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Israel: the new left is not the enemy

Carl Gershman

There is a (perhaps inevitable) time lag between the development and the public recognition of political trends in the United States. The reason for this is probably that the primary concerns of most people are with immediate personal problems. Their political perceptions are drawn mostly from the media (except in the case of such immediate problems as crime and employment), and the media are famous for not treating a phenomenon until it has reached a crisis stage—until, that is, it has already been developing for quite a while. Moreover, since the kind of phenomena that attract media attention are very often “trendy,” a British word combining chicness with transiency, it is likely that what the media have projected into the public mind will very shortly cease to exist. Thus we run the risk not only of a delayed recognition of what is happening but also a prolonged recognition of what is not happening.

This has been so in the case of the relationship between the New Left and Israel. With the benefit of 4 years of hindsight, it now seems not at all surprising that the 1967 conflict in the Middle East triggered off a wave of New Left hostility to Israel. The ideological and psychological underpinnings for such hostility had been present for some time before June 5, 1967. Central to the New Left world view was a Third World mystique which combined a glorification of the nonwhite and economically backward peoples of the world with a profound

alienation from Western civilization in general and the United States in particular. This view was supplemented by a fascination with guerrilla movements claiming to represent the forces of “liberation.”

An inevitable allegiance

Given this set of attitudes, Israel never had much of a chance with the New Left. In the minds of the young “revolutionaries,” the Six Day War presented a stereotypical situation: a country oriented toward the West and supported by the West fought against the armies of 3 Third World nations. The New Left, of course, could not get too excited about an alliance with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan whose main virtue was that they had lost (and thus were “oppressed”). But with the rise of the Fedayeen upon the ruins of the defeated Arab armies, the New Left had a movement that it could identify with. Yasir Arafat soon took his place in the hagiology of the New Left, and the rest is history.

The level of New Left anti-Israel activity mounted steadily from 1967 to 1970. It was not until the end of that period that the media discovered the problem and establishment Jewish bodies recognized the need for counter-action. Yet just at the time that concern with these New Left activities started to focus, the specific problem that had aroused attention was becoming less severe. In September, 1970 the Fedayeen, who had been touted as a powerful revolutionary force, were crushed by Hussein's army in Jordan. Following the Jordanian civil war the terrorists grew progressively weaker, and in July they suffered their worst and apparently decisive rout. Thus the New Leftists found themselves in solidarity with a revolution that did not exist, and their zeal was soon tempered.

The movement declines

Moreover, the decline of the Fedayeen coincided with the disintegration of the New Left itself. After the SDS takeover by a handful of Stalinists and Maoists, the organized New Left political thrust petered out in a series of grotesque bombings and infantile calls for high school uprisings. The Trotskyites moved in to fill the Far Left political vacuum and added a touch of fanatical anti-Zionist dogmatism to what had once been the incoherent ravings of the New Left. But the campus mood was not congenial to the Trotskyites. The New Left seizure was followed by a rapid decline in extremist political activity on campus as a period of exhaus-

Middle East. The difficulty in clarifying the debate is that many people who are nominally pro-Israel refuse to face up to the full implications of Soviet power in the Middle East.

One (and by no means the only) example of this tendency is a recent essay in *Ramparts* by Sol Stern, an editor of the magazine who took a hostile stance toward Israel following the 1967 war. Stern, evidently distressed at the extreme turn that was taken by the Left opposition to Israel, wishes to disassociate himself with the extremists and give his support to the American Jewish and Israeli Left. In putting forth his new "pro-Israel" position, however, he is simply unable to come to terms with the question of the Soviet threat and the need for U.S. support to Israel. He dismisses the whole matter with a single sentence that "Israel survived in 1948 without any American weapons, and is dependent ultimately not on big-power support, but on its own willingness to fight for its survival." Fine, except that Israel received Czech weapons in 1948 (an unlikely source today) and the security situation, to say the least, is a bit different now than it was 23 years ago.

Isolationists pose the real threat

The Middle East conflict is now part of a larger conflict between the great powers, and the fate of Israel will be determined by the future course of American foreign policy. One can moralize against such a state of affairs, yet that will not make it go away. If American is unwilling to stand by Israel, or if the balance of power in the Mediterranean continues to shift to the point where we are *incapable* of standing by her by anything short of a nuclear deterrent, then Israel will be in more serious trouble than ever before in her history.

Times indeed have changed. The present task is no longer to stand up against a handful of extremists who are calling for Israel's destruction (where such people exist, and they do, we must, of course, continue to oppose them), but to speak out against the perfectly respectable people who are advocating isolationist measures that could lead to disaster. If we do not recognize this reality quickly, before the crisis comes, then the crisis is more likely to happen with consequences more ominous than most of us care to contemplate.

Israel: are there no limits to jewishness?

Norman Lamm

In his critique of Walter Wurzburger's plea that Israel live by "Jewish values" (Sh'ma 1/16), Arthur Hertzberg invokes Hayyim Greenberg's claim that Jewish polemicists are guilty of "m'darf, m'zoll, m'muz" (Sh'ma 1/17). Employing this technique, the speaker urges his listeners to do "something constructive," without ever telling them what that "something constructive" is. However, while Hertzberg is not exactly loathe to criticize Israel publicly on social issues (such as the Black Panthers), when it comes to religious matters it would appear that he holds "m'darf nit, m'zoll nit, m'muz nit . . ." (one should not, one ought not, one must not).

