

From



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Washington

Young US Jews fighting mad

Mandela stirs up new thinking

WASHINGTON, D.C.

OVER the weekend, while Nelson Mandela was beginning his spell-binder tour of Washington, I was in Madison, Wisconsin, home to one of America's great universities.

The University of Wisconsin has a student population of nearly 50,000. And it has a reputation of being a very politically progressive place—a kind of Berkeley of the American Midwest.

I was there at the invitation of a new student organisation which has taken the name "Freiheit", a name which means "freedom" in the Yiddish language, and a name which itself causes some consternation among the 70 or so Jewish activists who have broken away and started their own political movement.

What's basically involved with Freiheit actually is "freedom"—freedom to think for themselves, freedom to act according to the values these young American Jews believe are their own, most essentially freedom to speak up in opposition to Israeli policies and those of the American Jewish establishment.

The problem of course is that while "freedom" is a most appropriate name, taking it from a past, dying, ghetto language is not what many of these young American Jews really have in mind. For most of the Jewish students in this group are trying to look ahead, not behind—ahead to a future time when the Palestinians too will have their freedom; ahead to a time when they can again be proud to be Jewish Americans.

When it comes to the Palestinian issue there is no question for many young American Jews like the ones I met in Freiheit in Madison—they too should certainly have their basic political

freedom, their national existence in a sovereign state.

And when it comes to American policy here too there is no question about the basics—it should be quickly changed, the US should support Palestinian human rights and political independence, the US should oppose Israeli policies and tactics.

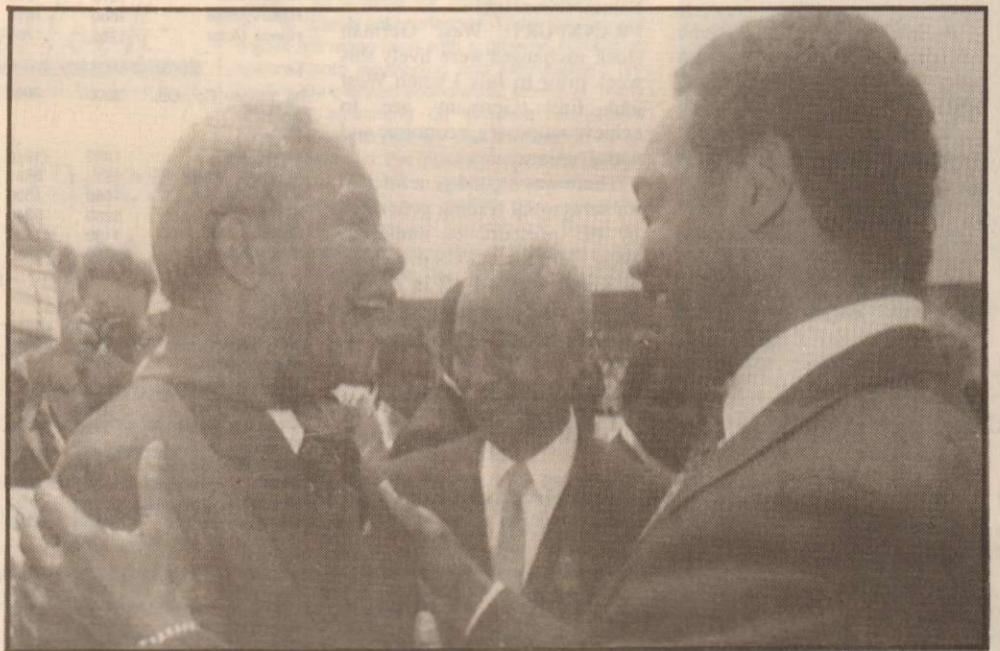
What I found surprising, though, was how little opposition there was within the membership of Freiheit to the idea of a major cut in American assistance to Israel. Things have changed during the past few years, in the years of the Intifada. A new consciousness among liberal, progressive American Jews is budding.

Even more surprisingly, many of these young Jewish activists want to go further, at least in concept, and are talking about "sanctions" against Israel, the same kind of sanctions that the US has applied in recent years towards South Africa. In this rather important sense, it seems, Nelson Mandela's triumphant US tour has stirred up some new thinking.

Name aside, Freiheit at the University of Wisconsin is but one example of what is happening throughout campuses around the country. College-age American Jews are increasingly upset by what is happening in Israel and considerably agitated by what is being said by traditional American Jewish organisations supposedly in their names and in the name of all Jews.

There is, in general, a deepening sense of both frustration and bewilderment. And this is coupled with a growing energy and assertiveness to do something visible in order to demonstrate how much opposition really does exist as well as just how vocal and strong that opposition really is—strong in spirit that is if not in numbers at this point.

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New York welcome: Nelson Mandela is greeted by Jesse Jackson (right) on arrival at Kennedy Airport. At the centre is New York City Mayor David Dinkins.

But as is so often the case in political situations of this kind there is little local or national leadership for students like those in Freiheit to turn to. The students in Freiheit have been searching, but so far they've been unable to find activities to get enthusiastically involved in beyond those at their local campus.

There are of course many organisations competing for attention and following—well-known groups such as Friends of Peace Now, New Jewish Agenda and Tikkun Magazine.

But more and more there is an awareness among the most astute activists that these well-known groups not willing to go far enough. Furthermore, there is a growing appreciation that these groups are actually often funded and controlled by Zionist institutions, either in Israel or the US, and that these groups

often act more as brakes than catalysts when it comes to serious opposition to Israel.

Friends of Peace Now, for instance, is more and more understood to be an appendage of the left-wing of Israel's Labour Party. And it has a very bad reputation of holding back, of self-congratulatory acts, of unwillingness to confront the basic issues of American assistance to Israel and Israeli expansionist designs.

New Jewish Agenda, and associated groups such as Jerome Siegel's new Jewish Peace Lobby and Tikkun Magazine are also known for their half-way measures and their refusal to call for a major change in American policies towards Israel.

In this situation, groups like Freiheit are left to fend for themselves. Many of the activists within the organisation are too frustrated and too committed to continue holding back; and so they begin to take local actions. But they are too isolated and too small to do very much on their own beyond that.

And so, coming into existence within this overall situation, the new Freiheit group in Madison has found itself fighting a few local battles. Over its short six-month existence it has so far won one and lost the other.

During the last school year Palestinian activists working with the student government attempted to make the University of Wisconsin at Madison a sister university with Al-Najah University in Nablus on the occupied West Bank. Freiheit was the only Jewish student organisation to endorse the effort: the larger supposedly

pro-peace Jewish student groups vehemently opposed.

In the end, not surprisingly, the effort failed. But it did serve to further radicalise and activate those in Freiheit who then went on to take their own independent action just a few months ago.

This came in the form of a demonstration on Israeli independence day a few months ago. It was a small demonstration calling for Israel to change its policies towards the Palestinians; but nevertheless it was symbolic, both for the university community and for the members of this new fledgling movement.

The other insightful information I picked up while visiting Madison has to do with the dynamics of energising and activating students. Even in this modern age of media saturation with so much video and printed material, it still remains vital to make human contact with the student activists in order to give them the assurance they need to go forward.

Throughout my day in Madison I repeatedly heard from the most committed activists how important it was for them that during the past year speakers such as Edward Said, Felicia Langer (the Israeli activist attorney) and spokesmen of the Israeli group Yesh Gvul (the group of soldiers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories) had come to speak at their campus.

The visits of these persons, a number of key activists within Freiheit told me, were exceedingly important to them, making it possible for them to feel confident enough to begin to take the actions they have

