

Introduction

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Capturing the multifaceted personality of Rabbi Leonard Beerman (1921–2014) is not a simple task. He was a deeply inquisitive thinker who posed probing philosophical and theological questions from his early to his last days. He was an impassioned preacher who lavished attention on his weekly and seasonal sermons, which alternately dazzled, moved, and angered his congregants. After his retirement from Leo Baeck Temple, he continued to give a much anticipated and often controversial sermon every Yom Kippur, delivering the final one two and a half months before his death on December 24, 2014.

Leonard Beerman was also an indefatigable activist for social justice whose renown extended well beyond Los Angeles to the wider nation. His commitment, like his life, was forged in a time of dramatic historical change. Beerman's early years were marked by the profound economic uncertainty of the Great Depression, out of which emerged his empathy for the less fortunate. As an adolescent, he encountered racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism in America, while developing a nascent awareness of the rise of murderous totalitarianism in Europe that culminated in the Holocaust. And in the first decades of his professional career, he devoted a great deal of energy to combating the scourges of McCarthyism, racial injustice, and later, nuclear arms.

Beerman was not alone in these commitments. During this tumultuous period in American history, the rabbinical profession was propelled forward by powerful new currents in American society such as progressivism and the social gospel movement.¹ Towering figures such as Stephen S. Wise, Judah L. Magnes, Abba Hillel Silver, and later Joachim Prinz and Abraham Joshua Heschel reimagined the rabbinate as a vehicle for broad social engagement, consistent with their vision of

an ethical Judaism rooted in the ancient Hebrew prophets' demand for justice. By the 1950s, the American Reform movement at large was assuming an increasingly activist and public stance, issuing books, guidelines to congregations, and proclamations that echoed the famous charge from Deuteronomy, "Justice, Justice Shalt Thou Pursue," as a 1953 rabbinical proclamation was titled.²

Leonard Beerman came of age in this charged midcentury era as a Reform rabbi inspired by predecessors such as Wise, Magnes, and Heschel (who was not a Reform rabbi, but whom Beerman met at the Reform seminary Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati). At the same time, he was very much his own man. The sight of injustice of any sort induced a raw pain in him. He was especially vigilant and outraged when he believed that fellow Jews were complicit in causing injury, either through direct action or indifference. Never content to settle for the easy path, Beerman challenged and chastised his fellow Jews—and himself—with fiery intensity. He was willing to alienate, indeed, to afflict the comfortable in order to comfort the afflicted, as the well-known phrase has it.

Leonard Beerman was an unusual mix. He was a thinker, a vastly literate reader, and a scholar manqué who was somewhat hesitant to commit his spoken word to pen. And he was a doer, who proudly lived the Heschelian principle of praying with his feet by frequenting and leading protests against injustice. In both of these domains of activity, Beerman was animated by a deep humanity. He loved people in the abstract, and he loved people in the flesh. He loved his fellow Jews, and he loved human beings in general. He knew the healing powers of love in personal relationships. And he knew, as his brother-in-arms, the legendary civil rights activist the Reverend James Lawson, put it, that "love in action" was the defining force of social justice.³

It would be easy but inaccurate to suggest that Leonard Beerman's personality was free of tension. He was filled with love, but also anger at injustice. He was a bold pacifist, but also an unrelenting fighter. He marched, demonstrated, and was arrested with people in South Central, but served a wealthy congregation in upscale Bel-Air. He was his own kind of Jewish particularist and an unbounded universalist.⁴ These dissonances and disjunctures reflected a spirit of restlessness, a constant fear of inadequacy, and a fair measure of inner turmoil. But they also gave real force to his sense of prophetic vocation. Like his rabbinical forebears, Beerman looked to the Hebrew prophets for inspiration. They were his models for thinking and doing in the world. It was they, he declared in a sermon from 1983, who "address our condition of being Jews and yet at the same time being citizens of the larger society."⁵

What especially spoke to Beerman's sense of mission in the prophets was their courage to remonstrate, to fight against inequality, to look inside themselves with critical eyes. This captured for him the essence of what it meant to be Jewish. Beerman articulated this sentiment already in his first major sermon—the one that every graduating rabbinical student gives at Hebrew Union College. In his "Chapel

Sermon,” of October 1948, Beerman stated: “Israel is the eternal wanderer and sufferer, like man himself, fighting against thistles and thorns, shadows and abstractions. Israel is *the eternal dissident*, the great disobedient child of history.”⁶ This had more than a trace of autobiographical insight, for Leonard Beerman was himself an “eternal dissident,” fighting against convention and comfort not in the name of tearing down, but rather with a deep belief in the possibility of repairing the world.

The roots of this distinctive commitment extended back to early childhood. Leonard Beerman was born on April 9, 1921, in Altoona, Pennsylvania, the eldest of three siblings. His father Paul (1896–1983) belonged to the great wave of Jewish immigration to the United States that commenced in the late nineteenth century, moving to this country at the age of three from Kovno in Lithuania. His mother Tillie (1896–1982) was born in New York to Hungarian Jewish parents. Neither of his parents went to school beyond seventh grade; both were needed to care for their families. In Altoona, Beerman and his parents lived in close proximity to his maternal grandparents, Rose and Jacob Grossman, who kept a kosher home and introduced Beerman to Jewish rituals.⁷ Life in Altoona was not easy, especially in economic terms. His father moved from peddling fruits and vegetables on a horse-driven wagon to selling notions, small objects, and toys.⁸

When Beerman was six and a half, his father took a more stable job as a department store manager in Michigan. The Beermans were one of seven Jewish families in their small town, and Beerman was one of two Jews at his high school. The town itself was, as Beerman remembers it, “ultra-Republican.”⁹ His oppositional tendencies were evident already at this early stage. In a student poll at his high school in 1932, twenty-nine of thirty students voted for Herbert Hoover; one, Leonard Beerman, voted for FDR. Not only did the local newspaper, the *Owosso Argus-Press*, regularly inveigh against Roosevelt and Communists, but the Ku Klux Klan was a presence in town. Antisemitism was also part of the general milieu; his father would regularly tune in during the 1930s to the weekly broadcasts of Father Charles Coughlin, the rabidly anti-Jewish Catholic priest from Detroit.¹⁰

Beerman learned from his father that it was possible and even necessary to hold to unpopular positions. Paul Beerman had returned from his service in the US military in World War I as a pacifist. Beerman recalls: “He didn’t believe in war. I mean, he didn’t make a big deal of it but that was what he was. He basically was a man of peace and gentleness.”¹¹ Paul was also a person who identified with the plight of the workers, as would his son throughout his life.

Beerman’s teenage years were challenging ones, and inculcated in him a lifelong empathy for the underdog. In the first instance, he was unusually short, 4’10”, paired with a partner on the high school tennis team who was 6’3”. This led to a certain lack of confidence, as he remembered: “Puberty really didn’t come to me until I was about 16, and that was a problem, a big problem in my glands and in my mind.”¹² Compounding these difficulties was the fact that his father was forced to take a major pay cut in 1937, at the tail end of the Depression, sending him into a

depression that culminated in the loss of his job—and then a nervous breakdown. After a period of rehabilitation for Paul in a sanatorium, the cash-strapped family was forced to move back to Altoona to live with Rose Grossman. Beerman remembers being very angry that he had to leave his Owosso high school after his junior year to commence his senior year in Altoona.¹³

One year later, the family again picked up and moved from Altoona for State College, Pennsylvania, where Beerman was to begin his college studies in the fall of 1939 at what was then the Pennsylvania State College. To make ends meet, the family took in boarders in its new house. Penn State was extremely important in Beerman's formation in several regards. There, he joined the local Hillel chapter, and began to develop a much richer connection to and intellectual interest in Judaism. An important guide was the Hillel director, Benjamin Kahn, a Conservative rabbi whom Beerman respected and learned from.¹⁴ At that point, though, he had given no thought to becoming a rabbi himself. Rather, he was coming into his own intellectually, discovering a passion for serious study, especially in his three favorite subjects: literature, history, and philosophy. He also took mathematics and physical education virtually every semester and was enrolled throughout his time in college in ROTC.¹⁵ At Penn State, he found contemporaries with whom he could converse in stimulating fashion as well as a talented faculty that challenged him. One professor, the medieval historian Francis Tschan, thought highly of Beerman, but was apparently no lover of members of the Mosaic faith. While giving him a ride home once, he said approvingly: "Beerman, you're not like those Jews from New York."¹⁶ Another faculty member, a Jewish biochemist with whom his parents were friendly, encouraged Beerman to go into that field. In the same period, he took a test designed to identify career options at Penn State. The person who administered it said that it revealed that Beerman had the aptitude to be a professor in the humanities, but added that it was virtually impossible for a Jew to attain such a position in the year 1941.¹⁷

