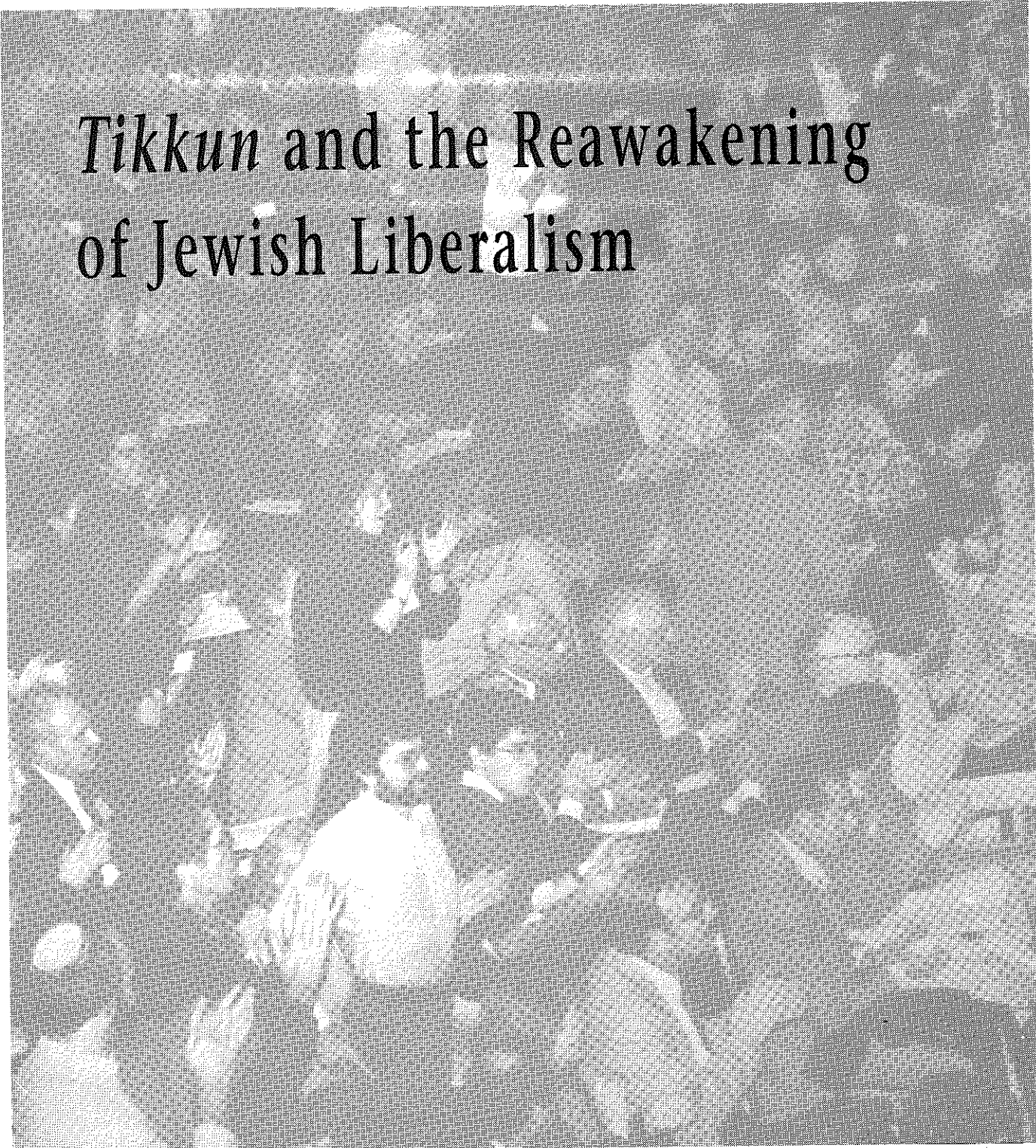


# Tikkun and the Reawakening of Jewish Liberalism



**Joe Galbo**

Photos by Paula Rhodes

With no sign of the Palestinian *intifata* 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 bi-monthly 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 surmise editorial views without a clear identification; nevertheless, some can be identified. On the *intifata*, *Tikkun* wants negotiations that would create a demilitarized Palestinian state, strongly criticized the *Intifada* for trotting obedience of the Israeli government's Middle East policy.

In its overall politics, *Tikkun* tries to retrieve the political terrain of the Right. Michael Lerner, *Tikkun*'s editor, and Christopher Lurie, *Tikkun*'s managing editor, have been vocal opponents of this position. In the past, the Right has been able to articulate the values that touch a large majority of the Right who talk about spirituality, ethics and morality, and as a result they have been able to articulate the language of reform. Recognizing the positive values to a large extent, *Tikkun* has taken the population, *Tikkun* has taken the Right's rhetorical thrust.

At the same time *Tikkun* dispels the idea that Jews should not get in with the conservative America continue to support liberal and reformist ideas. But the same cannot be said for the leadership of Jewish liberalism which Lerner asserts is that has a vastly disproportionate voice over what gets said in the Jewish community.

