Tikkun and the Reawakening of Jewish Liberalism

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Photos by Paula Rhodes

With no sign of the Palestinian intifada abating, a growing number of North American Jewish groups have been calling for a political solution to the Palestinian problem. Included among them is a new periodical on politics, culture & society, Tikkun.

Tikkun, which in Hebrew means to mend, repair, and transform the world, is a bimonthly journal that began publishing in 1986. Since this time the magazine has made a name for itself for its peculiar synthesis of liberal ideals, religion, feminism, and its critique of neo-conservatism. Tikkun advertises itself as the liberal alternative to the Jewish neo-conservative journal Commentary. The claim is not inaccurate but like other forms of self-advertising it warrants close scrutiny.
It is not easy to summarize Tikvah’s editorial views without some oversimplification; nevertheless, some clear principles can be identified. On the issue of the intifada, Tikvah wants Israel to begin negotiations that would create an independent and demilitarized Palestinian state and has strongly criticized the writers of Commentary for naively belittling the footsteps of the Israeli government in matters of Middle East policy.

In its overall politics, Tikvah wants to retrieve the political territory ceded to the Right. Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikvah, and Christopher Lasch, a contributing editor, have been the chief exponents of this position. Currently, they argue, the Right has been able to articulate the problems that touch a large majority of people. It is the Right who talk about the family, religion, spirituality, ethics and traditional values, and as a result they have found an opening which has allowed them to monopolize the language of religion and community. Recognizing the appeal of conservative values to a large part of the American population, Tikvah now wants to steal the Right’s rhetorical thunder.

At the same time Tikvah is trying to dispel the idea that Jews have thrown their lot in with the conservative forces. Jews in America continue to show an affinity for liberal and reformist causes, notes Lerner. But the same cannot be said about a number of prominent Jewish intellectuals and the leadership of Jewish organizations, which Lerner asserts is a conservative elite that has a vastly disproportionate influence over what gets said on behalf of the Jewish community.

The conference

It was partly to counter the rhetoric of the Right and the influence of a highly organized Jewish conservative leadership that Tikvah was founded. In December 1988 the editor also launched their first conference, which dealt broadly with the reconstitution of American Jewish liberalism. For those days Jews from all across the United States and Canada met at the Penta Hotel in mid-March in order to hear speeches, argues, network, celebrate, and work toward a coalition that would effectively challenge the political and cultural hegemony of the Right in the United States and, importantly, in Israel.

A three day conference with over 40 sessions is almost impossible to cover in a systematic way, especially when the conference itself did not offer a clear and coherent focus, but only the sparse outline for the beginning of new dialogues. There were sessions on the relationship between Whites and Jews, the Cold War, Religious Fundamentalism, Feminism and Judaism, the Intifada, the New PLO position on Israel, Modernism, Lesbian and Gay Jews, and the Political Strategies of the Left. Much of my time was spent going to sessions in which I had a personal interest, and speaking to other participants who, though unaware about their own position towards Tikvah, felt that many old-line North American Jewish groups and publications no longer spoke for them.

Tikvah’s editorial offices are in Oakland California. "Being in the West is in many ways useful. It makes us mysterious," said associate editor Peter Gabel, but he added "if the magazine is to grow we need to do better in eastern cities." By having the conference in New York City Tikvah was trying to strengthen its eastern ties. And adding variety and fresh perspectives to the conference were many speakers from the academic and literary community of the east, especially from the editorial board of Dissent magazine, one of the bastions of the New York Jewish Left.

The urgent need for alternatives, the editors of the conference, and the excellent advertising drew over 1000 people to the gathering: more than three times the number that the organizers had expected. The participants included academics, activists, artists, students, politicians, feminists, and union leaders. The number of women in the audience was significantly large yet there was no day care provided a glaring omission for a group that is trying to support women’s issues and recruit women contributors.

Overall, there was a general mood of excitement, as if at last the isolation and the walls of silence within a segment of the Jewish community were being shaken. The intellectual vitality found at the sessions was notably high though at some points heated disagreements were scented. Since the conference was designed to lessen differences and bring a wide range of liberal-leaning Jews together, the organizers were particularly concerned not to stoke the fires of commen- tary. They were highly successful, but the price that they had to pay was to muffle some sharp questioning of Tikvah’s values from the Left.

