¹⁴⁴ “About,” Jews on Ohlone Land, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.jewsonohloneand.org/about>.

¹⁴⁵ “Shuumi Land Tax,” Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/shuumi-land-tax/>.

And I was especially moved by the willingness of these artists and these people to offer this ceremony in a place that had been desecrated. And to basically offer it to the people who had done the desecrating. And I couldn't wrap my mind around it. I tried to understand, like what would the parallel be of that for Jews, in a post-genocidal situation? What would it be like for Jews to do *simkhas torah* outdoors in the neighborhood of the Warsaw Ghetto and invite Poles to join in the dancing with the Torah? That blew my mind, and I just couldn't see it.

Noily compared this experience to what they described as the “closing down of Jewish community and a shutting in of Jewish practice” in response to the trauma of the Holocaust. “You don't go into a public place where most people aren't Jewish and *be Jewish* in that way.” This “closing down” and “shutting in” recalls the questions of Jewish safety that arose in my conversations with interviewees about the fate of the Bund, and comparisons between the Trumpist moment and Nazi Germany. One interviewee described her anti-racist work in Jewish communities, “having those conversations and trying to unpack some of the anxieties around safety, particularly in moments where the Jewish community is feeling so vulnerable, reflecting on how we break down this idea that everyone is out to get us and that no one is on our side.”¹⁴⁶ These conversations were meant to interrogate American Jewish communities' reliance on the police – the alliance with state power that anti-assimilation politics opposes. Rather than bracketing the comparison to “Jewish suffering,” Rabbi Noily embraced it:

And so to see this very different way of relating in the place...where the *desecration* of the genocide happened and where it wasn't recognized, that was really expansive for me and I felt like there was a pathway to healing that they were modeling that I wanted to understand better. I talked to some of the dancers that night and told them how moved I was by their generosity, and they said that was just part of who they are as a people, that generosity was part of their practice. And that's what I encountered later with Corrina too, this idea that she'll say, the healing of this land, the healing of this place is something that all of us can participate in. *Everybody who's here is part of it now...* So I think there's some piece of it for me personally that's about being in relationship with other people who've experienced genocide historically. *And using the conversation or the comparison of those experiences as a way to see new possibility.* And then for me there's something also about how much I love this place and how much I love being in this land...I get to be in deeper relationship with this place through being in relationship with the people who've been stewarding it for generations and generations.¹⁴⁷

After a year of immersion in diasporist communities, I found Rabbi Noily's embrace of “the comparison...as a way to see new possibility” to be a clear and concise expression of the diasporist

¹⁴⁶ Interview #19.

¹⁴⁷ Interview #24.

politics of land, place and nation. This comparison takes place in the context of the transfer of material resources from Jewish settlers to facilitate the rematriation of indigenous land on Turtle Island. This is decolonial, diasporist “hereness.” Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz writes that “solidarity is the political version of love.”¹⁴⁸ This is not an instrumental solidarity for a specific political goal, but the relational homeland of *olam haba*, “the world that’s coming, moment-to-moment.”

Epilogue: “Do Not Lose Heart, We Were Made For These Times”

A Linke Fligl member told me:

I’ve had moments at Linke Fligl or just being in queer Jewish community where I feel that essence, of, oh, this is the world to come. Those moments of like, everything is divine, and this is like, perfection....For [the rabbis] *olam haba* was about place, was really about building Jerusalem....To me the *olam haba* of our generation is finding those little places all over, and not just it being in one place...and in that space [we can] really begin to even see what is the *olam haba*, and what can we build together, and creating spaces where we can gather and return and know that there’s a place where we belong....We have a spot in the land. We have a converted bus that we use as one of our program spaces because we don’t have any structures, and you can go up on the top of the bus and sit on the roof, and you can see out to the garden and the land and the mountains on either side. And we call that the *olam haba*....That’s the world to come.¹⁴⁹

The title of this thesis is taken from the title of a song written by two core organizers of Let My People Sing, which I heard several times in diasporist gatherings;¹⁵⁰ it is, in turn, taken from an encouraging essay circulated among activists over the past several decades, entitled “Do Not Lose Heart, We Were Made for These Times.”¹⁵¹ While this, and the “*olam haba* bus” described above, could be attributed to a youthful self-centeredness, I see them as an expression of the “self-approval and pride” that accompanies “self-critique” after Jewish activists experience “moral shocks” and rewrite their Jewish identities in solidarity with Palestinians.¹⁵² Activism is exhausting, and burnout all too common. The “sweetness” of diasporist music, the embrace of cycles of Jewish time, the dreaming of *olam haba*, and

¹⁴⁸ Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews*, 203.

¹⁴⁹ Interview #18b.

¹⁵⁰ Let My People Sing!, “We Were Made for These Times by Arielle Rivera Korman and R’ Noam Lerman,” August 17, 2020, video, 4:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5-xzjr-ThE>.

¹⁵¹ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, “Do not lose heart, We were made for these times,” *The MOON magazine*, December 31, 2016 (copyright 2001), <http://moonmagazine.org/clarissa-pinkola-estes-do-not-lose-heart-we-were-made-for-these-times-2016-12-31/>.

¹⁵² Omer, *Days of Awe*, 103.

the formation of relationships in diasporist communities allow the movement to grow, acting as a buffer against devolving into infighting and factionalism, as so many social movements do.

