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## Jewish public theology

*Bayonne rabbi applies Jewish law and political science to urban policy*

By JOANNE PALMER

What does revelation — as in the revelation at Sinai, when the Torah tells us that God spoke to the people of Israel — have to do with urban policy?

There were, after all, not many big cities in the wilderness; the Israelites had problems, but income inequality and drug use were not among them.

When you think about it, though, you realize that if the revelation at Sinai — no matter how you understand or define it — contained the law that has been elaborated and refined into halacha over the course of millennia, and that defines Jewish life and thought; and if public policy in general, and urban policy in particular, is a philosophy and system of governance that defines civil life and thought, then it makes sense that they would have a relationship with each other.

In fact, there is a “sub-discipline in the Christian tradition called public theology,” Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger said; such modern Christian theologians as Paul Tillich or Reinhold Niebuhr engaged in it. But there’s not been much of a tradition of public theology in the Jewish world; perhaps the most well-known Jewish thinker to approach it was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, but “there has never been a full-blown book-length study devoted to it,” Dr. Unger said.

Now there is.

Dr. Unger has written a new, peer-reviewed academic work, “A Jewish Public Theology: God and the Global City”; it’s published not by a Jewish house but by an academic one, Lexington Books, an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield.

Dr. Unger’s well situated — possibly uniquely well situated — to have written this book. He’s a political scientist, an associate professor and the director of urban programs at the department of government and politics at Wagner College on Staten Island, and senior research fellow at Wagner’s Hugh Carey Institute of Government Reform. His doctorate is from Fordham University, and he will return there as a visiting research scholar, offering a series of symposia on public-private partnerships in urban economic development in the fall.

He’s also — because why should two large jobs be enough? — an Orthodox rabbi, and his rabbinate is not of the academic kind. He’s the rabbi of Congregation Ohav Zedek in Bayonne.

(He’s also a former child actor who grew up to be a musician, arranger, and songwriter, so his credentials stretch from the Jewish world to academia to the arts, but as impressive as that background is, it’s irrelevant here except as a source of wonder.)

His book, he says, is “about the idea of how Jewish values speak in the public square. Take revelation, parse it out, and apply it to a range of issues — taxation, immigration, other divisive issues.”

And, he added, “it was fun to be able to combine the two disciplines that I love.”

There were three reasons for the book, Dr. Unger said.

“I wanted to write it for the Jewish community — Jewish academics and laypeople — to show that Judaism speaks broadly and loudly in the public square,” he said. “It is not just a body of work about ritual. We often define our commitment to Judaism through ritual observance — I am Reform, Conservative, Orthodox — or through our synagogue or theology. But Judaism is much bigger than that.

“I wanted to make the contribution to the broader community, because so much has been done in other faith communities — not only Tillich and Niebuhr, but also others — the Berrigan brothers or Thomas Merton. Heschel’s work wasn’t systematic; he did what philosophers call phenomenology,” a much more one-situation-at-a-time approach.

“Orthodoxy is my home base,” he continued. “Soloveitchik” — the great modern Orthodox theologian Joseph Ber Soloveitchik — “wanted to build that when he was a young scholar, a newly minted Ph.D. out of the university in Berlin — that was the best Ph.D. you could get at the time. He wanted to build an authentic Judaism, to derive a broad philosophy of life from halacha.” But history put its jackbooted heel in the project. “That project never was completed,” Dr. Unger said.

He is taking a different approach than Rabbi Soloveitchik likely would have taken, he continued. Their backgrounds are different. “I am not doing metaphysics. He was a more traditional philosopher, and I am doing more political science, but taking values from halacha.

“Halacha is law, and law obviously speaks to public policy. I wanted to look at the literature with which I am most at home, to see what Jewish law says about public policy.”

Dr. Unger’s third goal, like his first, is aimed at the Jewish community.

“I want to get us away from the camps that we are used to thinking in,” he said. “There is the progressive Jewish community and the conservative one, and they line up with what those terms mean in American society.”

