

Ruth Balser

## Liberation of a Jewish Radical

I am a woman. That means I have certain concerns regarding women about which I will speak. But also, it was in part my experience in the Women's movement that brought me back to Judaism. I know almost nothing about Israel! Not knowing about Israel is significant—the reasons are connected to the reasons for my becoming active in the Jewish movement, and are a dilemma which I believe many American Jews experience. I am now basically committed to the notion of a Jewish movement as a legitimate part of the Left in this country. I believe that movement, while it must deal with the issue of the Middle East, needs to be primarily Diaspora-oriented; that is, it must deal first with the reality of American Jews.

I was brought up in a fairly religious and a very self-consciously Jewish home. This meant both a way of life and being the target of hatred and/or persecution by other groups. I was brought up with both the pleasure of celebrating the holidays, and the stories of the Christian boys beating up my father when he grew up in Brooklyn, and of the Holocaust in Germany. In high school, when I became sensitive to the issues of Black Americans and the Vietnamese, I joined various civil rights and peace groups with the awareness that my being Jewish was one of the major reasons for becoming active. Genocide is genocide. And whether it is being waged against the American Indian, the Vietnamese, or the Blacks, as a Jew I feel now as I did then, personally threatened by it.

I went to college in 1965 and helped start a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) chapter at my school. The next four years were marked by an increasing commitment to building a revolutionary movement in this country. I learned a lot during that period, but I also *unlearned* a lot. A lot of what I did I still consider to be important work in the name of Blacks and the Vietnamese. But I forgot about myself both as a woman and a Jew. I quickly learned from my friends in SDS when we spoke of what brought us into the Movement that the "alienated youth" theory was more acceptable than my Jewish theory. I was teased for still being so attached to my family that I

occasionally went to Sabbath services with relatives who lived near my college. I read Karl Marx's *On The Jewish Question* and learned that religion was the opiate of the masses. Thus I learned to repress a part of my identity that had always been so important.

Toward the end of college and immediately after, I became attracted to the women's liberation movement. I left the male-oriented Movement and became a member of an autonomous women's organization. My statement to the world, and to the Left more specifically, was that I would no longer devote so much energy to a movement dedicated to the liberation of everyone but me. I was still for the liberation of everyone, but now I wanted it for me too. Being in the women's movement has taught me that I could base my politics on my experience rather than abstract theory and that my experience and feelings were legitimate, which has provided an immeasurable value in my personal as well as political life.

I sadly and painfully learned, though, that while so much else about me was supported by the women's movement, my Jewishness was still unacceptable. There was a lot of talk about the high percentage of Jews in the Movement but that statement was always presented either accusingly or jokingly. It was never dealt with in a way that might have helped us to understand it or that might have helped us to feel good. Further, a trend toward democratizing and egalitizing relationships between women, which had the best intentions, also had the unfortunate side effect of attacking a style which many Jewish women have had to develop to survive. This aggressive, outspoken, and at least superficially self-assured style came under attack as oppressive and elitist. A set of values, not unlike those of upper-class WASP society and particularly the middle-class mode for women, came into being: be quiet, be polite, be restrained. I, as a loudmouth Jewish woman, began to feel there was no place for me!

Increasing news of the Middle East started coming in. My family was frightened that the Jews would be pushed into the sea, and the Left supported Al Fatah.

I felt very much in the middle—not an unusual place for a Jew! All my life I had been taught that Israel was a place, the one place in the whole world, where Jews could live freely and not be afraid to be Jewish. My rage at the United States and the whole world for being silent in the early days of fascism was compensated by my joy that there finally was a place where Jews fought for Jews, and I had always been pleased by the struggle for socialism which many Jews had brought with them to Israel.

The women's movement quickly made a heroine of Leila Kaled, the Palestinian airplane hijacker whose slogan was, "My two goals in life are liberation for Palestine and liberation for women." I was afraid to say I was frightened by Leila because I was Jewish. I was afraid to learn that Israel might not be imperialist because that would cause conflicts with my friends in the Left. I was afraid to learn that Israel might be as imperialist as the leftist press was saying, as that might create conflict with my family and my past. In either case, I was afraid that an anti-Zionist movement would stir up latent anti-semitism in this country. I made a conscious decision to read nothing about the Middle East, to shut out the news, and to talk to no one about it. I couldn't handle the contradictions.

About a year ago I met a group of women from both the women's and gay women's movements in New York who had formed a Jewish women's consciousness-raising group, modeled after the women's groups we had all been in. I began to think a lot about my Jewish experience. After all, the women's movement had told me that my politics could be based on my experience and that my experience was legitimate. We had long informal conversations about being Jewish, being Jewish women, and where Jews are at in this country. We felt the need for a Jewish community unlike the ones in which we grew up because those were sexist and conservative, and also unlike the Left or women's community of which we presently are a part because it is anti-semitic.

