

Breira — friend or foe?

JERUSALEM POST 22 Feb 1977

The controversial U.S. Jewish group 'Breira,' which has adopted critical positions on Israel, has just held its first convention in Washington. Post

Correspondent MALKA RABINOWITZ discusses the aims of the group, the people who support it, and the conflicting views about its policy.

NEW YORK — The controversy over the gay Jewish organization, "Breira," has in the last few weeks become more visible than the group itself, as part of the Jewish community debated, with growing acrimony, Breira's true nature.

Is it, in effect if not intent, a tool of the PLO and therefore a threat to Israel and Jews everywhere? Or is it a legitimate forum for dissent?

While not phrased in quite those terms, questions equally fundamental were forced on Breira when 200 of its members gathered near Washington D.C. for a two-day meeting this week.

It was the first conference to have been called by Breira since it coalesced at the end of 1973 as a loose coalition of Jewish intellectuals and veterans of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements of the sixties.

As such, it marked the first occasion for what one of Breira's leaders called "hashling out ideological differences" that had been avoided until now.

One point of contention has been a package of pro-Israel proposals that endorse *aliya*. What happens to Breira may be determined by the reaction to these proposals of a group centered around Washington leftist Arthur Waskow, a group that includes Robert Loeb, executive director of Breira, and John Ruskay, its secretary.

It is this group that has been the prime target of attack by "The Jewish Week," a New York-based paper with a circulation of about 85,000. In stories some criticized as overly strident, the paper has maintained that sincere liberals have become ensnared in a programme that promotes the PLO.

A more sober, academic tone marked a monograph by political sociologist Rael Jean Isaac who found antecedents for Breira in groups associated with anti-Israel, pro-PLO activities. Her pamphlet was printed and distributed by an organization called "Americans For A Safe Israel."

A distinction was carefully made in these publications between a core group and well-meaning but naive liberals who have allowed themselves to be manipulated. Conservative and Reform rabbis are prominently involved in Breira, mainly at Hillel Foundations on college campuses, and the attacks on

can't be bombers or crazy leftists. It must be a group of liberals and Zionists: that is the function that Breira fulfills."

Similarly, others point to attempts reportedly made by Kissinger during his negotiations with Israel to convey the impression that the American Jewish Community was not behind Jerusalem on particular issues.

Thus, the undermining of this support could be damaging when the stage is reached of American pressure on Israel towards moves it doesn't like.

The names of Matti Peled and Lyova Eliav are frequently invoked in Breira literature as evidence of the respectability of dovish dissent within the Israeli camp. Critics reject the parallel, noting that in Israel it is known where these men stand and what their constituencies are: moreover they had earned the right as Israelis sharing in the risks of any decision to air their views. Not always are the nuances of delicate issues appreciated here, say these critics.

Concern is also expressed over the apparent feeling by some that they know better than the Israelis what is good for Israel. In an article published last December in the generally pro-Israel "Nation," writer Mark A. Bruzonsky said:

"Breira's only hope is so to weaken American support for current Israeli policies as to force policy changes, by U.S. imposition if necessary."

Behind Breira, believes a close observer of the American Jewish scene, is a wish to disengage from Israel, with adherents of this view having first to convince themselves that they are doing so out of moral virtue and what's more, for Israel's

own good. Since the Arabs won't give in, Israel must do so, particularly on the issue of the PLO. This is the logic followed by Breira, according to this critic.

This, then, would be the real meaning of the attempt to show Israel as the bad guy in its treatment of minorities or alleged wish to prevent the self-determination of another people.

By placing the moral onus on Israel, the individual is relieved of responsibility for its fate — especially if the interests of the U.S. and the interests of Israel are seen to diverge.

"At this point, instead of saying 'and therefore we stand firm,' they say 'and therefore we give up,'" this critic of Breira argues.

This is not the view of Rabbi Schindler who sees Breira as "a kind of intellectual dovish caucus that expands and contracts, depending on the issue." Thus, negotiations with the PLO would have narrower, and opposition to Kadum wider, support.

Within Israel, Breira's views are basically reflected by Mapam, says Schindler. But in the U.S. they feel deprived of an opportunity to influence the perception of the American Jewish Community because of the lack of an organization which is leftist-orientated in its entirety.

But to attempt to excommunicate them would be both hysterical and un-Jewish, says Schindler, particularly when some members of the Zionist Executive and Zionist Organization "are fully in sympathy with many of Breira's views."

At what amounted to its founding convention, Breira enjoyed a large (Conservative and Reform) rabbinical representation. Those actively identified with the group include

Balfour Brickner, director of the Department of Interreligious Affairs of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and co-chairman of the rabbinic cabinet of the State of Israel Bonds, and Eugene B. Rowitz Professor at the Hebrew Union College.

In articles that have appeared in "InterChange," Breira's monthly house organ, there have been appeals for greater participation by the American Jewish Community in Israel policy discussions but not in its decisions.

How this is supposed to make sense in practice is not explained. But it is not out of keeping with the gossamer-silk curtain that seems to hermetically seal off these two Jewish communities except for what each carefully chooses to set or hear in the other.

Israel tends to casually view American Jewry, six million in number, as an annex or extension of itself. And with this gross mis-perception, American Jewry is generally prepared to go along. A real involvement is more taxing than the role of rich uncle.

Attitudes towards Breira will undoubtedly be shaped by what emerges from the conference. In the heat of the debate in recent weeks two well known personalities announced their resignations from Breira: they were Rabbi Joachim Prinz, vice-president of the World Jewish Congress, and Jacob Neusner, Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University.

One of the most interesting of recent letters that flooded the pages of "The Jewish Week" came from Robert Gordis, Professor of Bible and the Philosophies of Religion at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Israel, he said, was confronted by a critical challenge that required individuals to face the challenge in the book of Joshua: "Are you with us or with our enemies?"

He agreed, said Gordis, with the ultimate objectives of Breira — the achievement of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East — but opposed its immediate tactics. "I continued to speak and act as though there were an Arab counterpart of moderates."

"If Israel is to live in justice and peace," wrote Rabbi Gordis, "it must live. I must do what I can to help achieve both objectives."