

The Failure of Jewish Radicalism

Bill Novak

The newest phase of Jewish radicalism began around 1967. I say "around 1967" because although there were seeds planted and developed throughout the Kennedy and Johnson years, the emergence of our own response was not clear until 1967. The story has been told of how young people who had been involved in the social activism of the early 1960's, the civil rights movement, the peace movement, were in many cases Jewish, although they rarely identified as such. On the contrary: many saw their own actions as going *against* Jewish life, at least against the lives and principles of American Jewry. And the story has been told and retold about how the civil rights movement changed direction and tone, and became militant and particularistic, leaving once and for all the age-worn ideal of the American melting pot, and replacing it with a new dream of cultural autonomy in a pluralistic society. And we are also well aware of how these changes left many Jews politically homeless, and how some are still drifting, still looking. Those who had been politically active in the early 1960's, in a variety of inherently good and worthwhile causes, found

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themselves radicalized by the expanding war, by America's misguided priorities, by Columbia, Brandeis, Cornell, Berkeley, and especially Chicago. And many of us, in ways which are just now becoming clear, had our Jewish selves radicalized in 1967, in the Six-Day War. For it was then that we learned, more dramatically than in any history class, the tragic lesson which seems to be the paradigm of the Jewish people: When it comes down to the crisis, we have only ourselves.

The experience of American Jewry, and of Jews all over the world, living through the sequence of events in 1967, was fundamentally crucial. The lesson was retaught only three years later, when the Leningrad trials in 1970 proved again that in the end we can rely only upon ourselves.

When the Jewish radical movement, and the larger picture of a Jewish counterculture were being created, when the first indigenous newspapers, the first experiments in community and education were being begun, we talked a great deal about *community*, and about our own situation. We were the people who were going to change the world, who believed that the differences between groups of men could be safely ignored, and they would eventually disappear. But we grew older and wiser, and influenced by the ensuing political developments in American life, we began to think in different terms, and envisaged a pluralistic America, where ethnic and cultural groups could, if they wished, live independently, in control of their own destinies. And we formed free Jewish universities, and read books, and wrote articles, all the time concerned with the Jewish people, quoting Hillel's famous dictum: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" And somewhere along the way we forgot about changing the world.

And so we read and we listened and we learned. We absorbed some of the momentum of the Holocaust and of Israel, and we tried to understand what happened in Europe during the 1940's, and what didn't happen in America during those same tragic years. And finally, in 1967, and again in 1970, we learned firsthand about the rest of the world. Except that by then we believed a little less strongly in the rest of the

world, and in its great saving power. The New Left? Ah, yes, that dream of a moral politics that would go beyond the corporate liberalism of the Kennedy years. Yes, the New Left would save the Jews, we discovered, like it saved Spain, Greece, Czechoslovakia, and the six million.

And we grew bitter in our disillusionment, and we passed around articles, reprinting them many times over, like M. J. Rosenberg's statement, in which he asserted, in 1969, that from that point on, he would join no movement "that does not accept and support my people's struggle. If I must choose between the Jewish cause and a 'progressive' anti-Israel S.D.S., I shall choose the Jewish cause."

Rosenberg's message, in one form or another, was repeated within the young Jewish community in America for over two years. More recently, this sort of attitude is being adopted by the Jewish Establishment, which is forsaking its traditionally liberal activism for an ostrich-like posture of "taking stock," of "consolidation." *Commentary* magazine, having previously taken to task the American youth culture, now cautions against any Jewish involvement in the Movement. Much more frightening, the usually courageous *Reconstructionist*, generally an island of reason in a sea of hysteria, goes along with and praises *Commentary* because *Commentary* rejects those who separate themselves from the community, and, by implication, regards the survival and internal health of the Jewish community as themselves spiritual goals. This is, indeed, good news, since the large circulation and profound impact of that splendid journal constitute a powerful instrument when utilized for positive Jewish values.

And who, we might ask, are those who "separate" themselves from the community? Apparently, this is a reference to those Jews who have tried to come to terms with their own Jewishness while maintaining political opinions which are no longer popular in organized Jewish life. Of Arthur Waskow's important although admittedly unsuccessful attempt to provide a symbolic language for radical Judaism, the editor of *Commentary* writes glibly that it "might more accurately be con-

sidered a contribution to the literature of Jewish anti-Semitism than to the literature of the often overlapping but nonetheless distinct phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred." Pretty harsh words, and pretty harsh times when it is *Commentary* who is identifying the "real" Jews, and pointing out the self-haters, and telling us who apparently ought to be excluded from the Jewish community.

To a large extent, of course, the general inward turning of both older and younger Jews has been necessary and important. But only up to a point. Those who quote the first part of Hillel's saying, mentioned earlier, might remember that he said, right afterwards in the text (*Avot*), "If I am only for myself, then what good am I?" If—as seems to be the case—we have indeed shifted our concerns and priorities from the forest to the trees, from our naive universalism to a more pragmatic particularism, I am afraid we have gone overboard to the point of seeing only the trees, and forgetting all about the forest.

Many of us are outraged when the Prime Minister of Israel sends a telegram of support to Nixon, regarding American foreign policy, or when the Jews of Philadelphia find it necessary to honor a police chief whose record hardly suggests the values we supposedly cherish. But how many of us object when the Jewish Establishment, and sometimes even those who call themselves Jewish radicals, attempt to isolate the National Jewish Organizing Project, or the Jews for Urban Justice, or any of the bolder attempts to combine—however awkwardly at first—political radicalism and Jewish tradition.

There was a hope, the hint of a promise, that things would be different. There were, in the beginning, attempts to synthesize "Jewish" action and "America" action. But now, there seems to be a feeling that we have to choose, that it is an either-or proposition. And so we find ourselves tolerating the Jewish Defense League, because they are Jews, or because the cause they claim to speak for is beyond reproach, or because they are "raising the conscience of the community," or because we dislike their enemies, or because, as it sometimes

seems, "at least they are doing something!" And we keep silent about our moral outrage and their open cowardice, and worse, we do nothing ourselves.

If the world has abandoned the Jews, is the proper response in turn for the Jews to abandon the world? If so, what is the point of it all? Israel has shown that she will not be a nation like all other nations, that her code of conduct must conform, as much as possible, to the laws of morality rather than politics. Diaspora Jews must walk the same tightrope, because that is the role of the Jews. We must give up the steady feel of the solid ground beneath our feet. Norman Podhoretz warns American Jews that there is a notion afoot "that the participation of Jews in the Movement, far from constituting a problem to the Jewish community, does honor to that community and is an ornament to its 'idealism.'" We must take that notion and *strengthen* it; we cannot and must not give in to the politics of fear, paranoia, and blackmail.

I do not wish to be mistaken on these matters. I do not take issue with the premise that all Israel is responsible one member for another. It does not end there, however. We have always been a busy people, and we have done many things with our small numbers. The day is short, and there is much to do. Yes, we must continue to act on behalf of Soviet Jewry; we must also not remain silent about other oppressed minorities, in Russia and elsewhere, and in our own backyard.

Several years ago, during the civil rights movement, there were those who said disdainfully, "nobody helped us" and "let them pull themselves up by their bootstraps like we did." These reckless comparisons are being repeated now in new forms, and if we must give the world tit for tat, as if there were no special obligations, no sense of destiny, or of mission, that Jews have always possessed. And long as we are here, it is our duty to make life in America better for all people; and this needn't be at the expense of ourselves. For we must assert it loudly: Mere existence, for Jews, *even in the wake of Hitler*, is simply not enough.