At that point in the summer of 1941, with few prospects awaiting him, though close to completion of his course work, Beerman left school and began to hitchhike around the country. Eventually, he landed in Flint, Michigan, where he got a job at the AC spark plug factory, which had been repurposed to make guns for the war effort. Beerman worked on the assembly line seven nights a week. In this setting, he stood out. In the first instance, he was an intellectually inclined and curious college student. In the second instance, his political instincts tended toward socialism, which was hardly popular in the jingoistic war years. And finally, his religion set him apart. He recalled that he once was socializing with a group of coworkers at the YMCA where he lived when he told them that he was a Jew. They responded:

"If we had known you were Jewish, we never would have had anything to do with you." Another one said, "In fact, we're not going to have anything to do with you," and they walked out of the room.¹⁸

Given his later trajectory, it is surprising that this and other encounters with anti-semitism as a youth and young man did not turn Beerman inward or render him defensive toward the world. On the contrary, these experiences seemed to heighten his own sensitivity for the plight of other victims of group discrimination. At the same time, he was learning and reading more about Jewish history and thought, working his way through the Judaica section of the Flint public library. This led him to develop a stronger sense of Jewish identity, and he began to think for the first time of a career as a rabbi.¹⁹ Soon thereafter, Beerman returned to Penn State to complete his studies. This was a period of further intellectual growth and existential tumult. He spoke with a close friend at Penn State, Leonard Feldstein, who would later become a psychoanalyst in New York, about his thoughts of becoming a rabbi. Feldstein immediately blurted out: “You can’t become a rabbi; you don’t believe in God.”²⁰ Indeed, Beerman harbored his own serious theological doubts, even as he was deepening his knowledge of Judaism. He felt some measure of solace when he discovered the great Dutch thinker of Jewish origins, Benedictus Spinoza (1632–1677), who helped give him a philosophical and theological handle on the world. He was particularly drawn to Spinoza’s notion that God was essentially equivalent to nature (*Deus sive natura*): “The god of Spinoza, I thought, could be my god, and that’s the god I think I could believe in and affirm, so I was comforted by that.”²¹ Indeed, this intense engagement with Spinoza became the philosophical foundation of Beerman’s lifelong agnosticism, which lent his rabbinate a curious quality, but also a tension-filled authenticity.

Throughout his life, Beerman asked tough questions of himself, refusing to accept pat answers or easy resolutions. He was a man of courage and boldness, but not of certainty. Moreover, he took steps in his life that were as much a challenge to his value system as an affirmation of them. One such step came after he returned to Penn State in the summer of 1942 to complete his degree. He finished his requirements in the fall semester and was awarded a bachelor’s degree with Phi Beta Kappa honors on December 17. He then decided immediately thereafter to enlist in the Marine Corps, prompted both by his need to fulfill his ROTC obligation and, in choosing the US Marines, by the desire to overcome his own sense of physical inadequacy.²² He shipped off to Parris Island, South Carolina, spent three months in grueling training camp, and emerged, as he recalled, with “a butch haircut, very lean, muscular.”²³ Because of his intellectual aptitude, Beerman was recommended for Officer Candidate School, but could not pass the final physical test required of new recruits. Faced with a variety of options, he took an honorable discharge after only seven months.

Over the course of his time at Penn State, Beerman had discussed the option of rabbinical school with Rabbi Kahn, the Hillel director. Because Beerman did not have a strong background in Hebrew or other traditional Jewish subjects, Kahn recommended that he consider the Reform movement’s seminary Hebrew Union College (HUC), where the fact that he was not familiar with traditional

Jewish sources would not be a disqualification. And in fact, Beerman had written to HUC's president, Dr. Julian Morgenstern, before heading off to Parris Island. As he remembered it, Dr. Morgenstern told him that he'd be happy to admit him if he returned in one piece from the Marine Corps.²⁴ Accordingly, after being discharged, Beerman made his way to Cincinnati, Ohio, and enrolled in the fall of 1943 in HUC.

There he took a wide range of courses, including Hebrew, the Bible, Jewish ritual, and rabbinic literature.²⁵ He studied with a number of leading Jewish studies scholars, including Israel Bettan, Jacob Rader Marcus, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. And yet it was a lesser-known faculty member who influenced him most, Abraham Cronbach, a Reform rabbi and scholar with radical pedagogical and political ideas. In his classroom, which was festooned with magazine covers expressing political views from Communist to Fascist, Cronbach did not allow argument. One had the right to express an opinion, but not to oppose another's. Cronbach himself was a deeply committed pacifist with strong socialist inclinations, whom Beerman remembered as "an absolutely brilliant man"—and one of the first to write on Judaism and psychoanalysis.²⁶

Meanwhile, the students at HUC were informally divided by their various interests. Beerman remembers three such groups: the "*kavanah*" boys (including Samuel Dresner and Richard Rubinstein), who came together on the basis of their common desire to make prayer and liturgy spiritually meaningful;²⁷ the "theology" boys (including future luminaries such as Eugene Borowitz, Arnold J. Wolf, and Steven Schwarzchild), who were the intellectual vanguard of the student body and were searching for a more vigorous theology than what they were taught; and the "social justice" boys, who were committed to the prophetic spirit of bringing equality and peace to the world. Beerman had little to do with the first group, had strong ties to those in the second, but was a mainstay of the third, along with his close friend Robert Goldberg, with whom he shared a passion not only for activism, but for fine literature and rigorous intellectual exchange as well. The "social justice" boys read the texts of Marx and other Marxists, and engaged in their own forms of activism. For example, they undertook, together with a black student from the University of Cincinnati, a sit-in at a segregated restaurant in town, refusing to leave before being removed hours later.²⁸

Beerman's participation in the informal social justice group gave expression to an ethical-political commitment that had been developing in him for years. It reflected his view that to be a Jew was to act in the world for the betterment of all humanity. It is thus somewhat curious that he decided that he would travel, along with his wife, Martha, and his fellow HUC student, Ezra Spicandler and his wife, Shirley, to Palestine to study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the fall of 1947. Although the American Reform movement had moved away from its unequivocal opposition to Zionism (in the Pittsburgh platform of 1885) to a position of qualified support (in the Columbus platform of 1937), many Reform rabbis

remained opposed or agnostic about Zionism. Given Beerman's own universalist rendering of Judaism and disdain for all forms of chauvinism, one might think that he would simply sidestep Zionism and avoid Palestine. But Beerman was insatiably curious and liked to learn for himself. Palestine was a source of intense controversy even then, and it was important to go to visit. At the same time, he harbored within him a vestige of his grandparents' world, traces of a certain Jewish ethnic bond, as well as pride in the fortitude and accomplishments of the Zionist settlers. Notwithstanding his profound concern and frequent criticism, Palestine (and later Israel) held a special place in his heart.

And in fact, Beerman's time in Palestine proved to be formative. He settled in Jerusalem, and quickly went about meeting people and making new friends. He planned to enroll at the Hebrew University in the fall semester, though there is no record of his actually taking courses.²⁹ That said, he did seek out and forge in this period a connection with one of the most controversial Jews in Palestine, who happened to be the president of the Hebrew University and a Reform rabbi: Judah L. Magnes. The American-born Magnes (1877–1948) had served congregations in the Bay Area and New York before taking a most unusual step for an American Reform rabbi in 1922: he immigrated to Palestine. He became a leading force behind the efforts to create a new university in Jerusalem, and presided over the opening of the Hebrew University in April 1925 as its founding chancellor. Beerman was drawn to Magnes not only because of his role in creating the Hebrew University, and not only because he was a Reform rabbi. Magnes was also one of the most notable Jewish pacifists in Palestine and was heavily involved in efforts to achieve peace between Jews and Arabs from the time of his arrival in the country. Magnes did not hesitate to voice his political opinions, which were decidedly out of step with the sensibilities of Jews in Palestine during the British Mandate period (1922–1948). Even at the Hebrew University, whose faculty included a number of well-known liberals and progressive, Magnes's words were not always well received. For example, students hissed at his speech at the opening of the winter semester in 1929, three months after the murderous Western Wall riots. On that occasion, Magnes declared:

If the only way of establishing the Jewish National Home is upon the bayonets of some empire, our whole enterprise is not worthwhile and it is better that the eternal people that has outlived many a mighty empire should possess its soul in patience and plan and wait. It is one of the great civilizing tasks before the Jewish people to try to enter the Promised Land not as Joshua, but bringing peace, culture, hard work, sacrifice, love and determination; to do nothing unjustifiable before the conscience of the world.³⁰

