

New Jewish Agenda— A Welcome Voice

LEWIS MOROZE

The founding of New Jewish Agenda last December marks a serious effort by members of the American Jewish community, predominately young people, to guarantee a voice for the mass of the Jewish community in the many struggles around which movements are now arising throughout the land calling for world peace, economic justice and for an end to racist and political repression. Of special concern to the participants at the founding conference was the need for democratization of the organized American Jewish community and the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East that would guarantee the rights of the peoples of Israel and the Palestinian Arabs.

The discussions leading to the calling of the founding conference for a New Jewish Agenda were undertaken as the participants took serious note of and viewed with grave concern the foreign and domestic policies of the ruling circles of our country and government: 1) the whipping up of war hysteria to make a war economy and nuclear war palatable to our people; 2) the unrelenting drive to extract maximum profits at the expense of our impoverished working class and the middle sectors; and 3) the go-ahead signal to the KKK and the Nazi Party to spread their racist and anti-Semitic ideology and to engage in terror to divide the people in order to guarantee the success of their monopolist aims.

Along with the broadest sectors of our people, American Jewish youth display widespread anxiety. The ruling class is banking on pessimism and despair to undercut opposition to their reactionary austerity policies. But the people are resolved to fight back and to increase their effectiveness by joining in coalitions on all issues of major concern.

American Jewry have to contend with the stifling of dissent in the organized Jewish community.

This is the work of the dominant section of the leadership who are part and parcel of U.S. monopoly or their professional hirelings. They impose their class views by the power of the purse and by the demagogic device of equating Zionism with Judaism and the imposition of Zionist views on the total community, brooking no dissent. Their class views blunt the struggles against racism, for economic justice and for world peace. Not to be ignored, of course, is the participation and the contributions of some Jewish leaders in the struggle for affirmative action, as in the Weber case, and for world peace and for an end to racist and anti-Semitic terrorism.

The undemocratic control of Jewish community organizations is coming up against growing opposition. Sam Norich, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, reported at the Conference for a New Jewish Agenda that alienation in the Jewish community is so widespread that but 50 per cent of the community is tied to any of the Jewish organizations. Avivah Cantor of *Lilith* magazine denounced the patriarchal practices of the Jewish organizations denying women full participation on an equal basis in the leadership of the Jewish community. Trude Weiss-Rosemarin, editor of the *Jewish Spectator*, attacked the Jewish leadership for depriving the Jewish community of the skills of some of our "finest intellectuals who think independently," offering views different from those of the establishment.

The bankruptcy of Zionist policies in Israel is causing rethinking on the question of Zionism. More and more American Jews reject the Zionist concept that anti-Semitism is ineradicable and that Jews can not live secure and meaningful lives outside Israel. Recently the International Economic and Social Commission of the World Jewish Congress rejected this basic Zionist tenet.

The mood among the mass of the Jewish people for a people's alternative, especially among the

Lewis Moroze is co-editor of the magazine *Jewish Affairs*.

younger men and women, is widespread.

The Call to the Conference for a New Jewish Agenda was aimed to gather between 400 and 500 people. About 700 gathered in Washington, D.C., during the last week in December of 1980. Hundreds who attempted to register during the last few days prior to the conference had to be turned away.

In May of 1979 about 50 Jewish men and women formed the Organizing Committee for a New Jewish Agenda. They agreed that "issues of political commitment and social justice need to be restored to a high priority for the Jewish community." There followed six months of preliminary discussions on a wide variety of subjects and preparations for the holding of a national conference.

The organizing nucleus consisted of those who had been active in the ill-fated Breira (Alternative) organization that sought an alternate, more flexible approach in solving the Middle East crisis. In addition there were members of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, Jewish Bund, Hashomair Hatzair, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform synagogues. There were also Zionists, non-Zionists, anti-Zionists, peace advocates, civil liberties and civil rights activists, women's liberation forces, Left progressives, Yiddishists and secularists.

The first Agenda organizing newsletter stated that their objectives were twofold: 1) to found a new organization to involve Jews who have become alienated from Jewish communal life; 2) to challenge assumptions of national Jewish organizations and to stimulate discussion and debate within them. The issues and concerns to which they were addressing themselves were not limited to inner Jewish communal life but to all questions facing them as Americans and as Jews.

A study of the pre-conference discussion documents and position papers presented to the Conference underscores the validity of looking beneath the surface to uncover the true feelings and aims of people in motion. Those who took a surface view of the Jewish community concluded that the Zionist ideological hold on the American Jewish community made dialogue on the question of Israel impossible. They also felt that the stifling

of dissent in the Jewish community by the establishment made it impossible to involve broad sectors of the Jewish people in the problems of the working class and the poor, in the struggle against racism and in an all-out struggle for world peace. A reading of the documents reveals sharply the need to be alert to and to appreciate the varying levels of understanding of people seeking change. The correct response is to match their determination and courage with patient understanding and a strong helping hand.

