

Red Rabbi Turns Pink: Marshall Meyer's Influence on the Debate over Four Hundred Disappeared LGBT People in Argentina

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Short Story of One Disciple

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1930, Marshall Meyer grew up in Norwich, Connecticut, in a nonreligious family, but became involved in Jewish life at an early age and actively participated in Camp Ramah. During his undergraduate career at Dartmouth College, he met a

philosophy professor who constantly challenged him to debate about Judaism. Obsessed with the idea of winning the debate, Meyer improved his Jewish knowledge, deepening his desire to become a rabbi. During this time, Meyer was impressed by the thought of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) of America, the main



Sol Avena (2023). "400 LGBT detainees and disappeared people, they're here! That the sidewalks they walked on would speak of them. Neighborhoods for Memory and Justice."

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seminary of Conservative Judaism. After graduating, he enrolled at JTS under Heschel's tutelage. The experience changed Meyer's entire perspective on Judaism and the defense of human rights. Rabbi Heschel was a prominent civil rights activist, a close friend of Martin Luther King Jr., and a dedicated fighter against racial and religious segregation. Heschel's books were an inspiration to a generation of young rabbis who understood the centrality of participating in the defense of human rights as an aspect of performing mitzvot. Marshall Meyer was ordained a rabbi in 1958, a year before he arrived in Buenos Aires. His admiration for Rabbi Heschel carried him through the worst days in Argentina, when Rabbi Meyer always remembered Rabbi Heschel's words: "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying." During the last Argentine dictatorship, Rabbi Meyer also prayed with his legs, even by missing the Shabbat.

Red Rabbi

Rabbi Marshall Meyer and his wife Naomi arrived in Buenos Aires in 1959 to serve at Liberty Synagogue, one of the most important non-Orthodox congregations in Argentina. At the time, the Argentine Jewish community numbered about 300,000 people, the largest outside the United States and Israel. However, most Argentine Jews were secularized and had no theological training. Rabbi Meyer's main goal was to increase the participation of the Conservative Jewish community in religious services and to promote Judaism among young people. Although the Jewish community was intrigued by this new American couple living in Argentina, on many occasions they were perceived as too liberal because of their colorful and fashionable attire, their irreverent and informal attitude, and their overfamiliar treatment of young Jewish people.

In 1962, Rabbi Meyer ended his contract with Liberty Synagogue and established a new congregation, Bet El, in the Belgrano neighborhood, a suburb associated with young Jewish families. One of the most important projects developed by Rabbi Meyer was Camp Ramah, based on his own childhood experience. In Argentina, Camp Ramah taught hundreds of Jewish teens Torah, the Hebrew language, and sports. The success of Camp Ramah motivated Bet El to purchase land to build permanent classrooms and sports facilities in a rural area far from Buenos Aires. Beyond the success, Rabbi Meyer was criticized for some of the activities at Camp Ramah: for some youth members, he was too permissive and liberal and refused to follow leaders' instructions, resulting in an open letter referring to "favoritism" in the Ramah Association elections; an interfaith wedding held in one of the camps offended some members; and finally, in 1969, Rabbi Meyer was publicly accused of sexual misconduct with some *madrichim*. Nissim Elnecave, editor-in-chief of *La Luz Magazine*, a publication associated with the Orthodox community, wrote a curious and salacious column indirectly referring to some sexual scandals that occurred with a male *madrich* in Bet El, allegedly by the "beautiful and young rabbi." In the 70s and 80's, Elnecave published many articles criticizing Rabbi Meyer, accusing him of being a Marxist, a reformist, a foreigner with too liberal ideas, and a homosexual. A deeper analysis of the debate between Marshall Meyer and Nissim Elnecave reveals the controversial role of Rabbi Meyer in the Argentine Jewish community, and his strained relations with the Delegation of Argentine Israeli Associations (DAIA) and the Kehila of Buenos Aires (AMIA).

In *La Luz Magazine* of November 19, 1962, an article recounts the debates within the Liberty Synagogue and describes Rabbi Marshall Meyer as a "too young, handsome, beautiful, but above all, greedy and ambitious to a superlative degree, unscrupulous of the respect due to others and of the decency and dignity of our local institutions, norms and established customs." In this sentence it is clear that Meyer was considered a disruptive rabbi from the beginning of his career. Other articles refer to him as a "Red rabbi" for his Marxist ideas, even though Rabbi Meyer always declared himself to be a liberal and democratic person and never expressed sympathy for socialism.

"But You're a Jew"

The political conflict in Argentina grew in the 70s, especially between the conservative sectors (embodied by the military forces) and the leftist organizations integrated into some sectors of Peronism, the Communist and Socialist Party. The return of Juan Domingo Perón after a long period of exile did not resolve the political violence. Perón rejected the participation of leftist organizations in the Peronist Party, rejected leftist rhetoric, and appealed to the military for support to pacify the country. A few years after the military took over the government, Perón signed documents proposing the creation of a military force committed to controlling the leftist organizations, also known as the Triple A, the Spanish acronym for Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine anticommunist alliance). During these years, and especially after the beginning of the last dictatorship, Rabbi Marshall Meyer worked hard to defend Jewish youth persecuted for their leftist ideology. While the central Jewish organizations refused to support the families of the disappeared, accusing them of raising their children in the wrong way, alienated from Jewish doctrine and oriented in leftist ideas, Rabbi Meyer was engaged in the defense of Jewish people in danger under the military government. The archives contain many documents in which mothers and fathers acknowledge the work of Rabbi Meyer, who accompanied Jewish young prisoners, found out the whereabouts of Jewish disappeared people, and spiritually supported people who were tortured, raped, and mistreated by the military government, like the famous journalist Jacobo Timerman. The latter wrote a letter to the rabbi highlighting the spiritual role of Meyer's support during his imprisonment: "All the days they let me know that I am a Jew, but your presence here, in this prison, lets them know—maybe understand—that being a Jew is my strength and my pride."

