

Religion and the Jewish New Left—1960 to Date

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It is a commonly accepted logical axiom that the whole is greater than any part. When dealing with any specific subject, one must be ever cognizant of the greater, all-encompassing field surrounding it. Specifically, when writing about the Jewish New Left, one must consider first the general category of New Left. For it is true that even as the specific changes the general, the general, without question, determines the nature of the specific.

What, then, is the New Left? The term was first coined by C. Wright Mills in an article written in 1960. He called on the new intellectuals to identify themselves as the vehicle for social change. These intellectuals were to form the "New Left." In order to understand the phrase, one must first differentiate it from the term "Old Left." Old Left refers to socialist movements existing prior to World War II. But time is not the only difference between the Old and the New. Richard Rovere attributes to the New Left "a spirit of indiscriminating rejection of society that never really existed in the Old Left."¹ Other critics have pointed to the lack of serious political thinking, the lack of interest in past movements, and the total rejection of the American system of government as characteristic of the New Left, distinguishing it from the Old. The New Left has been variously described by many writers. One such writer called it "a conglomeration of random groups in ideological disarray, undivided only with regard to Vietnam,"² while another labeled it "anarchism, socialism, existentialism, humanism, pacifism, transcendentalism, bohemianism, Populism, mysticism, and Black Nationalism."³ All

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¹ "Confrontation: The Old Left and the New," *American Scholar*, Autumn, 1967, p. 574.

² Philip Rahv, "Left Face," *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 12, 1967, p. 10.

³ Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority* (New York, 1966), p. 22.

that can objectively be said about the New Left is that it is an unorganized, disparate movement consisting of many variable elements with countless changing goals, all agreeing only on the theoretical concept of change in the general direction of the left. This then includes such strange bedfellows as CORE, SDS, SNCC, SANE, Women Strike For Peace, The Revolutionary Action Movement, Free Universities, and The Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP).

The make-up of the membership of all these groups stretches across all the boundaries of economic class, race, creed, color, sex, age, and location. One finds in the composition of these groups poor Blacks, wealthy Protestants, working-class Catholics, upper-middle-class Whites, men and women from all parts of the United States and the world. Jews also play an important role in the majority of these organizations. It is not true, however, that Jews control the New Left. This is a misconception. An examination of the statistics available makes it clear that "the New Left is neither Jewish controlled nor dominated, it is equally clear that support for New Left activity comes from a rank and file that has a large Jewish representation and an intellectual-writer group that is predominantly Jewish."⁴ Such is the New Left. But the question remains, what then is the Jewish New Left? Is it accurate to call Jews who are members of New Left organizations also members of the Jewish New Left? Or is there a separate movement consisting of Jews with Jewish goals also oriented in the general direction of, and associated with, the New Left?

TO SEEK A RAPPROCHEMENT

Certainly in the early 1960's, before the rising phenomenon of ethnicity and Israel's Six-Day War (establishing the Jewish State as the dominant Mid-Eastern power), Jewish New Left could have been defined as Jews who are members of New Left organizations. But today the picture has been altered. Jews concerned with Jewish issues, directed ideologically towards change to the left, have organized themselves into separate groups. This change, this deserting,

⁴ Geraldine Rosenfield, "Interim Report on the New Left and Alienated Youth," The American Jewish Committee Information Service, Dec., 1967, p. 28.



Courtesy, Michael G. Rapp, Minneapolis, Minn.

The Jewish New Left in Action



Courtesy, Michael G. Rapp, Minneapolis, Minn.