In virtually every regard, Judah Magnes was a model for Leonard Beerman: his pacifism, his commitment to Jewish-Arab peace, his vision of a prophetic Judaism defined by its ethical norms, and his willingness to brook controversy with his words. In fact, a recent biographer of Magnes described him in terms that could



FIGURE 1. Leonard Beerman (far right) with Judah Magnes, Ezra Spicehandler, and two unidentified people at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem (1947).

well suit Beerman: “American Jewish nonconformist.”³¹ Among other affinities, Beerman was drawn to Magnes’s most controversial of stances—his opposition to a self-standing Jewish state in favor of a Jewish-Arab binational state.³² And yet, he did not publicly endorse Magnes’s proposal. As a matter of fact, he took another action in Jerusalem that is surprising in light of his own instincts as well as his new relationship with Magnes. Following the United Nations General Assembly vote in favor of the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state on November 29, 1947, he joined the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary force associated with the Labor Zionist Mapai Party. He renewed his knowledge of how to use a gun from his time in the Marine Corps, and was even sent out on a mission shortly after the outbreak of hostilities between Jews and Arabs that followed the approval of the United Nations partition plan on November 29, 1947. On that mission, which he undertook with his HUC friend Ezra Spicehandler, he recalled carrying but not detonating hand grenades in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem.³³

The experience of serving in the Haganah and countenancing the prospect of doing serious harm to another human being, along with his conversations with

Judah Magnes, solidified what would become an iron-clad principle for Beerman from this point forward: pacifism. He returned to the United States in the spring of 1948, and was invited to speak about his experience. In a speech entitled “I Saw Palestine Betrayed” at the Penn State Hillel chapter on April 30, 1948, he followed in Magnes’s path by taking aim at the British, whom he scored for failing to prevent violence between Jews and Arabs. Unlike Magnes, though, he supported the idea of partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, but on the condition that “Arabs are given access to educational and cultural opportunities such as the Jews have.”³⁴ While clearly drawn to the ideal of binationalism, he remained committed throughout his life to the principle of independent states for both Jews and Arabs. Over time, though, one notices a shift in his rhetoric regarding the relations between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land. Soon after his return in 1948, he expressed the view of fellow Jews about the desire of local Arabs to “impose their feudal rule on the country and overturn the achievements of the Jews.”³⁵ In later years, from the late 1960s onward, such sentiments gave way to frustration over the errant path of Zionism, especially in denying to Palestinians their national rights. Incidentally, Beerman never identified himself as a Zionist, though he felt a strong connection to Israel and, on a subsequent visit in 1964 while on sabbatical with Martha and their three daughters, even considered moving there—yet another evocation of the life path followed by Judah Magnes.

Meanwhile, back in the United States, Beerman entered his final year of rabbinical school in 1948. Although he tended to describe himself as shy and merely one of the pack, he distinguished himself enough to be elected student body president. Moreover, with his “Chapel Sermon” on October 30, he revealed himself not only as a skilled orator and explicator of the Bible, but also as a wide-ranging and fearless intellectual. Over the course of his time at HUC, Beerman always did well in his classes on public speaking, earning the grade of Excellent. As a general matter, the attention paid to popular speaking, and more particularly the sermon, in that era of the American rabbinate was high. For many congregants, it was the key measure of the rabbi’s public performance as well as the center of gravity of the weekly Sabbath service.³⁶

From the very beginning of his career, Beerman brought a formidable array of talents to the art of sermonizing: lyrical eloquence, a large library of philosophical and historical references drawn from his wide reading, a seemingly endless repository of poetic allusions, and deep psychological insight into the human condition.

This last quality was on display in his first major homiletical appearance, his “Chapel Sermon.” He began by reflecting on children and their tendency to rebel against their parents. In fact, this impulse was not restricted to children, but applied to humans at large. Beerman’s proof text was the series of early chapters of the book of Genesis describing Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. He treated Adam’s taking a bite of the forbidden apple (Gen. 3:6) not as a manifestation of man’s fall from grace, but as an essential, if not fully complete, step toward individuation—indeed,

as liberation from the state of infant dependency. Beerman analogized Adam to man in his time, who has taken a step toward liberation by gaining mastery, through technological advances, over nature. But like Adam, who took only a bite rather than consuming the entire apple, human beings have not gained mastery over themselves or society. They remain in need of “a sense of purpose, a sense of human dignity in the changed and different world in which we live.”³⁷

This incomplete state yields fear, frustration, and a lack of boldness. The resulting lack of rationality and emotional maturity led people to believe, Beerman observed, that “if there were no Russia and if there were no Communists, all the problems with which we and the world are troubled would vanish.”³⁸ This statement announced his own steadfast resistance to the rabid red-baiting of the day. Beerman also pushed back against the grim view of human nature that he associated with neo-orthodox Protestant theologians, who held that man is evil and “the world is set against him in eternal conflict.”³⁹ On the contrary, human beings are not evil nor condemned to ignorance. They are on a ceaseless quest for enlightenment and justice. What is required is not more conformity, but to “eat more and more and more at the tree of knowledge,” to rebel against constraint and convention. The prototype for this transgressive pursuer of knowledge is Israel, the Jewish people, whom Beerman designates, we recall, as “the eternal dissident, the great disobedient child of history.”⁴⁰

This early sermon presciently captures a good portion of Beerman’s lifelong vocation as rabbi—to believe in the goodness of humanity, but to be mindful of its enormous unrealized potential and not infrequent missteps. This is the credo that guided him in fulfillment of his role as eternal dissident. And it was a role for which he became known throughout his career. More than thirty years later, in the wake of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982, Beerman’s picture was on the cover of the local *LA Weekly* with the headline “A Dissident Rabbi Speaks Out.” He and a number of colleagues had proposed a resolution critical of the invasion at the recent convention of Reform rabbis (the Central Conference of American Rabbis, CCAR), which was roundly defeated. In a lengthy interview in the *LA Weekly* to explain his position, Beerman reiterated his universalist and pacifist ideals: “My concerns as a Jew are not only for the survival of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, but for the ethical values of my Jewish tradition. Anything that involves the destruction of human beings of any race or nation is something that I consider to be a tragedy, an outrage against the principles that I, as a Jew, am committed to.”⁴¹

Alongside this early and rather constant dissident stance, Beerman displayed another, somewhat opposing tendency as rabbi: as institutional partner and builder. At the end of the 1948–1949 academic year that began with his “Chapel Sermon,” he graduated HUC. Soon thereafter he was interviewed by a small group of Reform Jews in Los Angeles interested in hiring a rabbi to lead their new community as of August 1, 1949. The group had first organized in 1947 as Congregation

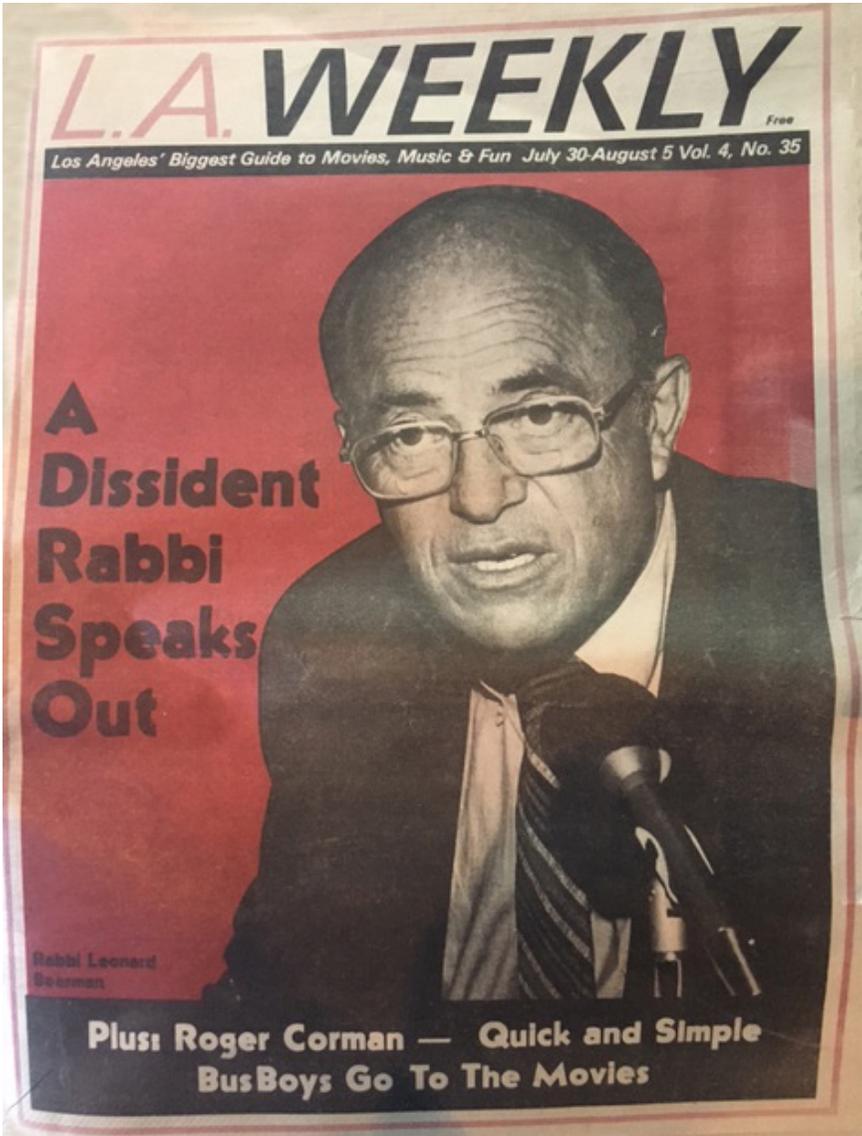


FIGURE 2. "A Dissident Rabbi Speaks Out," *LA Weekly* (1982).