#### *The conference*

It was partly to counter the Right and the influence of the organized Jewish conservatism that *Tikkun* was founded. The editors also launched a conference, which dealt with the substitution of American values. For three days Jews from the United States and Canada met at the Penta Hotel in mid-Manhattan to hear speeches, argue, and work to build a coalition that effectively challenge the cultural hegemony of the United States and, importantly,

A three day conference sessions is almost impossible to do in a systematic way, especially when the conference itself did not have a coherent focus, but only for the beginning of the sessions were sessions on the Blacks and Jews, the Fundamentalism, Ferrel, the *Intifada*, the new Zionism, Modernism, Lescault, and the Political Strategy. Much of my time was spent in sessions in which I had to speak to other people and speaking to other people though unsure about the direction towards *Tikkun*, felt

It is not easy to summarize *Tikkun's* editorial views without some oversimplification; nevertheless, some clear principles can be identified. On the issue of the *intifada*, *Tikkun* wants Israel to begin negotiations that would create an independent and demilitarized Palestinian state and has strongly criticized the writers of *Commentary* for trotting obediently in the footsteps of the Israeli government in matters of Middle East policy.

In its overall politics *Tikkun* wants to retrieve the political territory ceded to the Right. Michael Lerner, the editor of *Tikkun*, and Christopher Lasch, a contributing editor, have been the chief exponents of this position. Currently, they argue, the Right has been able to identify and then 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, *Tikkun* now wants to steal the Right's rhetorical thunder.

At the same time *Tikkun* 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 *Tikkun* was founded. In December 1988 the editors also launched their first conference, which dealt broadly with the reconstitution of American Jewish liberalism. For three days Jews from all across the United States and Canada met in the Penta Hotel in mid-Manhattan in order to hear speeches, argue, network, celebrate, and work to build 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 Blacks 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 unsure about their own position towards *Tikkun*, felt that many old-line

North American Jewish groups and publications no longer spoke for them.

*Tikkun'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 *Tikkun* 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 eclecticism of the conference, and the excellent advertising drew over 1800 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 scotched. 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 controversy. They were highly successful, but the price that they had to pay was to muffle some sharp questioning of *Tikkun'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 coterie of New York Jewish intellectuals who have propelled the neo-conservative movement, the most notable among them being Irving Kristol, Midge Decter, and Norman Podhoretz. Podhoretz began his career with *Commentary* in the early fifties at a time when cold war liberal anti-communism was at a feverish pitch. Over the years, and especially under Podhoretz's editorial direction, *Commentary* went through first a narrowing and then a reversal 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 shrill voices of neo-conservatism. Kristol is a senior fellow for the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank. Podhoretz continues to oversee *Commentary* and is a member of the ultra hawk Committee for the Free

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 *volte-face* of *Commentary*, and indeed for the growth of Jewish conservatism, was the cold war, which disenchanting many Jewish leftists. More importantly, the status of



Grace Paley addressing the Conference

Jews in America was rising. By the late 60s many Jews felt comfortable within the mainstream of American politics and society and that dulled 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 gloats over his triumph of "making it," *Tikkun* 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 its moral tradition of justice and insurgence. Neo-conservatives may wince at such earnestness: the idea of the moralist as rebel is not currently fashionable. But thus far *Tikkun* continues to stress the links of Jewish spiritual identity with universalist values, liberalism, and progressive ideas. This was the prevailing theme of the conference, and especially at

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 urbane 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 Israel and the moral evasion by 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 represents 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 if they look inward they fear finding nothing. As a consequence, Howe continuing, 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 finesse 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, it was politically timely as well. A week earlier, Yasser Arafat reiterated his message in Geneva before delegates of the UN that the PLO renounced terrorism and recognized Israel's right 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 coalescence 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 PNC would accept a demilitarized Palestinian state. Said was often irritated by such questions because, he said, they could only be answered at the negotiation table. At a subsequent session Michael Lerner added rhetorical ballast to the idea of negotiation. What American Jews need to do, intoned Lerner, is to make their voices heard. "We are not advocating support for the PLO but the start of a peace initiative,"



Abba Eban

and if Israel insists on its intransigence they should be shaken from their self-delusion: "Wake up, Israel, you do not have forever. We American Jews are calling out. Negotiation now!"

**Feminism**

*Tikkun's* position on a negotiated peace is widely supported by its readers, yet in other political and social issues 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 Chesler, 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 praying on the Wailing Wall, where women are not allowed. They talked mainly of the resistance and intimidation they had to face, and their struggle to broaden women's role within Judaism. On the other side are women like Ann Snitow, in the Feminist Perspective session, whose political consciousness as a feminist is linked, she said, more with secularization than it is with Judaism, and so felt that her concerns as a secular feminist were being marginalized in this conference. Snitow 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 crystal-

ize 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 vitriolic attacks on higher education by Allan Bloom (see *Border/Lines* # 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 went 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 clarity and self-discipline and were incapable of upholding bourgeois moral standards. The idea of degeneration provided the foil to the idea of degeneration concept of clarity, tradition and values. Bloom's lament for the souls of today's 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 losing the 'civility' 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 status, he has become a warrior in the *Kulturkampf* and his defence of "excellence" becomes in reality an argument against equal access to schooling.