Just as queer diasporists with Orthodox backgrounds sometimes act as teachers to other diasporists seeking anti-assimilatory Jewish culture, Linke Fligl and other core queer diasporist groups create diasporist culture that “filters down” to the rest of the Jewish left: Never Again Action, while on the Jewish left, is not one of these core groups. Nonetheless, I attended a training with NAA in January 2021 where, in a “word cloud” of participants’ submitted identities, the most prominent word was “queer.” And while the 2020 NAA Haggadah drew primarily on secular, Bundist socialist references, an entire section of the 2021 training was devoted to dreaming *olam haba*, the world to come.¹⁵³

At the end of March 2021, Rabbi Alissa Wise resigned from her work as a leader of JVP. At a celebration of her work, Wise began, “Ten years ago, when I started at Jewish Voice for Peace, a Kabbalat Shabbat service like this felt like an impossibility.” She recalled trying to plan a tour of *Shministim* at New York synagogues, but “not a single congregation would host the Israeli conscientious objectors.” The experience inspired her to become a rabbi. “And tonight I just feel in love with all of the anti-Zionist Jews and rabbis here in the US, and the ones who came before us who showed us how...I love watching how malleable and responsive our traditions become when you bring your creativity.”

Wise described the consequences of over a decade of anti-Zionist work:

I have regularly received death threats...I have been barred from traveling to Israel. I almost was kicked out of rabbinical school. I have been called a kapo more times than I can count...I always maintained it didn't seep in. But did it?...I think I was negligent when taking care of those feelings for myself, and I think that is a part of how I ended up needing to take a break 10 years in...We have a world to win, and we all need to be as whole and healthy as possible not just to win it, but to enjoy it when we get there. That's why we need each other...That is why we make our own homes for each other and why we must tell each other we love each other more. I'm sorry if I haven't said it enough. I love you all.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Weinblum et al., *Let My People Go: A Haggadah Supplement from Never Again Action* (self-pub., 2020), <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RcY7Eju04nsbSs8RK4d5wqreewH-aSLsHasfJ5acou4/edit#>; Never Again Leaders Training, January 10, 2021. NAA's membership overlaps significantly with that of IfNotNow, the founding of which in 2014 was influenced by members of the core diasporist groups, and brought widespread attention to the shifting concerns and allegiances of many young Jewish Americans. Interview #16.

¹⁵⁴ Alissa Wise, “Rabbi Alissa Wise’s love letter to anti-Zionist Jews, as she leaves ten years’ work with Jewish Voice for Peace,” *Jewish Voice for Peace* (blog), March 24, 2021, <https://jewish-voice-for->

In tears, like the hundreds of other diasporists gathered in Zoom community, many of whom I met over the past year, I was grateful to have been part of this moment of *olam haba*.

peace.medium.com/rabbi-alissa-wises-love-letter-to-anti-zionist-jews-as-she-leaves-ten-years-work-with-jvp-d04776df54ff.

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Curriculum Vitae

Claire Melissa Bergen

EDUCATION

Indiana University Bloomington

MA, Jewish Studies, 2021

- Thesis: “We Were Made For These Times: Diasporism as an Emergent Jewish Movement”

International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism

Third-year Rabbinic Student

- Ordination projected, 2023

University of Southern California

MA in Teaching, 2007

- Preliminary Multiple Subject Teaching Credential, Supplementary Authorization in Music

Pomona College, Claremont, CA

BA, Magna Cum Laude, 2001

- Major in Music, Minor in Sociology

HONORS, AWARDS, FELLOWSHIPS

- Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Fellowship (grant-in-aid of research), Indiana University, Summer 2020
- Glazer Family Fellowship, Indiana University, Spring 2020
- George and Monique Stolnitz Yiddish Prize, Indiana University, 2019-20
- Judith Manning Grayson Endowed Memorial Scholarship, University of Southern California, 2006
- Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society, Pomona College, 2001

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS

- “Queering the World to Come: Jewish Diaspora’s Past and Future at Linke Fligl Chicken Farm and Queer Talmud Camp: Diaspora Edition,” Jewish Studies Graduate Student Conference, Indiana University, February 4, 2021
- “Bread and Rose(s) to Bernie Bros: Jewish Women at the Intersection of Yiddish Socialism and Industrial Feminism,” Jewish Studies Graduate Student Conference, Indiana University, February 7, 2020
- *Sholem School Curriculum*, co-developed with Sholem staff, 2014-18
- “A History of Jewish Resistance” workshop with Erin Faigin, Los Angeles, May 7, 2017
- “Graffiti at Workmen’s Circle,” Op-Ed, *Jewish Journal*, February 20, 2014
- *The Shpil*, album co-produced with members of The Shpil klezmer band, 2011

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Auschwitz Jewish Center, Oswiecim, Poland

- Student Scholar, Summer 2003

UCLA Department of Sociology, Los Angeles

- Research Experience for Undergraduates Summer Program, 2001

SELECTED ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE

Asylum Arts

- Reciprocity: Los Angeles Jewish Artists Retreat, November 2015

The Shpil

- Co-founder, violinist, bandleader, 2007 – 2013
- Los Angeles County Arts Commission Musicians Roster, 2012
- Los Angeles County Holiday Celebration, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, December 2011

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Silverlake Independent Jewish Community Center, Los Angeles

- B'nai Mitzvah Mentor and Song Leader, August 2018 – September 2019

Bresee Youth Center, Los Angeles

- Drawing Instructor, August 2018 – May 2019

Sholem Community, Los Angeles

- Lead *lerer* (teacher), Curriculum Specialist, *vegveyzer/madrish* (leader), August 2010 – May 2018

Los Angeles Philharmonic (YOLA Neighborhood Project)

- Teaching Artist, September 2011 – June 2013

YOLA (Youth Orchestra Los Angeles) at HOLA (Heart of L.A.)

- Musicianship and Early Strings Teacher, August 2010 – May 2013

P.S. ARTS, Lawndale Elementary School District, CA

- Teaching Artist, September 2007 – June 2010

Yiddishkayt Los Angeles

- Program Assistant, October 2003 – August 2004

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, New York

- Corps Member, 2001 – 2002