Rabbi Meyer also experienced this differential treatment during his visits to the prisons. He was stripped naked

and humiliated on several occasions, and when he demanded his right to be treated like other Catholic chaplains who visited the prisons, the prison guards said to him, "But you're a Jew," referring to the undervalued condition in which the Jewish prisoners lived. Rabbi Meyer registered all these mistreatments received during the dictatorship and denounced how the Jewish people were especially tortured and violated because of their different religion and culture.

Pink Rabbi

In 1983, just a few months after the return to democracy, Rabbi Marshall Meyer was appointed to the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), created by President Raúl Alfonsín to investigate the role of the army forces in the repression, disappearances, and annihilation of leftist organizations. CONADEP collected testimonies and denunciations of the violence suffered under the last dictatorship. Rabbi Meyer was instrumental in collecting denunciations in New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Paris, and London, where he met many Argentine refugees and victims. Based on these testimonies and others collected in Argentina, CONADEP declared the total number of disappeared persons to be 8,961, although they declared that this number was only a small fraction of the great challenge that still remained in the search for justice.

Rabbi Meyer was the member who drew attention to the number of Jewish people who were particularly mistreated during the last dictatorship, and also spoke out about the violence against gays and lesbians in the illegal detention centers. In an interview with Robert Spero in 1988, Rabbi Meyer stated: "At the National Commission for the Disappeared Persons in Argentina, we found that over five hundred gays had been murdered and tossed into the river, but first they were anally abused by the military." When Rabbi Meyer moved to New York in 1985 to officiate at B'nai Jeshurun, the city's oldest Ashkenazic synagogue, he encouraged the

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congregation to support gay people affected by the AIDS crisis and created a friendly environment for LGBT people.

Current Demands for Reparations in Argentina

The demand for the recognition of these LGBT victims in Argentina mentioned by Rabbi Meyer has become one of the central issues of LGBT activism in the country today. Due to the scarcity of documentation about Rabbi Meyer's statements on gay disappeared people, only the rumor of four hundred people, spread by the preeminent Argentine gay activist Carlos Jauregui, survived. This short article is the first attempt to bring documentary evidence related to the role of Rabbi Marshall Meyer in the struggle for LGBT rights in Argentina. Perhaps because he was often treated as a homosexual, but certainly because he always acted in defense of marginalized people, Rabbi Marshall Meyer bequeathed to the present a central piece of information that feeds the current demands of justice for trans, *travesti*,ⁱ lesbian, and gay people in Argentina. A compelling argument to continue fighting for recognition are the words of one of the members of the CONADEP, which are now recovered in this paper.

The role of Rabbi Marshall Meyer and other Jewish organizations, such as the Jewish Movement for Human Rights, is currently underrepresented, largely due to the actions of the mainstream Jewish institutions, which have refused to participate in the human rights debate because of their alignment with the Right in Argentina. In general, Argentine society ignores the long tradition of left-wing Judaism and Jewish leadership in the defense of human, civil, and workers' rights. Despite multiple attempts to hide the disruptive voices and actions of a sector of the Jewish community, the legacy of Marshall Meyer survived in the LGBT demand for recognition of the four hundred prisoners and disappeared. Rabbi Meyer's intense work in defense of the disappeared, his perspective on the particular violence against Jewish and LGBT people, and his disruptive voice challenging the

conformism of the Jewish community remain present as LGBT people are claimed by Memory, Truth, and Justice.

In several demonstrations, the LGBT community has demanded the recognition of four hundred LGBT disappeared, adding this number to the 30,000 cis-heterosexual disappeared now recognized by the government. Thus, the number of 30,400 disappeared people is used to make visible the existence of LGBT people murdered under the military dictatorship. Every year on March 24, when Argentina commemorates the National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice, human rights organizations protest in front of Congress and the Pink House, the two central government buildings in Argentina. During these demonstrations young LGBT people hold signs demanding the recognition of the 30,400 disappeared people, an unexpected and marvelous legacy of the liberal, controversial, democratic, and empathetic work of an American rabbi who prayed with his legs.

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ⁱ *Travesti* is a term used in Argentina and some countries of the Southern Cone of Latin America to refer to transgender people who are generally engaged in sex work. It is a complex term with multiple meanings across time. In the 1970s, it usually referred to "men dressed up as women" in theater and cabaret shows, while in the 1980s and 1990s, it was more related to sex work and the use of rudimentary embodiment techniques. Currently, it is seen as a political identity that rejects gender binarism and vindicates the racial, ethnic, and class condition of trans people in connection with sex work.