

A New Agenda for American Jews

by Allan Solomonow

Countering the steady rightward drift of the American Jewish community, Jewish progressives throughout the country first formed the Organizing Committee for a New Jewish Agenda in the spring of 1979. A year and a half later, on December 24-28, Agenda brought over 600 people together in Washington, DC, for the organization's first national conference.

In part, Agenda is an attempt to revive the spirit of Breira, a national Jewish organization of the mid-70s that sought a new "Israel-diaspora relationship." Because of its controversial positions on the Middle East (among other factors), it fell apart shortly after its first national conference. More important, Agenda is a response to the broader syndrome of which the demise of Breira was only one aspect: the increasing difficulty of Jews as Jews to be comfortable raising the political and social issues which are an integral part of the Jewish experience.

Smarting from the experience of Breira, the many who participated in the founding meeting and subsequent planning conferences chose caution as the hallmark for organizing. Formal chapters were shunned and committees prohibited until a national conference with broad and full representation could be brought together to provide a justification and a mandate for "still another national Jewish organization."

Threading through this caution were several nagging questions. Just how left should the group be? How does one get together a group of liberals-leftists-progressives-peaceniks, et al? Given the sharp response of the Jewish community to Breira and the continued drift to the center and right, is such an effort doomed to swim against the tide?

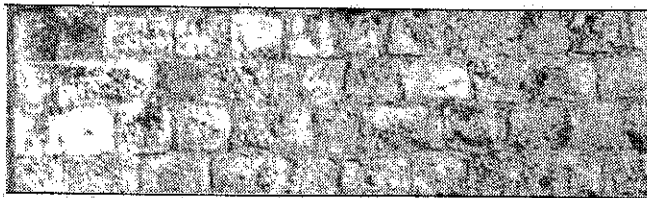
Agenda thus became a patchwork coalition of the liberal orthodox, Bundists, radicals who are Jewish—and Jews who are radical, young rabbis, professionals, middle-aged scholars, staunch feminists, gays

and lesbians, and many in their sixties who "have not sold out."

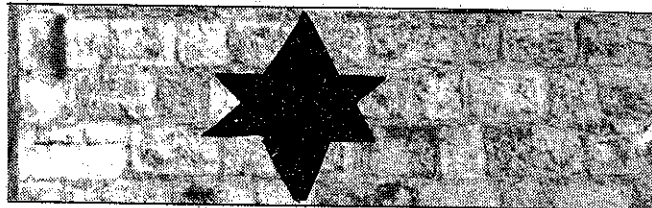
The overwhelming turnout at the conference came as a surprise to organizers and participants alike. Seeing this push at the last moment, the Steering Committee steadfastly turned back the pleas of staff to permit as many as physically possible to come. At the first general session when word was announced that there was no more room and credentials would have to be checked, there was a surge of opinion against this mentality, and a spirit of non-exclusionism prevailed.

What to do with the conference? It was too big and new to make firm and final decisions; there were enough agendas for a year's effort. There were numerous program sessions generally focused on Jewish identity, the Jewish community, the Middle East, and US policies—foreign and domestic. At times there were 20 sessions on divergent themes occurring simultaneously. There were painful, late sessions hammering out bylaws and a platform.

Naturally, there were cultural events and a literal pantheon of Jewish services. Songs of the peace and civil rights movements of the 60s, the labor movement of the 30s and, of course, Hebrew and Yiddish songs frequently emanated from the 4-H hall where the conference was being held. Orthodox marveled at the chanting of anti-Zionists while humanists took "Jewish" nature walks.



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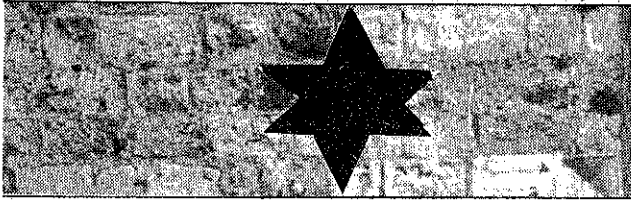


The conference witnessed the eruption of something long walled-up: personal expressions of Jewishness, anti-Jewishness, love, hostility and commitment for which there has been no other forum in the country. One Israeli scoffed at the "born-again Yids." Perhaps that had more truth in it than we want to admit. Some seemed strained in wanting to link their convictions with their Jewishness. Yet to most, there was the underlying puzzlement as to how the American Jewish community has come to abandon its Jewishness in favor of a secure and assimilated social position in America.