Judaism is far older, though, and its texts “are a body of work from antiquity,” Dr. Unger said. “It is its own particularism, not progressive, not conservative.

“I want to read Judaism on its own terms, instead of falling into the trap of aligning it with American thinking. Let us see what the sources say. Let them stand on their own.

“For example, we have the issue of trade and globalization and protectionism. What does Judaism say about that in its own terms? The Talmud thinks in terms of city states, and it does ask those questions, on a micro level, in terms of the city state.

“Say you have a store in a place, and another store of the same type comes in. Say it’s a shoemaker. Can that other store be there? The answer ultimately is no, because it would impact his human dignity. A person’s dignity is tied up in work, and that affects his humanity.

“But what if it’s a school? A cheder, owned by a rabbi as a business. What if you have a cheder on a street, a historic talmud Torah, and a younger rabbi wants to open up his talmud Torah on the same street? Can that younger rabbi open it, if the older rabbi has been there all that time?

“In this case, the answer is yes, because education is a primary good, and competition makes every product better. We don’t worry so much about human dignity here; it is secondary when it comes to the public good of education.

“So the criterion for making public policy is human dignity.

“That is a different way of framing the discussion, so it’s not only in purely fiscal terms.”

He moved on to taxation. “There are two historic ways of giving help — the soup kitchen, which now may be called SNAP” — that’s the federal government’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — “and cash assistance. And it is recommended that even someone receiving assistance should also pay some taxes.” That, he said, is about human responsibility.

“And the final example is someone who has been wealthy and somehow loses his fortune. What do we do?” We wait until enough time has passed for that new pauper to adjust to his situation. Until then, Dr. Unger said, if “he used to have a white horse and a servant to lead that horse, it should still be the case for maybe six months; and the Shulchan Aruch and Rashi don’t even put a six-month qualifier on it.

“However long it takes to adjust to one’s newfound state, to get over the shame of the public presentation,” that’s how long he should be supported in the ease to which he had been accustomed. It’s all about “human dignity,” Dr. Unger said. “A person has to be supported for as long as necessary to preserve his sense of health.”

What about regulations? “We talk about it a lot now,” he said. “The halacha has no ideology in that regard. There are times when towns had a lot of regulations, and times when it was a laissez-faire market. It was whatever was needed to preserve the dignity of the individual or the community, as opposed to a political ideology.

“The idea is to preserve dignity. I find that value appearing over and over again. In our time and place, what preserves the dignity of the polis?”

Given all this, what about gender issues?

“I face that question head on,” Dr. Unger said. “I try to be as intellectually honest as I could be. When you look at the sources, you realize that in civil law there is more flexibility than the Orthodox would think.” (Jewish civil law, that is.) “There obviously are issues, but it all seems to be less hard and fast.

“The reason I come up with is that we can only work with certain parts about a woman’s role, because we are servants of God, and in the Orthodox reading our identities are assigned at birth. As Rabbi Saul Berman said, that doesn’t mean more or less equal, but that there are certain things that you can’t change. It doesn’t mean better or worse, although it may look better or worse.

“When it comes to a civil case, the rabbis would rather work out a compromise than just have straight letter-of-the-law justice. They’d prefer justice tempered with mercy.

“But when it comes to the ritual law, you are standing before God, so there the population into which you happen to be born is the code of law you are born into. We don’t have autonomy.

“The rabbis alleviate some of that for us. They do make decisions on a case-by-case basis. There is some mediation. But there is no autonomy in the post-enlightenment sense.

“The tension of living as a bicultural Jew, living fully within the Jewish sphere and also fully engaged in the civic sphere, is to walk with that tension.”

But that’s okay, Dr. Unger concluded.

“Faith is a dialectic. It is an ongoing source of tension. Faith should be a source of challenge. It should not be comfortable.

“I am trying to get past the divisiveness in both the Jewish world and the broader world. Why shouldn’t Judaism be brought to the table as a source of values? If all we do is think about maintaining the source of human dignity, that’s not a bad thing to do.”