Beth Aaron, but decided that it should take its name from the famous German rabbi and theologian whom some members had heard speak in Los Angeles: Leo Baeck (1873–1956).⁴² The new group did its due diligence, interviewing eleven candidates for the position. It chose the newly minted rabbi Leonard Beerman to serve as its spiritual leader at the fledgling temple located on S. San Vicente

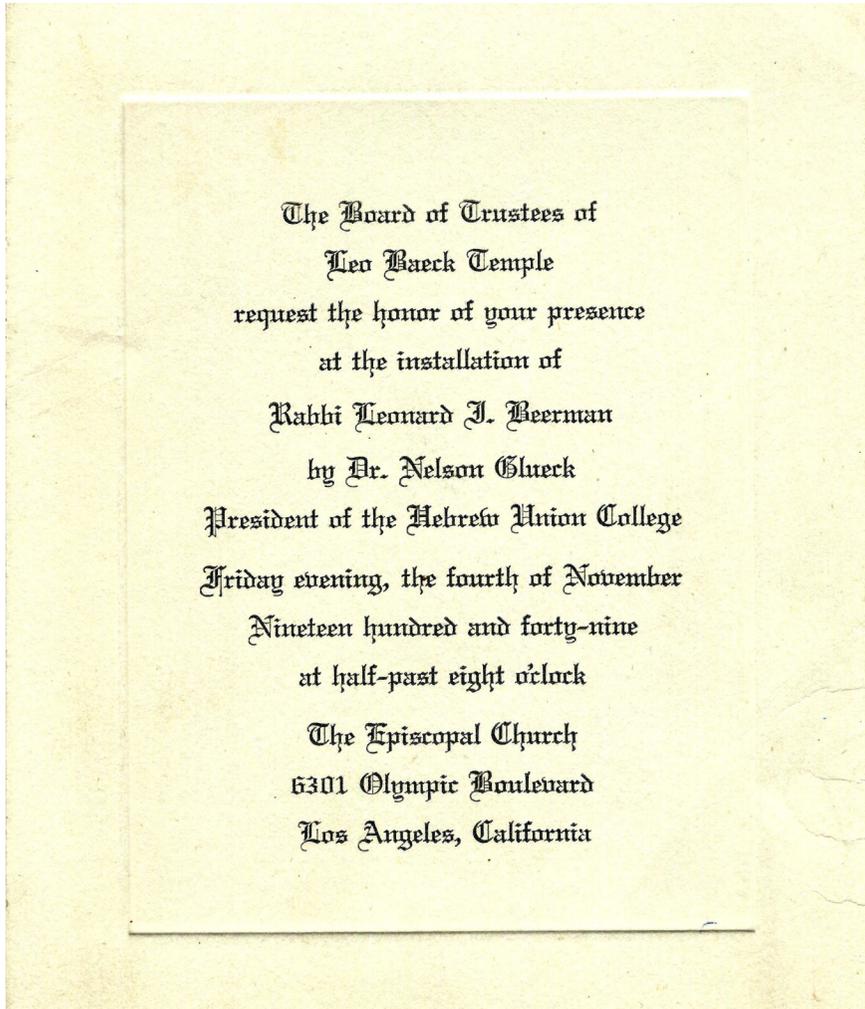


FIGURE 3. Invitation to installation at Leo Baeck Temple (1949).

Boulevard. It was a gamble for both sides: for his part, Beerman eschewed the easier path of working in an established congregation as an assistant rabbi in favor of a start-up experiment that could go bad; for the group, it was clear that Beerman was supremely talented, but also a person of deep and potentially divisive conviction. And indeed, over the course of his career at Leo Baeck Temple, he prompted some congregants to walk out in protest over his sermons.

And yet, Beerman built Leo Baeck into a major center of Reform Judaism in Los Angeles. This was one of the curious and impressive features of his personality.

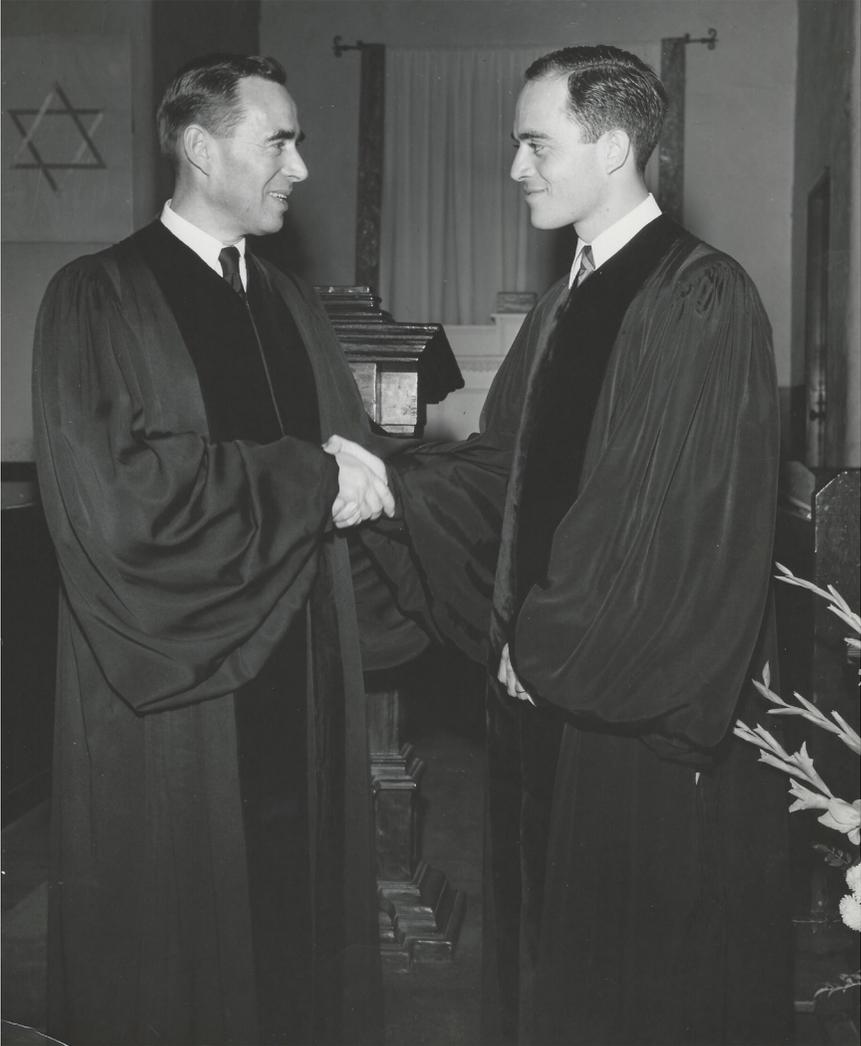


FIGURE 4. Leonard Beerman and Dr. Nelson Glueck at installation (1949).

He was not merely a critic, but also a collaborator who became involved in the work of the local Jewish Federation and the local Board of Rabbis, of which he served as president from 1979 to 1981. He learned from an early stage in his professional career how to strike a balance between provoking and nurturing his flock to become informed activists.

It was not an easy task. The first years of his rabbinate at Leo Baeck coincided with the advent of the McCarthy era and the dangerous assault upon all suspected of



FIGURE 5. Leonard Beerman (*right*) with Dr. Leo Baeck (*center*) and Rabbi Phineas Smoller (*left*) (1952).