The Jewish New Left seeks justice for Soviet Jewry

as it were, of the old Gentile groups to form new Jewish ones, is an interesting phenomenon. Its origins lie in the very nature of the leftist movements, old and new. All leftist groups seem to have assumed historically that "one of the payments the Jews would make to the Left for having liberated them would be to disappear." Their "feeling that Jewish particularism is somehow reactionary, tribal, traditional, unmodern, has continued down to the present."⁵ Coupled with this ever present notion is the new position of leftists after the 1967 war, that Israel should be condemned as the "Zionist Capitalist Nation" and that the Arab nationalists are the proletariat to be supported. Many Jews remained members of the general New Left world despite its requirements, even though in so doing they were under pressure to relinquish their Jewishness and to become Jewish self-haters, despised by the rising tide of the specifically Jewish New Left. The following dialogue from a political cartoon portrays the hatred the new Jewish radical felt for the self-hating Jew:

Hey Gang! Here's a riddle for Ya!! If a liberal is someone who supports other people's fights for liberation . . . And a Radical is someone who supports his people's fight for liberation . . . And a Pig is someone who puts down his people's fight for liberation . . . Then what would you call [radicals of Jewish background like] Abby Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and William Kunstler? (Hint: Oink, Oink, Oink.)⁶

On the other hand, many other Jews realized that Israel was only one issue that touched them Jewishly. There were other problems concerning the Jewish people that the New Left consistently ignored and disdained. Because of their rising Jewish consciousness and their inability to disregard Israel in favor of the Arabs, they broke with the general movement of the New Left and formed what could legitimately be called the Jewish New Left. "For the sake of revolutionary solidarity and Third World rhetoric, black and white radicals have taken [an] anti-Israel and anti-Semitic stance. Jewish student movement[s] have risen to meet this challenge, to connect and refute these ideologies, and to seek a rapprochement with such revolutionaries."⁷

⁵ Seymour M. Lipset, "The Left, the Jews and Israel," *Encounter*, Dec., 1969, p. 24.

⁶ Jerry Kirschen, *Hashofar* (Northern Ohio Union of Jewish Students), Vol. II, No. 1, Jan., 1972, p. 3.

⁷ Jack Nusan Porter, "Jewish Student Activism," *Jewish Currents*, May, 1970.

A LIBERATED JEWISH PEOPLE

The key to understanding this Jewish New Left, and its prime weapon, is its press. This press is multifaceted and widespread throughout the United States.⁸ Jewish student movements have been formed on various campuses, and with them newspapers have arisen. Reflecting the general New Left movement, these papers are disparate, ranging from moderate liberal to revolutionary, from professionally written to graffiti, from sensible and rational to unintelligible. As opposed to the general New Left literature, however, these Jewish New Left documents are unified in their selection of causes and in the general mode of action suggested. The issues encompassed in the newspapers and magazines include: Soviet Jewry, *havurot*, local and national politics, Hillel activities, Israel, Biran and Ikrit, Arab Jewry, Zionism—in short, anything which touches the individual Jew. It should be understood that the Jewish New Left can no more reach a common definition of the words “Jew” and “Judaism” than can the normative Jewish community,⁹ although the members of the Jewish New Left have a generally accepted solution. They ignore definitions and concentrate on issues. The Jewish New Left is a political activist entity. As a group and as individuals, it is committed to change, not to debate.

It is clear that the Jewish New Left and the New Left differ in their emphasis—the Jewish New Left is markedly concerned with Jewish issues as well as with general humanitarian problems.

The Radical Jewish movement . . . believes the Jewish community in America and in the world is oppressed by the powerful—not by the blacks or the Arabs and not chiefly by the Russians—and it holds that if it can consciously identify its oppressors, the Jewish community will join the resistance. It believes that a decent democratic socialist resolution of the American crisis will require and include a liberated Jewish people.¹⁰

But, “the specific changes the general” is the rule, so one should

⁸ Louis Shub, *The New Left and Israel* (Jewish Affairs Background Reports, Vol. 1, No. 2, April, 1971, p. 15).

⁹ Eddie Sherman, “Religion Vs. Nationalism,” *Hatikvah* (Brooklyn College), Vol. 1, No. 1, Dec., 1971, p. 6.