During the period prior to the founding conference, one of the key leaders of the movement, Rabbi Gerald Serotta, associate director of Hillel at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., announced, "Our goal is to involve the unaffiliated, disaffected and especially those alienated from the politics of the American Jewish community—those who feel it has turned so rightward and inward that they can no longer feel comfortable in the community."

Reaction sensed and appreciated what was in the wind. J.J. Fishbein, editor of the weekly Chicago Jewish *Sentinel*, reported, "The realistic fact is that the Conference for a New Jewish Agenda has already been given the cold shoulder by the entire Jewish establishment, is isolated by an overwhelming number of the Jewish press. The censorship which dominates American Jewish life and imposes such terrible vengeance on any who dare to dissent from the established theme is certain to besmirch and denigrate even this minimum attempt to restore a smidgin of democracy to American Jewish life."

Those amongst the original organizers of New Jewish Agenda who were associated with Breira remembered that it was destroyed by the Jewish establishment with quite an assist from the infamous Norman Podhoretz, editor of the Right-wing *Commentary*, organ of the American Jewish Committee. They assessed the reasons for its demise and concluded that what was needed was a multi-issue organization based on the grassroots. Breira was an organization governed from the top and was single-issue. They then set about proposing a multi-issue coalition in New Jewish Agenda.

The editorial committee of *Jewish Affairs*, publication of the Communist Party, appreciating the

historic and political importance of the Conference for a New Jewish Agenda, sent this writer to represent them as a participant at the founding conference.

A detailed report of the conference is hard to construct because of the many—too many—simultaneous panels and workshops that took place. Key questions were dealt with at the plenary sessions. The breadth of approach is reflected somewhat in the song sheet distributed at the conference. Included were: "A Shabbas (Sabbath) Song," "Joe Hill" and "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream," the song for world peace. The breadth of the issues tackled is revealed in the resolutions adopted by the conference. The high degree of unity is revealed in the votes taken on each of the resolutions.

At the opening plenary session Rabbi Serotta remarked that "We have to look much more carefully at our interests as Jews and the realities of anti-Semitism, than simply to say that our economic self-interests require us to be identified with the conservative political position in this country."

A Chicago attorney, Marian Neudel, remarked that "if we can not create a movement for ordinary working Jews we are betraying our past and writing off our future."

An Israeli Zionist army educator had to acknowledge the corruption and reactionary positions of the Israeli government and then pleaded for the healing of the rift between Israel and Jews in the diaspora (those outside of Israel).

A third panelist, a Bundist, called for Agenda to "be a union of all democratic and progressive forces."

Note must be taken that his coalition of American Jews did not engage in Soviet-baiting from the platform, as is all too common in the Jewish establishment and in the Jewish press. Comments by individual participants here and there revealed the effects of years of anti-Soviet propaganda. No resolution was introduced attacking the Soviet Union. However, lingering anti-Soviet prejudice accounts for the wording in two different resolutions. The otherwise powerful resolution on war and peace was weakened by the absence of any reference to SALT II and no reference to the need

for detente to secure world peace. The other resolution was the one calling for the protection of the rights of Jews everywhere, singling out, however, the following countries: the USSR, France, Argentina, Ethiopia and Iran.

Of great import was the number of position papers prepared for the conference. Though eclectic, the views expressed in the main struck a positive note. They covered such areas as: 1) foreign and domestic issues; 2) Jewish identity; 3) women, men and the family; 4) the American Jewish community; and 5) the Middle East. Particular topics included the arms race, world hunger, affirmative action, Jews and the labor movement, Jewish females, Jewish avoidance of personal relationships with Blacks, Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, Israeli arms and Latin America.

Sessions of the Left Caucus drew over 100 participants. The overwhelming number called for flexibility to meet the needs of the many constituencies represented and yet win approval on a maximum number of issues and for the establishment of a permanent coalition to further these aims. Women played an important role at the caucus and throughout the conference.

At the panel on "Reversing the Arms Race" Rabbi Israel Dresner observed that "The survival of Israel must rest on the bedrock of morality and does not lie in the Pentagon, as many Jews think."

The leader of the workshop on "Strategic Realities in the Middle East," a State Department employee, warned that a continued deadlock in the Middle East presents a grave threat to peace. He proposed a negotiated peace with the PLO to be signed by the USSR and the USA to make it effective.