Communism. Although there were many otherwise liberal Jews who succumbed to the Red Scare, including more than a few in his congregation, Beerman frequently inveighed against McCarthy and the assault on democratic principles. Later in life, he recalled that on the Friday on which Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed, June 19, 1953, he inserted their names into the kaddish (mourner's prayer) at Friday night services. When confronted by a congregant as to why he would do such a thing, he recalled that he took the path of lesser resistance, for which he later felt regret, by saying that a member of the congregation was a relative of theirs.

Some months later, in October 1953, Beerman delivered a sermon at Leo Baeck intended as a tribute to one of his leading Reform rabbinical predecessors, Stephen S. Wise. It also provided him an opportunity to praise Wise and other noble figures such as Judah Magnes whom the McCarthyites, "pygmies of national shame" in his pungent language, had tried to brand and excoriate for their alleged Communist ties. In the course of his robust defense, Beerman articulated both a personal credo and a vision of Judaism that would last a lifetime. He declared to his congregants:

As all men do, I hold opinions. My opinions may be right or they may be wrong. They may not always coincide with the majority. But because they are mine and because they are as honest as I can make them, I have the obligation to speak them. I have done so in the past and I hope to do so in the future.

This moral imperative to speak up derived from his broader sense of Jewish mission, rooted in the principle that “we have proclaimed our choice of virtue and goodness as our mission among the nations.” He continued:

Since the days of the prophets, we have borne the message that our God desires neither sacrifice nor burnt offering, but the doing of justice, the showing of mercy, and the pursuit of righteousness.⁴³

At a mere five years’ remove from HUC, Beerman gave eloquent voice to the guiding prophetic spirit that would remain the bedrock of his rabbinate. In the 1960s, he continued with his mix of building up and agitating for change. He worked together with the Leo Baeck board to raise funds and develop architectural plans for a new campus on the Sepulveda Pass. Leo Baeck moved from its San Vicente site to its current Bel-Air address in 1963, a convenient four months after the opening of the San Diego Freeway, to which it was adjacent. A year later, Beerman took an eight-month sabbatical, sojourning with Martha to Jerusalem via Europe, where they stopped at Theresienstadt, the Nazi concentration camp in which Rabbi Leo Baeck had been incarcerated. During this sabbatical period, Beerman studied Hebrew, met with scholars and politicians, and gave serious consideration to moving to Israel, but ultimately decided not to.

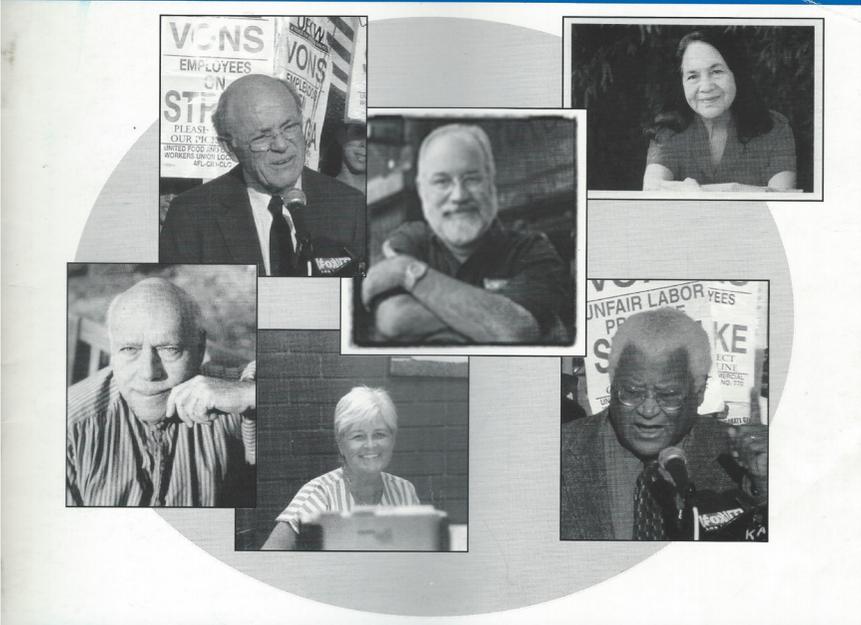
Upon his return to LA, he immersed himself in a variety of causes. As he charted his career throughout the tumultuous sixties and into the seventies, three major issues of social justice recur: the quest for civil rights, opposition to the Vietnam War, and a commitment to rid the world of nuclear arms. In the first case, Beerman joined many other Jewish leaders in taking an active role in the civil rights movement. One of the most notable examples was his German-born colleague Joachim Prinz, who delivered an impassioned address just before Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. There, Prinz declared that the Jewish experience of liberation from slavery created “a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience” with African Americans.⁴⁴

In that spirit, Beerman channeled his lifelong resistance to any form of group discrimination not only into support for legislative reform such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but into a far-reaching critique of the deep structure of racism in America. He was invited to speak in January 1967 at a symposium on Black Power, offering, as was his custom, a progressive Jewish perspective. He analyzed the psychological, as well as material, effects of racism before concluding with a stark candor that went beyond Prinz’s powerful words:

America is racist from top to bottom, and this racism is not a problem of human relations, but of a pattern of exploitation maintained actively or silently by society as a whole. And the rebuilding of society is not primarily a task of the blacks; it is the responsibility of the whites.⁴⁵

Giants of Justice:

Sustaining the Struggle for a Lifetime



*Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice
Annual Benefit Luncheon
April 29th, 2004*

FIGURE 6. Leonard Beerman (*top left*) getting an award from CLUE with others, including Rev. James Lawson (*bottom right*) (2004).

Critics, especially of his political stance on Israel-Palestine, would say that he never hesitated to blame himself or fellow Jews (or here, whites) for the ills of the world—and that such a tendency indicated a self-hating impulse. A more charitable reading would maintain that this impulse reflected Beerman’s willingness to acknowledge his position of relative privilege and take stock of those upon whose shoulders it

was built. It also reflected his deep powers of empathy, especially for the underdog or downtrodden, consistent with his Jewish mission as eternal dissident.

Beerman's work on civil rights brought him into contact with the Reverend James Lawson, the pioneering pastor, activist, and proponent of Gandhian non-violence who moved to Los Angeles in the summer of 1974. He and Beerman met shortly thereafter and recognized that the two of them, an African American minister and a Reform rabbi, were kindred spirits.⁴⁶ They met on a monthly basis as part of an interfaith group on human relations. They also joined hands in the struggle for justice on a dizzying array of causes: Vietnam, nuclear arms, El Salvador, Nicaragua, immigration, livable wages for janitors, the Persian Gulf War. Shortly after Rev. Lawson arrived, they agitated to expand opportunities for black students to gain admission to the UCLA Medical School. Beerman's position of support was at odds with some in the Jewish community who, from the 1970s onward, began to see remediation for past discrimination against African Americans (e.g., via school busing or affirmative action) as antithetical to their interests.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, some years earlier, Beerman met another Protestant minister, who would become his closest friend. George Regas, a self-described country pastor from Knoxville, Tennessee, assumed the pulpit at All Saints Church in Pasadena in 1967. Under his leadership, All Saints became a national leader in progressive, church-based politics. The two men would remain extremely close to one another for the next nearly fifty years; following their example, All Saints and Leo Baeck Temple frequently joined together in support of social justice activism and to share occasions of celebration and protest. Indeed, so close was their personal and institutional relationship that Rev. Regas appointed Leonard Beerman Rabbi-in-Residence at All Saints in 1973, surely one of the few occasions in which a church had its own in-house Jewish cleric!⁴⁸

The Episcopalian and Jew first encountered one another in Los Angeles in 1967 at a site familiar to both, a peace rally, this time against the Vietnam War. Beerman was enchanted by the genteel accent and rhythmic cadence of Regas's speech at the rally, and they quickly found a common path in progressive politics. That said, the two men pursued distinct theological routes. George Regas was a man of deep faith in Christ and commitment to prayer. Beerman was an agnostic who believed in the great spiritual power of poetry and protest. But he recognized in Regas a similar prophetic passion. And like his friend, he was disinclined to remain silent when he saw injustice. To wit, he wrote a letter to President Lyndon Johnson on April 13, 1967 informing him that he and Martha wanted no part of the Vietnam conflict:

That portion of our tax which helps to sustain the war in Vietnam has been paid involuntarily. We have no wish to support what we consider to be unjust. We should be happy to pay even a greater proportion of our income for works of healing and peace, but the acts of violence being perpetrated by our government violate our conscience.⁴⁹