Izzy Stone inevitably disturbed many by asking the question others refuse to ask: "What is the point in having a separate Jewish organization? We don't want to be, even organizationally, a Jewish moral majority" he asserted, while calling for Jews to work together with others. The "Jewishness" of the conference aside, its participants do not see themselves as a separate Jewish lobby. Leftist non-Jews were invited to be in the program.

The priority of Agenda is, rather, to provide a progressive Jewish forum at a time when the American Jewish community's alignment with the Right has moved disturbingly ahead. Within the Reagan camp, for instance, there is no lack of Jewish presence. Jewish advisors such as Edward Luttwak, Joseph Churba, Rita Hauser and Uri Ra'anani have all had serious input into the Reagan teams' decision-making, especially in foreign policy. And the presidential vote affirmed what many already knew: the movement of the Jewish community away from liberal policies toward the mainstream, and now, the Right. The single most productive and dependable peace/social justice community is shifting its commitments.

Even more disturbing has been Jewish alignment with the "pro-family" New Right. Meetings of Jews with Reverend Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority



have papered over differences in favor of a working alliance of Jews with right evangelicals who, despite their often overt anti-Semitism, support a literal interpretation of the Bible encompassing a return of Jews to the Promised Land (if only to prepare for their coming Armageddon).

Perhaps in response to such developments, the conference often moved beyond internal organizational politics to broader social concerns. The issues of feminism and racism played a constant theme, and many were deeply moved by a workshop titled "Jewish Men/Women-Love/Hate." Poignant exchanges on anti-Semitism were raised even at times when they had not planned in the schedule. It was a continuous consciousness-raising process as those with firm convictions clashed or made impassioned pleas to others less convinced.

Of course, more traditional politicking also occurred. A few dozen folk of various "left" associations formed an amorphous caucus. After a classic bickering start that alienated many participants, working groups hammered out a platform with more political substance than the statement of principles that had been formulated in the crush of the closing days of conference planning. It had been assumed that the conference could not make a comprehensive and satisfactory political statement, but what had been presented appeared at best only marginally "progressive."

By straw votes the conference eventually did adopt most of the alternate suggestions of the "left" caucus including an affirmation of a "two-state" solution for the Middle East conflict. The feminist caucus brought in a more comprehensive position on women that the conference also overwhelmingly affirmed. There was a call for a moratorium on the building of nuclear plants and for progress toward conversion and the eventual tearing down of existing facilities. On the other hand, perhaps only out of negligence or lack of time, there were shortfalls. The statement of disarmament and nuclear weapons would not have offended President Reagan, and vast areas of foreign and domestic policy were left unmentioned.

In setting up the new organization, in the elections and the bylaws, there was wide criticism from around the country. It should be a broad, non-exclusionist group; there must be a wide sharing of power and decision-making. Perhaps even (shudder) the office



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should not be in New York City. The messages were heard, a testament to their strength and the pliancy of those running the conference. And the Committee for a New Jewish Agenda elected its first 25-member Executive Council at some spirited if unconscionable hour.

Instantly, non-chapters became official chapters, and a national Jewish (whatever that means) "progressive" (whatever that means) organization emerged on an official basis. It has a tentative platform approved by a strong vote. It must still be worked over and presented for formal approval, a task that has already been initiated by newly-created task forces.

By the time you read this the Executive Council will have had its first meeting, spending in all probability the remainder of its budget and then some, to insure that those on the new Executive Council are financially able to come and participate in the process of building a new organization.

At the first meeting of our "reference group" at the conference, a fellow from a small Midwestern town said how offended he had been seeing two women "flaunting" their feelings by walking around hand-in-hand. He, too, stayed and heard and learned as did many others.

No doubt many are annoyed by the confusion and lack of definition that prevailed. The organized Jewish community has often been criticized for its inability to reflect the multitude of Jewish perspectives and increasingly the progressive voices within its midst. Agenda is clearly different. It's not merely "progressive"; its strength may well prove to be the creation of an environment in which Jews can once again be heard and participate in the events that determine their future.

Certainly if the strength and vitality of those who trekked to Washington can be tapped and transformed, there will be a chance to struggle for a truly Jewish and human agenda. Ω

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And for further news on the Middle East from a progressive Jewish perspective, see the monthly newsletter, *Shalom Network*, Box 221, River Edge, NJ 07661.