Rabbi Hertzberg is being somewhat disingenuous, I fear, in pressing so hard for a precise definition of "Jewish values." When he asks "what values?" or "whose values?" and points to the multiplicity of interpretations of the term, he is applying to Wurzburger the old gambit of the professor who, asked if he believed in God, countered with his own question, "which of the hundreds of different conceptions of God?," and proceeded to mention several dozen. Such playful sophistication is good for a debator, but it will not do as serious discussion. Using such a technique one can bring all conversation on any subject to a squishy halt by drowning it in the oozing swamp of quibbling disquisitions. Prof. H.A. Wolfson has contrasted the "fool" of Psalms 14 who says, honestly and bluntly, "There is no God," to the "lovers of wisdom" (philosophers) who made semantic quibbling about the meaning of "God" one of their chief occupations. *Mutatis mutandis*, that is what Hertzberg is doing with the "Jewish values" problem. Clever, yes; enlightening, no.

What jewish values are not

Without identifying myself completely with Rabbi Wurzburger's views—I, for one, am more sanguine about the "Judaization" of Israel, and expect it to become more apparent when the current seizure of polarization has been resolved or spent itself—I feel that it is sufficiently clear what he means by "Jewish values," and more precise definition is not necessary in order to appreciate and agree with his point. Wurzburger is talking about "normative" Jewish values, not those of the antinomian mystic or militarist or pacifist—or the intermarriers, to complete

the reference to Hertzberg's cute quaternity. He is saying that we have to go beyond the ethnicity or nationalism already achieved, and which may well have religious values as Rav Kook taught. One need not pin Wurzbürger down to a minority "Orthodox" position in order to share his animadversions. I dare say there are many others, even those not identified with the camp of "religious Orthodoxy" (whatever that means), who, at the very least, will agree what Jewish values are *not*, the kind of things they would exclude. Jewish values, most of us would agree, are not enhanced by the goings-on at Dizengorff in Tel Aviv on Shabbat; by the traffic jams on roads leading to the resorts on Shabbat; by the crowded beaches on Rose Hashanah; by the sickening trash Israelis import from the U.S. for their movies, paperbacks, and TV reruns; by the silent prejudices by Ashkenazim against Oriental Jews—and Arabs; by the hatred stirred up on both sides of the religious divide; by the ethical shortcomings of a number of public figures; by the indifference to the widening gap between the have's and the have-not's; by the carrying on of religious debate by means of stone-throwing; by the pathological zealots who have declared war on all pathologists; by the sundering of Jewish religion from Jewish nationality for the first time in Jewish history by the first Jewish state in 2000 years; and yes, by the chaos that some want to welcome, in the name of liberalism, in matters of marriage and divorce, seeking to introduce into Israel the same anarchy that prevails in this country.

Halakhic practice can be "Jewish"

Of course, there will be differences amongst us as to the degree that Halakkah should control in Israeli life. Even those who are committed to Halakkah may, for a variety of reasons, prefer disestablishment at present. But, this does not exclude Halakhic practice from the scope of "Jewish values" as a desideratum; and it does not mean that there are no other values, not formulated by the Halakkah, that are genuinely Jewish and desirable.

I am not white-washing the so-called religious establishment in Israel; it takes more than white-wash to clean up a situation. Nor am I discounting certain real moral problems that crop up on the margins of Halakkah. From Plato through Maimonides to our own day, legal thinkers have known that every law causes inconveniences or suffering to some innocent people in individual cases. But this does not vitiate law as such, unless one is simply willing to take up

anarchy as his "thing."

I am troubled by many of my liberal friends. Too many religious liberals here, and secularist intellectuals in Israel, seem to form comprehensive judgments on the religious problems in Israel on the basis of the sacred texts of *Haaretz* editorials. They are ready to man the ramparts on behalf of *mamzerim* who cannot marry non-*mamzerim*, and divorcees prevented from marrying *kohanim*. I admire their passion, and recognize its provenance in their sense of outraged righteousness. But what of the moral issue at stake for the rest of the population—not just 2 or 10 or 20 *mamzerim*, and the handful (and that is all that is involved) of divorcee-*kohanim* problems? What about all those other painful problems that affect the life of each and every Israeli—why the silence? Or is it that what is good enough for American Jews is good enough for Israelis? For instance: the pornography, the nudity on stage, the astounding rate of abortions (often overlooked by those who plead loudest for *aliyah* to improve Israel's security position), the right of a man to the integrity of his body after his death, the right of the religious citizen not to have his Sabbath rest disturbed in *his* neighborhood by the grinding of gears and honking of horns?

A very real worry

It simply won't do to dismiss Wurzbürger's point by confining his thesis to the circumscribed group of those who share "his version of religious Orthodoxy." Nor can Hertzberg simply imply that whatever Israeli society does constitute, by itself, "Jewish values," and is thus immune from criticism. The issues are too great, too crucial, just to leave it at that. Wurzbürger is not "attacking" contemporary Israeli reality. He is simply expressing a very real worry that Israel may turn out to be just a Middle East version of the American Jewish community.

And if it does—Heaven help us.

Israel: neither surrogate nor inferior

Judd L. Teller

Arthur Hertzberg's buckshot rejoinder (Sh'ma 1/17) sprays everything in sight. It hits at that which he attributes to Walter Wurzbürger (1/16), and barely grazes that which Wurzbürger had written.