Beerman regularly used the pulpit to inveigh against the war or invite others to do so. One of the guest speakers whom he brought to speak at Leo Baeck on Yom Kippur was Daniel Ellsberg, the former defense analyst who gained renown in 1971 for releasing a huge trove of sensitive US government documents related to the war known as the Pentagon Papers. Even before that, on the eve of the Jewish New Year in 1970, Rabbi Beerman decried the “militarization of American life, the war in Indochina, the orgy of wasteful production and distribution,” which, he lamented, “are all a part of a gigantic hoax that we are trying to perpetuate on our children.”⁵⁰ There was in his words a daring, at times transgressive, quality that mesmerized and challenged his audience, always drawing from a deep well of moral outrage. He often accompanied and tempered his jeremiads with poetry, in this case, concluding his sermon with a poem from 1910 by the Briton Wilfred Owen, who anticipated the impending mass bloodshed of the Great War by making reference to the biblical binding of Isaac. In the closing lines of the poem, Owen’s Abraham declines to substitute a ram for his son:

But the old man would not do so, but slew his son,—
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

The mix of moral indignation and poetry made for a powerful listening experience, solidifying Beerman’s reputation as a formidable and controversial preacher who not only talked the talk but also walked the walk of social activism. His resulting prominence, at both local and national levels, was not without its costs. In 1971, Beerman was proposed for the position of vice president of the CCAR by its nominating committee.⁵¹ The group’s annual meeting that year in St. Louis featured impassioned debate among the rabbis over whether they should be permitted to officiate at mixed marriages.⁵² Beerman was already serving as executive secretary of the group, and had he ascended to the vice presidency, he would have been in line to become president of the CCAR, the youngest person ever to assume the post in its history. However, an unusual development jolted the CCAR assembly on its last day, as it went through the formal act of voting on the unanimous recommendation of the nominating committee. For the first time in its history, a rabbi-delegate proposed from the floor a different candidate than the nominating committee’s choice, Leonard Beerman. He argued that his preferred candidate, Rabbi Robert Kahn of Houston, had the benefit of age and wisdom, which trumped in importance the precedent of supporting the nominating committee. A delegate stood up to criticize Beerman for his stance on Israel, which prompted another delegate to cast Rabbi Kahn as a tool of the establishment. After more debate, a secret ballot vote was held, and Robert Kahn was elected vice president by a vote of 77 to 55.

Beerman returned from the conference in a state of shock and disappointment, averring that “I had my rabbinic nose rubbed in the dirt; I was clobbered in public.”⁵³ But this disappointment hardly detoured him from jumping back into

the fray. He continued to agitate on behalf of important causes. For example, in January 1973, he joined with a number of prominent Christian leaders on “a journey for peace” in Europe. The aim was to put pressure on the Nixon administration in advance of the Paris peace talks, which brought a formal end to the Vietnam War.⁵⁴ In that same year, a new voice on the American Jewish scene surfaced: Breira (Hebrew for “Alternative”), which called on Israel to recognize the national aspirations of the Palestinian people and make territorial concessions as part of an overall plan in favor of two states. Beerman became an active participant in the West Coast branch of the new group, which brought together prominent Jewish intellectuals and religious leaders in Los Angeles, including his close associates from Leo Baeck, Richard Levy (the former assistant rabbi) and Sanford Ragins (onetime assistant rabbi and, at that time, Leo Baeck’s associate rabbi), as well as Rabbi Laura Geller, Rabbi David Gordis, Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller, and Dr. Yoav Peled. Members of Breira promoted an alternative narrative and set of activities to the mainstream consensus of the American Jewish community.⁵⁵ They were no longer willing to provide unquestioned support to the Israeli government, which made them frequent targets of denunciation by Jewish and even non-Jewish leaders (such as former Vice President Spiro Agnew, who specifically attacked Breira). Their early advocacy of a two-state solution earned them the designation “anti-Israel,” a label that would be frequently and unjustifiably attached to Beerman. Already from his first visit in 1948, he was deeply connected to the issue of Israel-Palestine, and would remain so throughout his life. His increasingly vocal criticism of Israeli treatment of Palestinians in his last decades made him a lightning rod in the Jewish community, with some on the far right casting him as a self-hating Jew. As he made abundantly clear in his public speaking, Beerman was undaunted by his critics and continued to speak out without inhibition until his last sermon at Leo Baeck in 2014.⁵⁶

But Beerman’s concern for the world was never confined to Jews, Israel or Palestinians. His close friendship with George Regas rested, in no small part, on their shared diagnosis of a world beset by grave challenges and their commitment to repair it. They appeared together frequently, including at a forum at All Saints in 1975 to discuss the place of religion in an age of crisis. In an illuminating exchange that reflected their differing theological stances, Regas lamented the fact that in 1960, 84 percent of Americans thought that religion was “an important factor in shaping American society,” but in 1974, that figure had plummeted to 14 percent. Beerman, for his part, thought that this might be a positive development in that a lesser role for religion could bring about greater openness and honesty in addressing major social issues.⁵⁷ Here he was reflecting his skepticism—in the spirit of his intellectual hero, Spinoza—about the unequivocally beneficial effects of organized religion. This somewhat counterintuitive quality, especially for a rabbi—not merely his theological agnosticism, but his skepticism regarding religion—reflected his difficulty in accepting the claims of certainty, whether they were of a religious or a

political nature. Indeed, this skepticism was the philosophical underpinning of his lifelong role as dissident.

Undeterred, and perhaps even spurred on, by their differences, Beerman and Regas pushed forward with their shared work. In October 1979, Leo Baeck Temple and All Saints Church collaborated to host a joint conference attended by one thousand participants to protest the nuclear arms race. In framing the conference, George Regas declared: "Reversing the arms race with all its madness is a fundamental religious obligation; we cannot continue to pray for peace and pay for war."⁵⁸ This conference became the launchpad for the Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race, which, with Beerman, Regas, and their friend Harold Willens as its driving forces, was the leading voice of protest against nuclear weapons in Los Angeles for a ten-year period.⁵⁹ At the beginning of this period, Beerman assumed the presidency of the LA Board of Rabbis, which was convincing recognition of the fact that, in the midst of his wide-ranging advocacy beyond the Jewish community, rabbinic colleagues held him in high regard even if they did not agree with some of his views. Meanwhile, to his fellow Jews, he sought to cast the battle against nuclear proliferation as a distinctly Jewish imperative. He declared to an audience at a New York synagogue in 1982 that "because of our recent experience in history, we as a people know that the unthinkable can happen."⁶⁰

For Beerman, 1982 was a fateful year, signaling an inescapable return of focus to Israel. It was in the summer of that year that Israel undertook what many have described as its first war without a national consensus. Responding to an assassination attempt on its ambassador in London on June 3 as well as to its unstable border with Lebanon, Israel invaded its northern neighbor on June 6. The declared goal was to establish a twenty-five-mile "cordon sanitaire" north of the Israeli border, but Israeli defense minister Ariel Sharon, with the tacit assent of Prime Minister Menachem Begin, saw an opportunity to push on to Beirut and root out the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose headquarters were in the city and whose forces were scattered throughout Lebanon, including in the south near Israel. In the course of the Israeli invasion of Beirut, Christian forces allied with Israel undertook, beginning on September 16, a massacre of Palestinian civilians (with hundreds and perhaps thousands killed) in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Ten days later, Beerman delivered a sermon on the eve of Yom Kippur. He recognized that the role of the rabbi, at times, was like the biblical Aaron, who "took the gold, fashioned the calf, and gave the people exactly what they wanted." The animating challenge of his life as a rabbi was markedly different; it was not to submit to the will of the people, but to "guide his congregation on the path that leads to the acknowledgment of moral failure, the awakening of conscience, the path that leads to the repentance that this day calls for."⁶¹

He identified himself as one of the small minority of American rabbis who "believed, from the first day, that the war in Lebanon, the war of Begin and Sharon, was doomed to be a moral and political failure." He went on to chronicle the tale



FIGURE 7. Leonard Beerman with Israeli diplomat Abba Eban (undated).

of carnage wrought by the invasion, refusing to soften the blow for his congregants on the holy day: “340 Israeli soldiers dead; 2,078 wounded. 17,000 Lebanese Palestinians killed; 30,000 wounded. About 50,000 people altogether, not to mention the 100,000? 200,000? 300,000? homeless.” He immediately followed up with a question that he would pose in slightly altered form on subsequent occasions, and for which he would become famous, or infamous, depending on one’s perspective:

“What kinds of Jews are these who kill and injure so many thousands and cause such massive destruction as a reasonable technique for carrying out policy?”⁶²

Even before his first visit to Palestine in 1947, Beerman was unsure about the Zionist goal of establishing a Jewish state in which the Arab majority would become a subordinate minority. His time in the country, including in the Haganah, deepened his connection to the people and place, but also his concerns about the dangers of power. As a general matter, and, specifically, in his 1982 sermon, he resonated with the words of the iconoclastic Jewish statesman Nahum Goldmann, who declared that the test of our time was the proportional and moral use of Jewish might: “For two thousand years we were powerless as a people, and without power we learned how to be the best visionaries, the best dreamers, the best idealists. But without power we could not implement our visions. Now the powerless have become powerful.” Goldmann, and Beerman in his wake, were channeling a concern rooted in the Bible. What happens when “the servant comes to rule,” as Proverbs warned, and fails to remember the experience of subordination and oppression to which he was once subjected?⁶³

Beerman had used the occasions of Israel’s previous wars to question whether Jewish political and military power was being used appropriately. While many Jews were swept up in a euphoric reverie in 1967, mesmerized by the lightning display of Jewish military prowess, he remained sober-minded. He recalled after a visit to the country following the Six-Day War that “I feel today a deep love for Israel, even a deep yearning for Israel, and yet I do not share the intense national feelings.” Indeed, he could not call himself a Zionist then.⁶⁴ And the subsequent decade and half after 1967 did not alter his decision.