¹⁰ Arthur Waskow, “The Politics of Jewish Radicalism,” *American Report*, Oct. 2, 1970.

expect this change in emphasis. In fact, every specific organization of the New Left has its own issues; that is the nature of specificity. Then is not the Jewish New Left merely a member of the general body of the New Left similar to SNCC or CORE? It both is and isn't. It is in that it shares its leftist leanings with the general leftist world of organizations. But it differs, and finds itself outside the realm of the New Left, in its character and in many of its positions. This "character" is what, according to New Left Jews, separates the Jewish people from other peoples.

"Jewishness" connotes a religious characteristic, but one that has never been separated or abstracted from a specific people—the Jewish People. Thus Jewishness equally connotes ethnicity, culture, philosophy, music, language, the sense of a common past and an interdependent future. It cannot be neatly pigeonholed alongside "Protestant" and "Catholic."¹¹

Jewishness, then, for the Jewish New Left is religion, defined as stated above. It is this religion which separates it from the general New Left, as much as its very nature which forces it to take stands which the New Left considers erroneous or meaningless (such as concern for Soviet Jewry). Since the origin of the Jewish New Left was a reaction to the anti-Jewish Israel nature and the universalistic versus particularistic aspects of the New Left, the identity of the Jew became a central issue in the new movement. The Jew was running away from one group to his own group to save his own identity, which was being threatened by the changing New Left world. Part of that identity, if not all of it, involved religion, as we have already seen. It is somewhat unique in the world of the New Left that religion became a real issue among the Jewish New Left. But then the Jewish New Left sees itself as intrinsically different from, yet basically homogeneous with, the New Left.

The word "religion," even as used above, has two connotations for the Jewish New Left. It is first the catch-all phrase denoting the highly organized and powerful Jewish religious and secular community, despised by all leftists. In the following piece, Jerry Kirshen, one of the movement's better satirists, depicts the establishment as fat pigs, speaking of themselves in a characteristic manner:

Oh I'm an 'official' zionist leader and I stand so proud and tall . . . and

¹¹ Editorial, *The Jewish Radical* (Berkeley Radical Jewish Union), Spring, 1971, p. 3.

I'll never move to Israel no I never will at all—I'm a pompous righteous leader and I look with sharp disdain at the activists for soviet jews who fight in freedom's name. Oh we looked away in Hitler's time and ignored the ones who cried . . . cause to march and shout and raise the fist is too undignified!—We're the marching Jewish liberals and we march for all the others but we're much too much too busy for the causes of our brothers—we're the happy jewish ladies who sing the zionist tune and we're sure to say kibbutz but never say it means commune!¹²

This "pig" establishment includes, in their eyes, the community centers, the Jewish federations, the U. J. A., the synagogue, the Israeli government, and all such controlling bodies in the Jewish world. These new Jewish leftists do not separate secular Jewish institutions from religious ones. All establishment bodies are "Jewish" and therefore religious.¹³ However, the most direct attacks on religion, as the word is commonly understood, center around the Jewish New Left's attitude toward the synagogue and temple. "For the young dissenter the synagogue and temple are so integral a part of the middle-class structure that he casts them aside with the other philistine abhorrences."¹⁴ The Jewish New Left rejects the religious values and ideals of Judaism which are considered as relevant only to establishment people and labels them, satirically, as metooisms (me too isms).¹⁵ Once the old is rejected, the new must be sought; a new Jewish religion for the Jewish New Left, if you will.

THE GOLEM WAS DEAD

This brings us to the second use of the word "religion." Religion is the beliefs, ideals, in short, the whole of the individual which leads him to the better life. This becomes the new Jewish religion. This religion must contain, for it to be valid in radical eyes, two traits: romanticism—a quest for wide experience, self-expression and a free life; and moral purity—a reaction against hypocrisy and self-

¹² Jerry Kirschen, "The Pig City Follies," *Hashofar*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1972, p. 3.

¹³ Editorial, *The Jewish Radical*, Winter, 1971, p. 3.

¹⁴ Rosenfield, p. 41.