Bashing the neo-conservative Commentary

New York City was the logical choice for yet another reason as it is the home of Commentary. For a little more than a decade we have all watched the rise of the political fortunes of the editors of New York Jewish intellectuals who have prop- pelled the neo-conservative movement, the most notable among them being Irving Kristol, Michael Dentzer, and Norman Podhoretz. Podhoretz began his career with Commentary in the early fifties at a time when cold war liberal anti-commu- nism was at a feverish pitch. Over the years, and especially under Podhoretz’s editorial direction, Commentary went through first a narrowing and then a re- vening of its liberal position. Coming from a tradition of cold war Democratic politics, it was easy for Podhoretz to make a transition to the Right.

Both Kristol and Podhoretz have now become the chief voices of neo-conserva- tism. Kristol is a senior fellow for the American Enterprise Institute, a conserva- tive think-tank. Podhoretz continues to oversee Commentary and is a member of the ultra hawk Committee for the Peace

World, while his wife, Midge Decter, contributes to Commentary and sits on the Board of Directors of the Heritage Foundation, a WASP, right wing anti-intellectual think-tank.

Part of the reason for the political role-play of Commentary, and indeed for the growth of Jewish conservatism, was the cold war, which disenchanted many Jew- ish intellectuals. More importantly, the status of Jews in America was rising. By the late 60s many Jews felt comfortable within the mainstream of American politics and society and that drilled the edge of Jewish radicalism. In the first volume of his highly publicized memoirs, Making It, Podhoretz vividly remembers the personal and cultural undercurrents of Jewish assimilation in the 40s and 50s. Assimilation had been a "brutal bargain" where much of the ethos had to be given up in return for the economic and cultural opportunities which many Jews of Podhoretz’s generation quickly embraced. What spurred us on, remembers Podhoretz, was "the lust for success," which "had replaced sexual lust... especially for the writers, artists, and intellectuals among whom I lived and worked."

If Podhoretz giants over his triumph of "making it," Tikvah editor Michael Lerner cautions against the false security of believing that once having "made it" Jews no longer need to feel connected to the Jewish world and in moral tradition of justice and insurrection. Neo-conservatives may win at such narrowness: the idea of the moralist as rebel is not currently fash- ionable. But thus far Tikvah continues to stress the links of Jewish spiritual identity with universal values, liberalism, and progressive ideas. This was the prevailing theme of the conference, and especially at

13
the banquet honouring Irving Howe and novelists Grace Paley and Alfred Kazin, all of whom continued to be outspoken critics during the chill of the cold war.

Jews & Palestinians

Irving Howe is the editor of Dissent magazine and has been a crucial player in the Left community since the early 50s. An urban liberal, a literary stylist and a cosmopolitan in his concerns. Howe is the essence of the New York intellectual. He is also a stern critic of the Israeli handling of the intifada and in his banquet speech, he focused on the double crisis faced by Jews: the moral isolation of Zion and the moral evasion of American Jews. Howe's speech accurately reflects the sentiments of many of the Tikkun writers.

The leaders of the Jewish community, said Howe, have organized too narrowly for the defence of Israel and consequently they are dominated by a mood of inhibition and repression. They have made Israel the religion of American Jews because in a sense Israel supersedes the last shred of Jewishness the American Jews have left. The worldly success of the American Jews has had its price and now the community is drained of its ground of being. American Jews avoid any sustained effort at self-reflection because they look inward and fear finding nothing. As a consequence, Howe continued, Israel has come to provide a rationale for their own collective experience to the extent that they are now psychologically dependent on Israel for their identity. Howe ended his speech by focusing on the problem ahead. The American Jewish organizations are trying to finance a deepening split within the Jewish world. In the next few years, Howe prophesied, there will be a war within the Jewish community because of what is happening to the Palestinians. It will be a heated and divisive war that will force some people to pull out. But if Jews still hold firm to universalist values, they need to be prepared for a long and difficult fight.