Fittingly, Beerman’s message in 1982, a week and a half after Sabra and Shatila, was one of *heshbon ha-nefesh*, of moral accounting. He called out to his congregants on the eve of Yom Kippur to engage in repentance by supporting efforts to bring an end to the violence and to address both “Israeli security and Palestinian homelessness.” For the remainder of his life, he would remain focused on the entwined questions of Jewish power, Israel’s well-being, and Palestinian self-determination. This was not a matter of abstract philosophical interest, but of intense personal responsibility, which impelled him to reject the pat formulations and conformist tendencies of the organized American Jewish community. In 1988, after the outbreak of the first Intifada in the West Bank, Beerman joined a small group of academics assembled as the Jewish Committee on the Middle East that called for “an American Jewish Intifada” against the US government, American Jewish leaders, and the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. The group also advocated for a cut in both economic and military aid to Israel, which placed it well outside of the Jewish organizational mainstream in the United States—and demonstrated Beerman’s willingness to brook controversy and be counted among the radicals.⁶⁵

Then again, in 2006, when the Israeli military entered Lebanon a second time (after finally exiting from the first Lebanon War only six years earlier), Beerman

once more took to the pulpit on Yom Kippur to discuss the unfolding conflict. He acknowledged that he had stood in the same place at Leo Baeck, discussing a similar issue, twenty-four years earlier. The struggle that mattered most to him, he said,

is one taking place within Israel and within us as American Jews. It is a struggle for the heart and soul, one that has been taking place in Israel from its very beginning, and certainly since 1967, when it conquered all of the territory between the Jordan and the sea. So it has become a struggle about the future of Israel as a moral state.⁶⁶

Beerman evinced no trace of romanticism for Israel's military foe in Lebanon, the Shiite Islamic group Hezbollah. And yet, the task at hand, on this Yom Kippur, was to look inside oneself, to examine one's own self. The obstacle to doing so, his friend the renowned Protestant minister William Sloane Coffin once said, was "the sin of self-righteousness." Beerman quoted Coffin, who admonished: "If only we wouldn't go on using the conspicuous wrong-doing of our adversaries as a means of nourishing our own self-righteousness, instead of permitting the wrongs to deepen our awareness that we are all in need of some repentance, some humility."⁶⁷

It was this aversion to self-righteousness that Leonard Beerman constantly sought to inculcate in himself and others. It was the essential prerequisite, in Levinasian terms, to turning to face the other.⁶⁸ It was this fundamental ethical principle that allowed Beerman to reach out, as a Jewish leader, to Palestinians well before such a step became somewhat normalized in the Oslo peace process. As early as the mid-1980s, he met with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat in Jordan.⁶⁹ And at the local level, he routinely reached out to Muslim colleagues, who may well have had a different view of Israel-Palestine than most American Jews, including in some instances, him. In fact, Beerman called attention in his 2006 Yom Kippur sermon to his colleague of twenty years, Dr. Maher Hathout (1936–2015), a leading Muslim intellectual in Los Angeles and chairman of the Islamic Center of Southern California. Notwithstanding the fact that many Jews harbored unfounded suspicions of Dr. Hathout, particularly after 9/11, Beerman, along with George Regas, forged a powerful interfaith alliance with him. In doing so, he sought to model the importance not only of refusing to succumb to the political passions and prejudices of the day, but also of extending a hand in friendship to the beleaguered in times of crisis. The three men worked on many causes together, from homelessness to immigrants' rights to peace in the Middle East (as reflected in their work in founding the LA-based Abrahamic Faiths Peacemaking Initiative). Beerman, for his part, always felt a special affinity for Muslims committed to social justice, and was honored for his interfaith leadership by the local Muslim Public Affairs Council in 2013.

Leonard Beerman's natural allies in the Los Angeles area were progressives of faith, people such as Jim Lawson, George Regas, Ed Bacon, Maher Hathout, and Laila and Salam al-Marayati, who came from religious traditions other than Judaism. At a national level, he made common cause with prominent Christian



FIGURE 8. Leonard Beerman with Yasir Arafat (undated).

leaders such as Bill Coffin, Harvey Cox, and Jesse Jackson. In fact, Beerman traveled to the Middle East with Jackson and other clerics in 2002, meeting there with Yasir Arafat a second time. Beerman's ecumenism and spirit of engagement extended to those with whom he disagreed. He was never afraid of hearing or exposing others to divergent ideas. He engaged in an annual ritual with a Leo Baeck congregant, the well-known Los Angeles lawyer Bruce Ramer, who typically disagreed with the tenor and substance of Beerman's sermons, especially when they dealt with Israel. Ramer, as we see in "Exchange of Letters with Bruce Ramer," would write an admiring but highly critical letter to Beerman outlining his disagreement; Beerman would write back, affirming both his stance and his respect for Ramer. This openness to divergence extended to the pulpit at Leo Baeck, which welcomed a diverse range of opinions.

Beerman's unique ability to combine politics and the prophetic imperative made him a sought-after leader for many groups. He served as a board member of organizations dealing with civil rights, human rights, homelessness, Jewish social justice, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, and the death penalty.⁷⁰ On the occasion of his retirement from Leo Baeck in 1986, after thirty-seven years as the congregation's rabbi, he did not step back for a second from public engagements, but redoubled



FIGURE 9. Leonard Beerman with Rev. George Regas and Dr. Hassan Hathout, brother of Dr. Maher Hathout (undated).

his commitment to activism. By this point, his manifold contributions were widely recognized. Accolades came his way from obvious and less obvious quarters, including three honorary doctorates, the first from his alma mater Hebrew Union College (1974) and two from small liberal arts colleges on the East Coast, Lafayette College (2001) and Washington & Jefferson College (2007). The commendation from Washington & Jefferson read: “You have shown that religion and faith do not have to divide. You have reached across theological lines to work with Christians, Jews, and Muslims in solving our most pressing social problems. You are an example to us all.”⁷¹ Leonard Beerman was indeed seen by many as a model of passion, eloquence, and, above all, courage. And as he advanced in age, his sharp-edged critique lost none of its potency.

In going about his work, Beerman drew deep inspiration from the words of the great British philosopher Bertrand Russell:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.⁷²



FIGURE 10. Leonard Beerman with Rev. Jesse Jackson (undated).

This aphoristic statement fairly sums up Leonard Beerman's life philosophy. His thirst for knowledge and compassion for human suffering were fueled by his boundless love. This love was both universal and deeply personal. Beerman loved humanity in all its wild diversity. He loved his friends, of whom he had legions. He was particularly close to the members of his "Tuesday Knights" men's club, which met every week for forty years; the group included prominent LA figures such as George Regas, Stanley Sheinbaum, Harold Willens, Fred Nicholas, Dick Gunther, and Mike Farrell.⁷³ These men were not only friends, but partners on a range of social justice causes. He was especially close to Sheinbaum, the well-known progressive activist and philanthropist, with whom he joined forces for a half century of activism on issues ranging from racial and economic justice at home to Jewish outreach to the Palestinians abroad.

Leonard Beerman found love of a more intimate, familial nature, in his first wife, Martha, with whom he had three daughters, Judith, Eve, and Elizabeth.



FIGURE 11. Announcement of award to Leonard Beerman from Levantine Cultural Center (2012).

He had the great fortune to find love a second time, following Martha's death in 1986, when he met Dr. Joan Willens, whom he married in 1988. He often chose to express his love for others in poetry, not his own, but drawn from his vast repository of knowledge, samples of which he would often bring and declaim at a lunch or dinner. He was a dedicated and ceaseless student of poetry, who, even in his last days, drew succor from having it recited to him.

