

'Liberal' Jews bewildered and uneasy

Mark Bruzonsky
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FOR three days last fortnight while the Israelis shot Palestinians at an escalating pace in the areas now termed "occupied Palestine," American Jewish intellectuals of the Left who vocally support a "demilitarised" Palestinian state and coexistence between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism debated ideology, religion, and political tactics at an aging New York City hotel across the street from Madison Square Garden.

Among the successes of the Palestinian Intifada is still growing tension, apprehension, and uneasiness among that bastion of support for Israel — the American Jewish community. But as usual, the American Jewish Left is badly divided into a variety of ideological, religious and political factions often competing with one another for the role of liberal spokesman and for the credit of dissenting positions.

Moreover, as this latest gathering of pro-Israeli Jewish intellectuals again made evident, there continues to be a great surplus of rhetorical energies and an associated paucity of serious and timely political action emanating from the American Jewish Left.

Confusion

Indeed, when the conference organisers attempted to pass even a rather general resolution calling for negotiations with the PLO and a Palestinian state, the final plenary session disintegrated into confusion and the organisers were reluctantly forced to table the discussion. Instead of a conference resolution as had been planned it is likely that about 300 persons who attended the conference and specifically put their names to the table resolution will now try to place it as a paid political ad in *The New York Times*.

In theme, this first *Tikkun* Magazine Conference was built around the rather pretentious vision of "Reconstituting The

Progressive Tradition of American Jewish Intellectuals." But in fairness the conference organisers did appear to accomplish at least some of the smaller parts of their overall goal. Nearly 2,000 American Jews — many from outside the New York City area — participated in the multi-day event bringing forward a variety of passionately expressed concerns ranging from peace for Israel and the Palestinians, to electing a progressive (read here Democratic) president in the US next time around in four years, to better relations between Jews and Blacks, to finally ending the cold war.

Organisers had expected at most half the number of participants compared to the far larger number who did come. But taking place as it did so soon after the Shultz visa denial to Arafat, the meeting of a few American Jews with Arafat in Stockholm, the "Who is a Jew" controversy in Israel, and then of course Shultz's about-face towards the PLO, attendance at the conference grew considerably with many late registrants.

If one would have simply walked in off the street without knowing in advance what to expect, ones image of the conclave would have been subject to very different images depending on who was speaking at the time. Many secular, progressive Jewish intellectuals were indeed in attendance and spoke at various sessions. But the organisers of the conference, who maintained firm control by denying other organisations such as New Jewish Agenda a chance to speak about the positions of their groups, all came from that part of Left American Judaism that is also engaged in a kind of Jewish spiritual rebirth.

Indeed, at times, especially when under the spell of *Tikkun's* founder and editor, Michael Lerner — a kind of born-again modern Jewish rabbi/intellectual figure complete with Yamulka on his head, long flowing beard, and religious prayer shawl under his suit — one could

easily get the impression that the conference was a cult gathering of near-messianic impulse with grand aims to recreate the self-delusive vision that somehow Jews can still lead their country and indeed the entire whole world to a far more humanistic outcome than our current circumstances.

The final speaker the first evening for instance — Professor Robert Jay Lifton — spoke movingly of the urgency for creating a new "species consciousness" to save the whole world. And editor Lerner, in his keynote address of rousing and passionate conviction, complete with Torah lesson, repeatedly invoked the visions of Biblical redemption, "creation of a different kind of world," and insistence that Jews like him must have a voice in Israeli affairs.

As conceived nearly three years ago by Lerner and the publisher of *Tikkun*, Nan Fink, a wealthy converted American Jewess who lives with Lerner, this expensively produced magazine is in many ways far more a cause than a periodical.

Alternative

Conceived as the liberal/progressive alternative to the highly conservative American Jewish Committee quarterly *Commentary* which it resembles, *Tikkun* is already having far greater impact among some segments of American Jewry than its relatively small circulation of 40,000 would in itself explain. Some segments of American Jewry are hungry for good news these days — good news about themselves and good news about the future of Israel. *Tikkun* has come along to fill the vacuum of despair.

Whatever one's view of the conference itself, within American political and intellectual circles the magazine and the recent conference have indeed raised to a new height the flag of minority American Jewish support for ending the Israeli-Palestinian war with a Palestinian state in the occupied territories — albeit it one always referred to as "de-

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tics.

militarised" and not necessarily including eastern Jerusalem. On December 19, the *New York Times* carried a story on page 14 about the conference noting that the word *Tikkun* means in Hebrew "to repair the world." Indeed, on top of the masthead of each issue of the magazine the words "To mend, repair and transform the world" appear. And in his opening address Lerner repeatedly invoked the concepts of "healing, transforming, saving the world" seemingly oblivious to the rather obvious contradiction that if a gathering like this one couldn't even change the approach of the major institutions of American Jewry to the Palestinians, it's chances of having much of an impact on the world at large seemed a bit far-fetched.

The conference opened early Sunday morning, December 18, with a timely "Palestinian/American Jewish Roundtable" which brought two Palestine National Council members, Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu Lughod, before their largest Jewish audience ever. Rita Hauser, the leader of the Stockholm group of Jews, was on the programme and scheduled to appear; but for unknown reasons she did not come to that session or any of the others.

Abu Lughod and Said, without question two of the most prominent and respectable of the Palestinian spokesmen in the US, both gave excellent presentations Abu Lughod remarked that this was his first time before any substantial American Jewish audience at all. After outlining that what happened in Algiers and then in recent weeks was "the logical culmination of a peace process that the Palestinians began in 1974." Then he went on to call for reciprocity in US (and indirectly in American Jewish) attitudes toward both Israel and the PLO.

"I want the US to accept 242 and I want the US to insist that

Israel accept 242." Abu Lughod remarked. "I want the US to insist that Israel make a statement that terrorism in all its forms is renounced, condemned," he added. "And I want symmetry on the principles upon which peace can be had in the Mid-east, upon what is fair and just for both peoples," he concluded.

Said went even further, though the American Jews who followed him on the panel didn't appear to fully understand. "A tremendously important goal," Said quite passionately outlined, "is that a large part of the Israelis and the American Jewish community have so far denied the Palestinians compassion for their long suffering. So an important component of this process of reconciliation has to be recognition, an acknowledgement, of the historical injustice done to our people by yours."

Throughout the rest of Sunday, and for the next two days, meetings on a great variety of themes took place throughout the hotel. Among the subjects covered:

- Religious extremism.
- Anti-Semitism in the US.
- Blacks and Jews.
- American Jewish literature.
- AIPAC and its influence.
- Why have Liberal and Left movement failed.

Rebirth

But the heart of the conference was both religious rebirth and politics. The rebirth was everywhere — from the bearded figures on the podium who everyone once and awhile added a Torah and Talmud lesson to whatever they were discussing to the Jewish prayer after meals at the banquet.

As for politics, this was a gathering praying for the days of a new Dukakis in America and an Abarbanel in Israel. Indeed, Eban made an unexpected appearance at the conference and was greeted with a standing ovation and loud applause.

In the end, for all of their articulateness and rhetorical flourishes this was a gathering of Peace Now American Jews, a gathering of American Jews very much of the dual loyalty school, a caucus of American Jews unable to squarely face the desperate political situation in a clear-headed, objective way because of their deep emotional and religious ties to the Israel they see being reborn down the road, just as they are engaged in a rebirth themselves.

More on this important phenomena last week when the analysis included a look at new movements among Liberal American Jews to split off from the official Jewish lobby in Washington, the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee, which is in considerable trouble despite its immense strength.