"To support the peace forces in Israel is to help guarantee the future of Israel," said Tzali Reshef, an Israeli attorney and leader in the Peace Now movement. He warned that a Labor Party victory would not bring a change in basic policy. He stated that the struggle for peace and justice in the Middle East must be pursued with greater vigor.

Lack of time made it impossible to have full discussion and debate on all the resolutions. Though each of the resolutions was adopted by a large majority, they are not considered as mandates but as guides to action. Reactionaries and

Right-wing opportunists will take advantage of this to attempt to thwart the implementation of these resolutions.

The structural form adopted permits flexibility in promoting the program and calls not only for the establishment of local chapters but also invites Jewish organizations to become affiliates.

The newly established National Council has announced that the resolutions are to be considered as guides and not as mandates. At the same time the council proposed a variety of task forces for each of the areas of concern covered by the resolutions.

The Unity Statement was adopted by a vote of 70 per cent. The statement says in part, "We are Jews from a variety of backgrounds, affiliations, and personal outlooks who share a vision of the meaning and purpose of Jewish life... We are convinced that Jewish experience and teachings can address the social, economic and political issues of our time. Our Jewish conviction requires that we give serious and consistent attention to the Jewish mandate of 'tikun olam,' the repair and moral improvement of our world."

The resolution on the Jewish community was approved by a vote of 80 per cent. In part it states, "The U.S. Jewish community must make strenuous efforts to welcome, involve and empower disaffected and unaffiliated Jews, as well as working-class Jews, women, the young and elderly, poor, disabled, single and single-parents, geographically isolated, gay and Lesbian Jews and recent Jewish immigrants. Elitist and unresponsive Jewish leadership should be replaced by a representative and pluralistic one, accountable to our community and reflecting the diversity of the Jewish population."

Approved by a vote of 70 per cent was the resolution on Israel which states:

We are committed to the State of Israel as an ethical, democratic and peaceful country in which Arabs and Jews, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, women and men, secular and religious people of all persuasions can cooperate and contribute fully and equally....

We must work to educate the American Jewish community to support the forces in Israel working for these ideals....

We believe Israel can not rule over the Palestinian Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza as an occupying force without compromising its moral principles. Israel's settlements in the occupied territories endanger the peace process and must be opposed.

We support a peace based on mutual acceptance, recognition and security for Jewish national self-determination within the State of Israel and the Palestinians' right to national self-determination, including the right to create a Palestinian state.

Ninety per cent of the participants voted for the resolution on the U.S. domestic scene. It states *inter alia* that "We want to see an economically just America, in which democratic control of resources and concern for human needs replace concentrations of corporate power, oppression and exploitation. The U.S. needs good health care, adequate housing, full employment, safe neighborhoods, a protected and healthy living and working environment and decent education for all its citizens ... The right to organize, now currently under attack, must be guaranteed to all workers. We support affirmative action programs to redress past inequities and oppose the repeal of civil rights statutes."

Eighty five per cent approved the resolution on energy which states, "Based on the Torah policy of 'Bal Tashchit'—not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value—we believe that conservation and more efficient use of energy should be the cornerstone of U.S. policy. We encourage the development of non-nuclear sources which are safe, renewable and decentralized."

The resolution on war and peace was adopted by a vote of 70 per cent. It calls for "New alternatives for peace and progress... to be found to break the cycle of military spending, preparation and war. Arms, especially nuclear weapons, must be fought. U.S. foreign policy should be based on support for human rights and human dignity everywhere in the world, on achieving a new world order which provides all people with economic and political rights, on eliminating oppression and exploitation by governments and corporations and wiping out war, hunger and despair."

Ninety per cent of the participants voted for the

resolution on Jewish security, Jewish men and women. It states, "We affirm the nurturance of life and the continuity of Jewish generations...We strongly endorse the struggle to transform the historically unequal relationship between men and women. Women should be included in every area of Jewish communal activity, including all leadership positions....Our commitment to Jewish continuity—both physically and qualitatively—requires our support for the reproductive rights for women....Finally, we are committed to eliminating Lesbian and gay oppression and homophobia."

The resolution on the rights of Jews was adopted by a vote of 85 per cent. It states, "We will work for freedom, safety and unrestricted Jewish expression for Jews in the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Argentina, Iran, France and in every other Jewish community."

Seventy five per cent of the participants approved the resolution on racism and anti-Semitism. It states:

The present economic crisis has brought a dramatic rise of anti-Semitism and racism. Agenda will firmly oppose all forms of anti-Semitism and racism and right-wing terror whether they come from the Ku Klux Klan or the Nazis and whether these occur with or without government complicity. In doing so we seek to unite with a broad-based anti-racist coalition including Blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Native Americans, ethnic minority groups as well as labor, left and other progressive political organizations. In building these coalitions we will seek to end Jewish isolation and challenge any anti-Jewish attitudes that arise. We are especially committed to recreating a relationship with the Black community in which we recognize our similarities and differences and work for common goals. An atmosphere in which racist ideology is pervasive directly threatens Jewish well-being.