The trouncing 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 McLuhanesque distinction between hot and cool postmodernism. Cool postmodernism is "Goyish" since it is the kind of work which simply transcribes the impoverished experience of our current culture and denies us an engagement with our fears and anxieties. Hot postmodernism, by contrast, suggests that something has been evaded by our obsession with mass culture. Going underneath the images and the surfaces of everyday banality, hot postmodernism hints at real 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 characterised, hot postmodernism soon became an expression of a Jewish aesthetic sensibility and something of a rallying point and battle cry for

*Tikkun* enthusiasts. The validity of the distinction of hot postmodernism; a more fruitful work of postmodernism is to work with the minority in the session on action in a time of what comes next.

**Tikkun's Liberalism and the Democratic Left**

This is not an easy time in America, and none know it better than Michael Harrington. In 1968 F. Buckley Jr. once quipped that the tallest building in the world is the political struggle. Harrington has dedicated his life to the struggle and given the current political climate the proper political alliance within the Democratic Left. This was the substance of a strategy session on American politics which highlighted differences between Traditionalism and the political democratic Left.

Harrington reminded us how he ran his campaign for *Tikkun's* regular contributor. He wrote a searing critique of the mietown-Farrakhan affair and should not remove the program because it is the only one available to deal with homelessness, racism in education. It is, he said, that needs to be combined with new ideas and new vision.



Judy Chicago

definition of working hours of a 30 to 32 hour week of democratization of the work force against the religious barbs against the religious. *Tikkun* conference, F. that serious atheists, as concerned with values people, but values are

*Tikkun* enthusiasts. I'm not sure of the validity of the distinction or the association of hot postmodernism with Jewishness; a more fruitful way of seeing postmodernism is to view it, a dissenting minority in the session argued, as a holding 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 none know that better than Michael Harrington. Harrington is America's leading socialist which 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, a session which highlighted some crucial differences between *Tikkun's* Jewish liberalism and the political practices of the democratic Left.

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 searing critique of Jackson's Hymietown-Farrakhan 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

distributes the wealth of the world and takes a 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 American's Don't 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 stumble into each other for the same symbols and values: often the charged symbols of sexism, racism, and jingoism. If the Left is to make headway in American politics, says Piven, then it must work to change one of the most restrictive voter 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 grass-root political action that Peter Gabel, *Tikkun's* associate editor, finds spurious. He is more concerned with the ethical and psychological grounding of politics and criticises Harrington and Piven for being economic and technocratic. In a nutshell this is *Tikkun's* orientation: its basis is ethical and religious. Ultimately it fails to have a clear critique of both the larger structural issues and the smaller community practices, and to compensate for its lack of experience relies on pious notion of community and politics. 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 bristling with doubt. Often in *Tikkun* skepticism and caution yield to romantic ideas of "community," "Jewishness," and "family." And these are the most flagrant flaw I find with the magazine and with 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 it 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 spe-

cifically reaffirm a socially conscious role for Judaism in North America. It is a reasonable objective and one wishes them well. Nevertheless, *Tikkun* is in need of honest critics that can point to its idealistic excesses and its ill-founded optimism that intellectuals, and especially Jewish intellectuals, can transform the current political climate. Intellectuals are only part of the equation of political change and sometimes not a significant part at that. Russell Jacoby, who was present at the



Edward Said with Brazilian journalist Sylvio Band

conference, reiterated a key point that he made in his recent book, *The Last Intellectuals* (see *Border/Lines* #14). "If the *Tikkun* conference," said Jacoby, "can prove to me that the spirit of the activist, left-leaning Jewish intellectual is not dead, then I would withdraw the book and remainder it for \$1.25." To Jacoby the long-term political record of the radical Jewish intellectual in America is not particularly remarkable.

Despite some of the difficulties I have with the whole enterprise — its emphasis on ethnic meaning over political rights, and its polyanna reliance on terms like "community" and "religion," which in a sense yields the political discourse to the reactionary right — *Tikkun* has shown that it has the energetic individuals, the organizational skills, the political commitment and the dedication to bring together a vast array of people who have an interest in progressive politics, however loosely one defines that term. They have also shown that they can ask some tough questions about how North American Jews should respond to the new PLO initiative. This is where *Tikkun* has been most successful. They have been able to clarify the difference between traditional humane Jewish values and brutal and obturate Israeli policies. And it is mainly because of this distinction that many American Jews are turning their backs and closing their wallets to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the American Jewish Committee, and *Commentary*.

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definition of working life, the possibility of a 30 to 32 hour work week, and the democratization of the workforce. As a barb against the religious overtones of the *Tikkun* conference, Harrington declared that serious atheists, like himself, are just as concerned with values as religious people, but values are empty unless one