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Give Grateful Credit
Book Review
Spiritual Activism: A Jewish Guide to Leadership and Repairing the World by Rabbi Avraham Weiss.

The spiritual activist is the person whose activism is both inspired by the relationship with God and in turn inspires others to expand their relationship with God. No rabbi or Jew has been a more consistent and greater spiritual activist in the last five decades than Rabbi Avi Weiss. Luckily for us, Rabbi Weiss took a break from his many duties to author a masterpiece, *Spiritual Activism: A Jewish Guide to Leadership and Repairing the World* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008).

Rabbi Weiss writes of the difficulty of being an activist as well as a communal rabbi. The activist is by nature a tenacious fighter, wedded to ideals and horrified at compromise. The activist calls people out when they are wrong and even embarrasses those leaders who are corrupt and shameful. The rabbinate, as practiced by Rabbi Weiss (and I had the opportunity to witness this first hand when serving as the Assistant Rabbi of Rabbi Weiss's congregation, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale), loves everyone regardless of their baggage and with great difficulty attempts to judge no one.

This paradox often causes most rabbis to avoid the realm of activism in favor of focusing on their congregational needs. But Rabbi Weiss rejects that approach; not because he craves the excitement of activism or seeks the limelight, but rather because he feels that it is the responsibility of the rabbi to be the voice of moral conscience in the community.

A major tenet of Rabbi Weiss's activism is to follow an injustice that is not being addressed by the establishment organizations of the Jewish community. He writes that he is not anti-establishment, but non-establishment. Because he is not a full-time professional activist, in the sense that he has two other full-time jobs, Rabbi Weiss focuses his activism on areas where others are not speaking out.

In this sense, Rabbi Weiss has often become the lodestar and conscience for the Jewish community. Rabbi Weiss's book recounts the many times he spoke out on an issue of great importance to the Jewish community only to be criticized by the Jewish establishment. In retrospect, we can all be

grateful for Rabbi Weiss's prescience.

For example, Rabbi Weiss spoke out on the struggle for Soviet Jewry before the Jewish community organizations recognized this great human struggle. Rabbi Weiss recounts how he fought against leaders of the Jewish community for the passage of the Jackson-Vannik amendment, the critical piece of legislation that was responsible for the freeing of Soviet Jewry.

He tells of confronting the Israeli government about the need to rescue the Ethiopian Jewish community only to be dismissed disrespectfully. Today the world recognizes Israel's rescue of Ethiopian Jewry as an action by Israel that was a light unto the nations.

When the muckety-mucks of the America Jewish community were giving honor to President Carlos Menem of Argentina, Rabbi Weiss protested and was carried face-first down the steps of the posh, Pierre Hotel. As he was being carried out by police officers, some guests managed to put down their cocktails long enough to shout at Rabbi Weiss, "You are dishonoring the Jewish people." Ten years later *The New York Times* ran a story on the front page proving that Menem was involved in the July 1994 bombing of the Jewish Community Center in Argentina.

There are countless stories like these in Rabbi Weiss's book and countless others that he leaves out. Such is the life of the activist. He speaks out because he feels it is the right thing to do, even though it is very often not the popular thing to do. Indeed, almost by definition, Rabbi Weiss will usually only speak out when it is the unpopular thing to do, since if it is popular, he will feel that others are already making the case.

All this is not to say that Rabbi Weiss does not appreciate the defense organizations of the Jewish community. He recognizes that they play an important role in the symphony of the Jewish community. His goal is parallel to theirs. His goal is to inspire other individuals in the community to assume responsibility and rise up for the Jewish community.

Rabbi Weiss tells the stories of individuals or "students and simple housewives" such as Avital Sharansky, who have become some of the greatest activists in Jewish history. This is the ultimate teaching of Rabbi Weiss: The great activists speak out because they feel a religious need to do so. The great activists do not shirk responsibility but rather embrace it.

But even the greatest activists need a guide, so Rabbi Weiss offers a "street manual" to people who seek to become activists. In this respect, he religiously follows the principles of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He absolutely rejects violence by activists, even when being physically attacked. He demands absolute integrity in dealing with the media and even in dealing with opponents. Furthermore, he reminds us that no matter how pitched the battle, we can never forget that the people we are protesting against are human beings.

Some people think that the life of an activist is glorious. After all, they will often see the activist on television or in the newspaper or meeting with elected officials. I have had the great honor of standing next to Rabbi Weiss on many occasions during his moments of activism. For every successful rally of thousands of people there are literally tens, if not hundreds of rallies, with just a few committed souls. Spiritual activism is not for those who wish to hobnob with the "big shots" of the world. It is a tough, never-ending struggle for the soul of the community. It is often thankless and physically and mentally consuming.

The publication of Rabbi Weiss's book is an opportunity for all of us to step back and be grateful for what he has given our community. There is, however, one important omission in this book that is necessary to correct.

Rabbi Weiss notes that in March 2002, on short notice and with little advertising, he and a small group of like-minded rabbis organized a rally for Israel in New York City that was attended by more than 12,000 people. At this rally, Rabbi Weiss called for a much larger rally to take place the next week in Washington, D.C. He said that the Jewish establishment should organize such a rally—and if they do not do it, then we will do it ourselves.

Within twenty-four hours, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations met and decided that it would hold a rally in Washington the very next week. The ensuing rally was attended by well over a hundred thousand people and will forever be remembered as one of the bright spots in American Jewish history.

Unfortunately, the organizers of the Washington rally decided to completely freeze out Rabbi Weiss and his rabbinic partners from the rally. These rabbis attended but were given no credit. Such is to be expected. Such is the role of the activist.

But in this one instance, *The New York Jewish Week* decided to write an editorial giving credit where credit is due. Here is the passage as it appears on page 122 of Rabbi Weiss's book:

> Kol Hakavod *(give grateful credit) … for not only spearheading the highly successful rally outside the United Nations on Sunday, but for no doubt convincing the Jewish establishment—some would say shaming them into acknowledging—that passion and commitment go farther than endless planning when it comes to staging an impressive pro-Israel event.*
>
> *The rabbis have staged several rallies for Israel since June, but Sunday's was by far the largest, attracting at least 10,000 people—some say many more—to voice their support for Israel in its time of crisis…. By contrast, the organized Jewish community of federations and national organizations has been slow to respond to the crisis in Israel, now in its 18th month, at least in terms of public displays of support.*

In his great modesty Rabbi Weiss omits four key words from this paragraph. The original editorial in *The Jewish Week* stated, "*Kol Hakavod* (give grateful credit) **to Rabbi Avi Weiss**…." Indeed!