Combatting anti-Semitism requires that we understand its political, economic and religious and psychological causes and forms. We must also seek to free ourselves from the ways in which we have internalized our oppression.

At the last moment, by a voice vote, the following resolution on Ethiopian Jewry was

adopted: "In view of the conditions of Ethiopian Jewry, we strongly urge the Israeli government and other responsible Jewish agencies make the rescue of this community a high priority and we deplore the neglect of our fellow Jews "

The references to Ethiopian Jews in two resolutions reveal confusion and the hiding of the true facts about the Falshas. Prof. Edward Lenhoff, president of the American Association of Ethiopian Jews, in a statement in the January 29, 1981, issue of the *Sentinel*, reported that Ethiopian Jews are granted their full rights by the Ethiopian government but are being harassed by armed tribal bands attempting to overthrow the socialist-oriented government.

Numbers of participants in the founding conference of New Jewish Agenda came to renew or tighten their ties with Jewish communal life. To identify with progressive Jewish traditions is a constructive, positive step.

The challenge facing New Jewish Agenda is to chart a correct course on the national question. As it is correct to combat national nihilism, so would it be in order to guard against emphasis on national identity and national pride to the point of leading the Jewish people down the road to national arrogance and chauvinism.

The resolutions adopted at the conference are replete with references to "Jewish traditions" as guides to action. Since during conference discussions the delegates were referring to the traditions of the Prophets and *not* those who stoned the Prophets, a more accurate reference would have been *progressive Jewish traditions*. The irony of the situation is that the Jewish establishment with whom New Jewish Agenda is in contention claim they are carrying on as inheritors of "Jewish traditions."

The conference heard attacks on "anti-Semitism from the Left." Jewish historians as well as Marxists have correctly characterized anti-Semitism as a ruling-class device to divide and rule, especially in times of crisis for the ruling class. It is essential to keep ever in mind the roots of anti-Semitism and racism.

The false cry of "anti-Semitism from the Left" came from Stanley Aronowitz, who distorted the Marxist-Leninist position on the national ques-

tion. Aronowitz claimed Leninists are insensitive on the national question and that Lenin frowned upon the flowering of national cultures, Jewish culture in particular.

In his work, "Critical Remarks on the the National Question," Lenin wrote, "In advancing the slogan of 'the international culture of democracy and of the working-class movement,' we take from each national culture only its democratic and socialist elements; we take them only and absolutely in opposition to bourgeois culture and the bourgeois nationalism of each nation." The Marxist-Leninist position is crystal clear, calling for the fullest flowering of all national cultures and the democratic and voluntary integration of the progressive features of all cultures.

Morris U. Schappes attacked "assimilation from the Left as well as from the Right as completing the work of Adolph Hitler." In the same work mentioned above, Lenin said, "The best Jews, those who are celebrated in world history, and have given the world foremost leaders of democracy and socialism, have never clamored against assimilation. It is only those who contemplate the 'rear aspect' of Jewry with reverential awe that clamor against assimilation."

It is essential to keep constantly in mind the true source of anti-Semitism—the ruling class. For it is they who sow confusion and drive some people to accept cosmopolitanism as a step in the direction of the "unity of mankind," whereas in actuality it is a reactionary thrust sowing contempt for national origin and national pride.

New Jewish Agenda will be participating with

many groupings in our society, with other national minorities, in promoting common programs to counter the thrust of U.S. monopoly capitalism. In so doing there will be a further flowering of progressive Jewish values and a cross-fertilization of democratic values.

Organizationally success can come from the fullest mobilization of the participants at the founding conference to reach into the communities to establish functioning chapters and to invite existing Jewish organizations with common programs to affiliate.

Programmatically success calls for priority attention to the common concerns reflected in the resolutions voted upon and the subordination of other concerns of the various constituencies that comprise Jewish Agenda.

New Jewish Agenda's success will be threatened by attempts to modify its program to mollify or seek concessions from the Jewish establishment. Such favors will have to be heavily paid for in the dilution of basic programs and objectives.

New Jewish Agenda offers great promise in bringing about democratic changes in the organized Jewish community and in contributing to the success of the people's coalitions for peace, economic justice and for an end to racism, anti-Semitism and political repression.

New Jewish Agenda deserves and needs the support of all progressive Jewish men and women who are determined to bring about a new, progressive voice in the American Jewish community and on the American scene.