THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN CAME TO SALEM IN MAY AND JUNE
PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

Locally and nationally, the religious left is making its impact felt with T'ruah and the Poor People's Campaign

Rabbi Ruhi Sophia Motzkin Rubenstein of Eugene's Temple Beth Israel is measured yet urgent when discussing the way her faith compels her to work for justice — especially at this particular junction in American history, when members of the Trump administration have used religious justification for policies that take aim at poor and immigrant communities.

One aspect of that political engagement is her recent participation in the Poor People's Campaign.

"If anything good can be said of this administration — it's motivating people," Rubenstein says, adding that, for her, the blending of true faith with political action presents no inherent difficulties. "It's a funny question to me, because for me there's not a question of balance. They're not oppositional."

Rubenstein says the Trump administration is "unprecedented in the scope of havoc it's wreaking on democratic institutions," and she adds that, contrary to much popular opinion, "there exists a religious left" that seemingly stands worlds apart from U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who recently quoted a narrow passage from the Apostle Paul to justify separating immigrant children from their families at the border.

Indeed, Rubenstein herself is a key participant in T'ruah: the Rabbinical Call for Human Rights, an organization that seeks to link and mobilize Jewish leaders in the interests of protecting human rights in North American, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

In a May 14 op-ed piece for the *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, Rubenstein advocated for Jewish involvement in another human rights organization, the Poor People's Campaign, which is gaining traction nationwide. "Torah demands that society care for the most vulnerable, and it is evident that the United States in 2018 needs that corrective as badly as the land of Israel did in the time of Ruth," she writes, noting later in the article that "one way is to join an action with the Poor People's Campaign."

On May 14, Rubenstein traveled to Salem to participate in a demonstration on behalf of the Oregon chapter of the Poor People's Campaign, the second incarnation of an historic movement whose austere origins stretch back half a century.

In the year before his assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had begun broadening the scope of his political activism. As one of the key leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King surveyed the successes of the movement and saw that, beyond the evils of racism, the grind of chronic poverty had afflicted a wide and diverse swath of the American people.

"I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights," King told a gathering of Southern Christian leaders in May 1967, calling for a "radical redistribution of economic and political power" in the United States.

This indicated, for King, the need for a new and expansive coalition — one that found common cause among blacks, poor whites, immigrants and others systematically shut out, or shut off, from the bounty of American prosperity. And it meant going after the massive machinery of the political machine, whether that be union-busting policy makers or the hawks behind the Vietnam War.

In short, King was moving from issues of race to issues of class, in all its ramifications.

And so was born the Poor People's Campaign, which King envisioned as petitioning the U.S. government to pass an Economic Bill of Rights. Despite vigorous organization and some action — including a march on Washington, D.C. — the movement faltered in the wake of the assassinations of King and then Bobby Kennedy.

Now, 50 years later, the Poor People's Campaign has been resuscitated across the country, led by a pair of ministers — Rev. William Barber from North Carolina and Rev. Liz Theoharis, based in New York — who are spearheading "A National Call for Moral Revival."

Drawing together support around the country from both faith and secular leaders and institutions, the campaign is calling for non-violent action, including civil disobedience, that addresses poverty in the broadest terms, from mass incarceration and systemic racism to rampant militarism and ecological devastation.

The impact of the Poor People's Campaign has reached Oregon, and even Eugene. During the campaign's recent "40 Days of Moral Action," which started May 13 and culminated with a June 23 mass gathering in Washington, D.C., folks regularly gathered at the capitol in Salem to participate in demonstrations calling for, among other things, a change in "the nation's distorted morality."

Rubenstein — who goes by Rabbi Ruhi — says that her advocacy for and participation in political action groups like the Poor People's Campaign is completely in keeping with her Judaism. Both her parents were reformed rabbis, she says, and as a kid they brought her along to NAACP meetings and LGBTQ lobby days in upstate New York.

She says she's always understood "that Judaism obligates us to work for justice … I feel blessed that I have this grounding in religious obligation. It's not the faith that everything will be okay, but it's the faith that I know what is called of me regardless of how hopeless things seem. Figuring out how to act is easy, which doesn't mean the act itself is easy. I myself am figuring that out."

She adds: "I don't feel that I have ever done enough, nor do I feel that I am currently doing enough … I certainly intend to continue working for justice."

Rev. Barber, founder of the Poor People's Campaign, has described a similar sense of obligation stemming from his Christian faith. In a May 14 issue of *The New Yorker*, Barber is quoted as saying, "I worry about the way that faith is cynically used by some to serve hate, fear, racism, and greed." He offers instead "theology of liberation," grounded in scripture, that compels respect and care for the poor: "Pay people what they deserve. Share your food with the hungry. Do this and then your nation shall be called a repairer of the breach."

Rubenstein praises Barber's focus and organizing efforts, which inspired recent political action across the country. "I think it's bringing visibility to some really important issues," she says. "He's offering a link between the religious and the secular left. This is part of years of really impressive coalition building work that he has done in his state."

However, she cautions that many of the injustices being decried now have been going on for a long time in American society, and that "the struggle for justice isn't one that ends — it's continuous in every moment, in every generation."

Now that the campaign's 40 days of engagement has come to an end, Rubenstein says the ongoing success of the Poor People's Campaign "depends on whether we in other places continue to build coalitions, young and old, religious and secular."

For her part, Rubenstein says, she's waiting to see what might be the next locus of organization, which she suggests is immigration and customs enforcement. "In the short term, that's where the energy is shifting, and that is urgently important, so much so that we can easily lose track of the long-term struggles. How do we marshal the energy and outrage to respond to the really urgently horrific issues that are coming up?"

She adds: "It depends a lot on how much we can mobilize across differences. The upcoming elections will reinstate some very real checks and balances. It's really important to be engaged and grounded in communities."

For further information about the Poor People's Campaign, including local upcoming events and actions, visit poorpeoplescampaign.org. Information about T'ruah: the Rabbinical Call for Human Rights is at truah.org. The Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, which contributes resources to the campaign, can be found at kairoscenter.org.