One of the more exciting sessions in the Tikkun conference, and certainly one that drew the most media attention, was a Palestinian/American Jewish Roundtable. Not only was this the opening session of the conference, its was politically timely as well. A week earlier, Yasir Arafat reiterated his message in Geneva before delegates of the UN that the PLO recognized the right of the Palestinians to exist alongside a Palestinian state. Now, in a room filled to capacity, Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, both members of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), were outlining the importance of this step. A critical threshold had been crossed, said Said. "The concessiveness of a political view within the PLO is clear and an important political fact. The foundation of a Palestinian state must be the result of negotiations between the two parties directly involved."

Judging from the response, this was a view which found a measured support from the majority of the audience. During the question period many were pressing Said for political assurance that the PLO would accept a dismembered Palestinian state. Said was often interrupted by such questions because, he said, they could only be answered at the negotiation table. At a subsequent session Michael Lerner added rhetorical bait to the idea of negotiation. What American Jews need to do, Lerner asserted, is to make their voices heard. "We are not advocating support for the PLO but the start of a peace initiative."

Feminism

Tikkun’s position on a negotiated peace is widely supported by its readers, yet another political and social issue there is no clear consensus. This was particularly evident in the feminist sessions where there was a sharp contrast between cultural feminists whose link to Jewishness is essential, and feminists who owed their allegiance to secular political values and rights. On the one side are women like Phyllis Cheder, who chaired the Feminism and Judaism session, and who along with a group of other women took part in an action in Israel that involved prying on the Walling Wall, where women are not allowed. They talked mainly of the resistance and the struggle for women’s role within Judaism. On the other side are women like Aria Salow, in the Feminist Perspective session, whose political consciousness as a feminist is linked, she said, more with secularization than with it and Judaism, and so felt that her concerns as a secular feminist were being marginalized in this conference. Session spoke of the importance of stepping outside women’s socially constructed roles and of being critical of any facile link between ethnicity and feminism. The women’s issues crystallized some of the obvious difficulties of having a religious orientation to political action. As a liberal Jewish magazine, Tikkun has often taken the view that cultural meaning (Jewishness) should be given a privilege over a position that argues solely on behalf of secular political rights. For many women and men, however, it is the struggle for rights that informs their values and politics.

From Max Nordau to postmodernism

It was inevitable that somewhere in this conference there would be a session that addressed the virulently attacks on higher education by Allan Bloom (see Books & Lives # 12). One of the more engaging speakers in this session was Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, who called Bloom the "Max Nordau of the 20th century." The analogy between Max Nordau and Allan Bloom was a long way in explaining why Bloom could so effortlessly become the willing guardian of a white, male Western culture. Max Nordau was a German Jew of the last century who wrote a highly popular book in 1892 called Degeneration which maintained that the moderns in art and literature lacked quality and self-discipline and were incapable of upholding bourgeois moral standards. The idea of degeneration provided the fuel to the conservative concept of clarity, tradition and values. Bloom’s lament for the souls of students once again sets public discussion firmly on conservative ground. But more importantly, what both Max Nordau and Allan Bloom have in common as Jews, says Botstein, is a deep anxiety of looking the ‘virility’ and privileges they had gained through assimilation. Like many other American Jews, Bloom was able to gain access to American “high culture” through the benefits of an open public school system. Now fearing a threat to his station, he has become a warrior in the Kollektivism and his defense of “excellence” becomes in reality an argument against equal access to schooling. The travesty of Allan Bloom drew a considerable audience and so did the session on modernism, which, logically, turned out to deal more with postmodernism. Here Todd Gitlin, another contributing editor to Tikkun, made a McLuhan-esque distinction between hot and cool postmodernism. Cool postmodernism is “Goyish” since it is the kind of work which merely transcends the impoverished experience of our current culture and denies us an engagement with our historical and social histories. Hot postmodernism, by contrast, suggests that something has been eroded by our obsession with mass emotions and feelings. Hot postmodernism, Todd Gitlin continued, extends the ideals of High modernism and is linked with a movement with which Jews have always been associated. So characterized, hot postmodernists are part of a Jewish aesthetic sensibility and something of a rallying point and battle cry for Tikkun enthusiasts. For validity of the distinction of hot and postmodern; more fruitful was a discussion end of the conference, where several writers pointed out the common themes and issues that underpin both. It was not an easy task to make the connections clear, but the end result was illuminating.