¹⁵ Sherman, p. 2.

interested behavior in social relations.¹⁶ And this attitude, this quest, is reflected in its extreme form in the tragic case of Richard Wishnetsky, who insanely murdered his own rabbi, Rabbi Morris Adler of Detroit's Shaarey Zedek. Wishnetsky wrote the following in connection with his violent act: "This congregation is a travesty and an abomination. It has made a mockery, by its phoniness and hypocrisy, of the beauty and spirit of Judaism." Judaism is here, as in the Jewish New Left literature, considered beautiful and worthwhile, but it has been corrupted into an unworthy form. Thus the leftist searches for his own Jewish forms.

These forms are varied. They include: *havurot*—"Haverim forms at West Chester State . . . a group working on creative services."¹⁷ "There is an alternative . . . the focus of the groups [*havurot*] is their Judaism, but at the same time they are open to drawing on all types of human-religious roots"¹⁸; free universities—"course on Jewish prayers"¹⁹; taking over and revamping old institutions—in a fictionalized comic piece the following was written:

And they seized the "Jewish" museum and made it into a Jewish museum, and they seized the Federation and made it into a Jewish Federation, and they seized the young men's—young women's "hebrew" association and made it into a young men's—young women's Hebrew association and they seized the Temples and made them into meeting places of our people and the fountain of our culture, religion, and morality, and they learned to speak their language, and they joined hands with their brothers and sisters around the world, and the golem was dead for ever.²⁰

"We the members of the Jewish Education Coalition make the following demands to the San Francisco Jewish Welfare Federation. . . . We call upon the S. F. Jewish Welfare Federation to change its inner structure so that it be responsive not only to its donors, but

¹⁶ Richard Hocks, "The Liberated Generation: Roots of Student Protest," *Journal of Social Issues*, July, 1967, pp. 56–59.

¹⁷ Karen Garsky, "Haverim Forms at West Chester," *Hayom*, Nov. 1–22, 1972, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 2.

¹⁸ Jeff Foust, "There Is an Alternative," *Hashofar*, Vol. II, No. 2, 1972, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Spirit of the Time*, Number 1, Nov., 1971, p. 7.

²⁰ Jerry Kirschen, "The Golem and the Dybbuk," *Ayin L'Tzion*, Vol. 6, Nos. 2–3, Dec.–Jan., 1973, p. 13.

to the entire Jewish Community of San Francisco as well”²¹; Changing educational norms—“We support the notion of the Jewish Community struggling politically to obtain some federal aid . . . we support the notion of Jewish studies in the public schools . . . integrated Jewish studies on the university level”²²; Para-military groups such as the J. D. L. (which may confuse them slightly with the “New Right,” which is highly militaristic), and the like.

It is evident that the Jewish New Left is extremely conscious of its own religiousness. It is deeply committed to the general leftist movement, this cannot be forgotten, but it is equally committed to its Jewishness. This Jewishness is part and parcel of its religiousness, as the Jewish New Left defines it. The Jewish New Left is religious when it communes with God on an individual level and when it fights for Arab Jewry. It believes in all forms of legitimate Judaism, and it is convinced that Judaism is a part of the New Left world. It disagrees with cosmopolitanism, so prevalent on the left, and holds fast to its ethnicity. The Jewish New Left desires to overturn only the establishment, the “religion” of Judaism, not Judaism itself.

This is a healthy and vital movement which has already altered, and will in the future change, the Jewish world as well as the New Left world. It is a fact that since the Jewish New Left arose, many New Left organizations have moderated their Israel positions in an attempt to win back Jewish left support. They failed because of the strength so quickly acquired by the Jewish New Left, a strength attributed to many things, including its own positivism. This movement emphasizes the building of a new world as opposed to the tearing down of the old, a common notion in the general leftist world. This makes the Jewish New Left a more liberal, less radical movement than its parent body, the New Left. But perhaps this will keep the movement from degenerating into lawlessness, the fate of many leftist extremist groups in the past.

²¹ *The Jewish Radical*, Spring, 1971, p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*, Winter, 1971, p. 3.