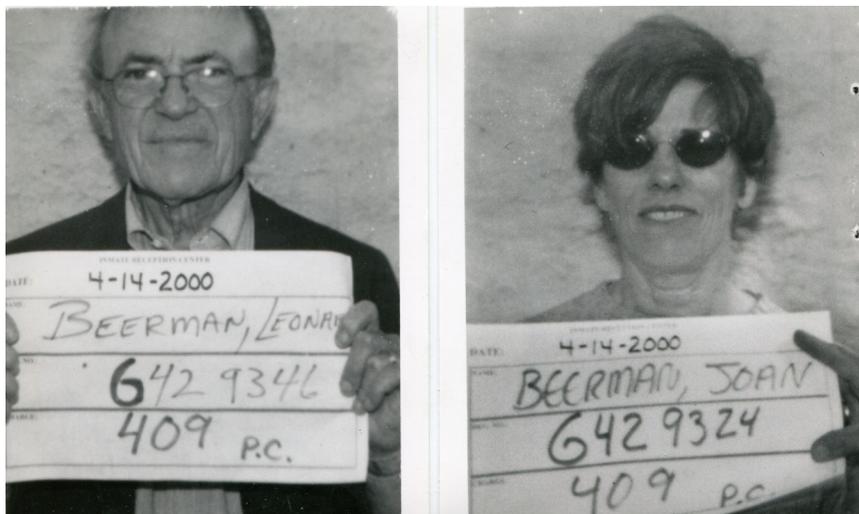


FIGURE 12. Leonard and Joan Beerman getting booked after arrest at “Justice for Janitors” protest in Los Angeles (2000).

In the final months of his life, as he recognized that his powers were waning, Beerman doubled down on his core commitments, to his family, to his close friends, and to the causes that burned so passionately within him. When he rose on the morning of October 4, 2014, to deliver his annual Yom Kippur address at Leo Baeck Temple, he had a clear sense that it might well be his last address there. For weeks before, he struggled over the phrasing of the sermon, even breaking from his decades-long practice by discussing it with a small handful of confidants before Yom Kippur. The subject was, tragically for him, a recurrent one: an Israeli military conflict, this time with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014. After opening with a refrain from W.H. Auden about being forgotten that he frequently quoted, he declared:

And, here we are again, you and I. Another Yom Kippur. Another time to reflect on our lives and consider again who it is that we are and what we have become. Another Yom Kippur, another time to think seriously about whether there is anything in the way we are living that needs to be mended.

Another Yom Kippur. Another war in Gaza. The outrages perpetrated by Hamas, the thousands of rockets deployed, thousands of Israelis rushing for shelters, living in fear, the many Hamas tunnels burrowing their way into the borders of Israel.

Another Yom Kippur. Another 500 children of Gaza killed by the Israel Defense Forces, with callous disregard for their lives. I had thought about using the word “slaughtered” for what I was really feeling, and I lingered over it, wondering whether it was too provocative.⁷⁴

Never one to shy away from provocation in the name of moral awakening, Beerman plunged in by excoriating the warring sides, and particularly the Israelis, for the unconscionable loss of children's lives. Drawing on a characteristically wide range of sources, including George Regas, the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, the Israelis Amos Oz and David Grossman, the American James Agee, and his own colleague at Leo Baeck, Rabbi Ken Chasen, Beerman returned again and again to the refrain: "Another Yom Kippur, another war in Gaza." He quoted the statement of principles that a small group of LA Jewish intellectuals had forged in opposition to the Gaza war, duly mindful of the fact that they were outliers in the organized Jewish community.⁷⁵

There must have been a certain feeling of frustration and even despair as Leonard Beerman faced his congregants on the holiest day of the Jewish year, knowing that it might well be for the last time. After sixty-five years as a rabbi, he was addressing an all-too-common theme—violence and destruction through military force, made more poignant and painful by the fact that the greatest amount of destruction in this case came at the hands of the Jewish state. Neither flinching nor fading, Beerman once again assumed the role of eternal dissident, preaching a sermon that precious few of his colleagues the world over would dare to deliver.

His words were not nor could they be singularly negative. For all of his awareness of the human potential "to hurt and be hurt," he never lost faith in the potential for human good.⁷⁶ And so he concluded his Yom Kippur 2014 sermon, and parted from his congregation, with these words:

Another Yom Kippur. It has come to us to remind us that our world, you and I, need desperately to be mended. Our world needs troubled people, Jews even, men and women who care, men and women who are not ashamed to be sensitive and tender. And our world needs men and women who have the courage to be afraid, afraid of all those forces which have removed our own humanity. And we need men and women who can resist all those, friends and enemies, who seek to prevent us from seeing the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of our own and others' souls, and in the warmth we gain in joining souls together.⁷⁷

When he finished speaking, the congregants of Leo Baeck Temple slowly rose, row by row, to applaud their founding rabbi for the first standing ovation in his career as a sermonizer. It was an acknowledgment not only of the courage of his sermon that day, but of the remarkable impact of his sixty-five year career. Beerman, for his part, would later say: "If this was in fact my last sermon, well, I spoke my truth."⁷⁸

. . .

As one can easily gather from the extraordinary quality of his sermons, Leonard Beerman was a great writer as well as a spellbinding speaker. But he authored no books and in fact harbored the view that he wasn't a very good writer. There was in Leonard Beerman something of the lifelong yeshiva student who felt incapable of writing anything because his mastery of the Talmud was not yet complete.

This was no instance of false modesty. It was a heartfelt sense of inadequacy. And it was jarring to encounter, given how powerful Leonard's words and deeds were. For several years, I had encouraged him to collect his sermons and publish them as a book; others had been making the same request years earlier. Leonard deferred, going so far as to question—to the utter incredulity of his listener—whether he had a body of work worthy of leaving behind. Only in the last few months of his life did he assent to working together or allowing someone else to collect his sermons.

This book is the result of that work of collection. Leonard left behind some eighty-three ring binders of sermons collected by year. The material was organized reasonably well, which is to say that the sermons were largely in correct chronological order in the binders and sometimes included information about the date and occasion on which a particular sermon was delivered. Other writings, letters, and organizational documents could be found in files in filing cabinets, which, like the binders, were located in Leonard's beautifully appointed loft-study on the second floor of the home he shared with Joan and their dog, Charlie.

Selecting items for inclusion in this volume was no simple task. One is struck both by the remarkable range of Leonard's interests, reading, and sermonic themes as well as by a certain amount of repetition, unavoidable for a pulpit rabbi. This volume has attempted to offer a window into the thought and passions of Leonard Beerman by providing a sense of chronological development within distinct thematic categories. It begins in part 1 with Leonard's first major address, his "Chapel Sermon" at HUC in October 1948, and concludes in part 5 with his final Leo Baeck sermon in October 2014. Part 2, following the "Chapel Sermon," offers an introduction to some of Leonard's main intellectual inspirations. Part 3 deals with questions of faith and doubt, recurrent concerns for a lifelong rabbi who considered himself an agnostic. Part 4 includes selected sermons and writings on the social justice issues that were so central to Leonard's rabbinic vision. And part 5 traces the arc of Leonard's thinking and preaching about Israel-Palestine, the issue that vexed him like no other over the course of his life. A list of his own sayings that Leonard felt worthy of preservation and consulted and copied from time to time is included following part 5. The list is a fine summation of the *'ikarim*, the guiding principles, of his lifework.⁷⁹

Leonard Beerman was a great believer in the therapeutic power of dialogue. In evocation of that commitment, this volume seeks to preserve a dialogic quality. Each of the major pieces of writing is accompanied by a short commentary (usually 250 words or so) written by a friend and colleague of Leonard's. Many of the commentators are well-known activists or thinkers in their own right, though for the purposes of this volume, all are profound admirers of Leonard Beerman.

I am very much that myself. I met Leonard Beerman shortly after moving to Los Angeles in 1988. We encountered each other as fellow travelers at gatherings of progressive Jews, acknowledging the other as a person of interest to get to know.

From early on, I recognized in him a rare mix of qualities: brilliant yet modest, a deep thinker and a tireless activist, and so very literate. Over the last decade of Leonard's life, we got to know each other much better; our wives became close, and our families were entwined. Leonard became, at once, an exemplar of goodness, a teacher, a comrade, and a dear friend. It was one of the great gifts of my life to have had the privilege to know and draw inspiration from him. This book is a modest gift in return to him—the eternal dissident, one of the great figures in the American rabbinate in the latter half of the twentieth century and a person who changed the lives of those he met.