Tikkun's Liberation, The Democratic Left

This is not an easy time in America, and none knew this better than Michael Harrington, the leader and main a speaker at the conference. The political struggle that he described in his speech was something that can be traced to the differences between the left and the political Left. This was the substance of his strategy session on America which highlighted the differences between the left and the political Left. Harrington reminded us that Jews can be critical of how尽 his capacity to the regular component and was the keynote speaker at the conference. This programme because it was a programme that was not available to deal with homelessness, racism and education. It is, he noted, that needs to be corrected.
Tikkun enthusiasts. I'm not sure of the validity of the distinction or the association of postmodernism with Jewishness: a more fruitful way of seeing postmodernism is to view it as a dissenting minority in the Western version, as a bolding action in a time when we are unsure as to what comes next.

Tikkun's Liberalism and the Democratic Left

This is not an easy time to be a leftist in America, and noise know that better than Michael Harrington. Harrington is America's leading socialist who is, as William F. Buckley Jr. once quipped, "like being the tallest building in Topeka, Kansas." The political struggle to which Harrington has dedicated his life requires endurance, and given the current American realities, the proper political alliances with a broad coalition within the Democratic party. This was the substance of his talk at the strategy session on American politics. As ever, the salami slicing was needed.

Harrington reminded his audience that Jews can be critical of Jesse Jackson and how he ran his campaign — in fact one of Tikkun's regular contributors Paul Berman wrote a scathing critique of Jackson's Hoyt Carpet aboard affair — but they should not remove themselves from his programme because it is the only realistic one available to deal with unemployment, homelessness, racism, and improvements in education. It is, however, a programme that needs to be complemented with bold ideas and new visions, particularly a new distribution of wealth in the world and a new critical view of the power distribution within the global economy.

The political strategy outlined by Harrington was set against a stark backdrop of American realities. During the past eight years, American organized labour has been savaged by Reagan to the point where only 14 percent of the workforce is now unionized. There are other problems as well and Frances Fox Piven, author of Why America's Secret Vote, pointed out some of the more glaring difficulties of American democracy. In the 1988 election just slightly more than 50 percent of the American electorate voted: one of the lowest turnouts in any democracy in the world. The U.S. is also the only country in the world where there are sharp differences between those who vote and those who don't. As a consequence, the underrepresented in politics are also the underclass in economic terms. The poor and the minorities are de facto disenfranchised.

One of the key reasons why conservatives win elections in America is that the electoral base is so narrow that the two opposing parties struggle to each other for the same symbols and values: often the charged symbols of sexism, racism, and sin. As a Christian, I am not sure to which of the two opposing voices registration laws in the free world and continue to build a grass-root infrastructure in order to increase voter registration and turnout.

Yet it is the emphasis on the structural inequalities of the global economy and the building of a grass-root political action that Peter Gabel, Tikkun's associate editor, finds most attractive. He is more concerned with the political and psychological grounding of politics and critiques Harrington and Piven for being economicistic and technocratic. In a nutshell this is Tikkun's orientation: it is driven by the belief that the community is not the target of political action and that community is not the target of political action. The problem of communities and the community of thought is the problem of the community of thought and the community of thought is the problem of the community of thought. Clearly, ideas about the family, religion and community should be assimilated into a Left politics, but with caution, with a mind open to pleasure and danger, and brimming with doubts. Often in Tikkun skepticism and caution yield to romantic ideas of "community," "Jewishness," and "family." But these are the most important axes I find with the magazine and some aspects of the conference.

What's left in America?

But such criticism is easy to make. With the current trend in the West towards the political Right, all factions within the Left must do some serious strategic thinking about how to turn the political tide. Within this debate a magazine like Tikkun, and the conference that憋sponsored which the planners are hoping to make an annual event, can play a constructive role. Tikkun's self-proclaimed goal is to enlarge the liberal vision of society and more specifically reaffirm a socially conscious role for Judaism in North America. It is a reasonable objective and one worths its goals.

Edward Said with Brazilian journalist Sylvia Rand

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