I started out speaking about my lack of a thorough analysis of America and Jews, and the issues a Jewish movement has to deal with. I believe that my not having definitions is largely a function of my Movement experience, and the pressures for so long to not ask the questions. Since I realized that, I have spent most of my energy reading and learning about Jewish history. But in thinking about a

larger analysis, there are several questions one might ask. One, why should a movement for and of Jews be leftist? Two, why should a leftist movement be specifically Jewish? Further, what within the established Jewish community needs to be changed? And finally, what forces in America need to be addressed by such a movement?

The first question: why must a Jewish movement be leftist? While I believe that Jews are oppressed as Jews, we are also oppressed because of our position in America: oppressed, for example, as women, or gay people, working people, young people, etc. And because we are in touch with our oppression as Jews, we cannot forget the other forms our oppression takes. I believe that only a movement which supports and is supported by the movements of other peoples can succeed. It is ultimately the same system which puts down Blacks, Spanish-speaking peoples, Indians, Indochinese, and other minorities which oppresses Jews. Part of our struggle is to support the struggles of other peoples.

Why, one might ask, form a separate Jewish movement when there is already a Movement in this country fighting against everyone's oppression? History, and my own Movement experience, have taught me that no movement can be trusted to fight for a group if that group doesn't self-consciously struggle for itself. Rosa Luxembourg argued for the Internationalist position, yet when Jews in Germany were slaughtered, no one spoke out. As a woman, I learned a long time ago that unless we organized separately, there would still be sexism after the revolution. (Witness Cuba.) Blacks, too, realized that an integrated movement would remain racist, and it was their splitting from the civil rights groups that forced many of us to deal with our racism. Likewise Jews must fight for Jews.

I have learned this quite painfully. Once at a women's movement meeting I pointed out that we support practically every oppressed group in the world, yet say nothing about Soviet Jews. I was informed by one of my so-called sisters that the struggle for Soviet Jewry was reactionary! More recently I was part of a Jewish women's study group which felt enthusiastic about exploring our collective and individual pasts. A group of us ended up in a major struggle at a larger women's meeting because some felt that Jewish activity made the women's movement appear "Zionist," despite the fact that they knew nothing of our positions on the Middle East. They also felt it made it appear that the women's movement supported

the existence of a radical Jewish movement—and they personally couldn't support this since any such movement was potentially, if not already, racist and reactionary.

I believe a radical Jewish movement needs to also deal with the traditional Jewish community. For me, Jews are a nation, a people with a common culture and history. It is that to which I have so far given most of my attention. But we also have a religion which I believe gave our people strength. For those people to whom religion is important, it is a legitimate form of community and belief. I take pleasure in some of the ritual, although many of the practices have been and are oppressive to women and need to be changed.

As a youngster, I was active in the junior congregation of my Hebrew school. I wanted to run for vice-president—I knew a girl would never win for president!—but that year my shul, which is Conservative, came under some pressure to return to more Orthodox practices. The decision was made that girls could no longer read from the Torah, even in the junior congregation, and I was told I could not run for vice-president. Instead I had to run for the Chief Hostess, who gave out cookies after the service.

Recently I went to a Jewish commune which holds "radical" services. While it didn't have the ostentatious quality of many Jewish centers, they still uttered the prayer "Thank God I am not a woman." Needless to say, I found that offensive. I later went to a Purim celebration where, in their satire of the Story of Purim, they called Esther "a piece of ass" and attributed the liberation of the people to Mordechai! My feminism will not allow me to accept that part of a Jewish movement which will not challenge the oppressive aspects of Jewish tradition.

Another important part of Jewish culture has been the sanctity of the nuclear family. This too must be dealt with since our community includes gay people and others who are involved in new lifestyles.

Last, but in some ways most important, comes the question of what is happening in America. I believe that anti-semitic attitudes are still prevalent among most Americans. For evidence of that one need only speak to anyone Jewish—almost all of us will be able to recount painful experiences. Much of the anti-semitism that I have been exposed to has been linked to anti-communism: the president of the

SDS chapter in school always received anti-semitic phone calls whenever there were anti-war actions on campus; when I gave out leaflets people came over to me to tell me that their father or someone had died in World War II to save "my people" and now it is "we" who are making all the trouble! Countless times I was told in "academic" discussions that it was Jews' fault we were persecuted; we set it up by insisting on being different! Because I am middle-class and for most of my life have lived in Jewish communities, the anti-semitism which I have encountered has been verbal. Others have encountered job discrimination and beatings and threats on their lives. When I was marching down Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge protesting the American blockade of North Vietnam, an M.I.T. student opened his window and unfurled a ten-foot banner with a swastika, apparently in protest against our demonstration.

People often argue that most Jews in America have "made it." Why struggle? Well, Jews making it never seemed to have saved them. In Germany, before the War, Jews were more assimilated than in any other country. That was not a protection and I don't believe it would be here. Because of the unique position of Jews in this country we are an easy scapegoat when the country starts falling apart and fascism is on the rise.

Jews frequently work in positions between those in power and those most oppressed, as teachers, social workers, doctors, and merchants. Jews also frequently live in neighborhoods bordering on Black neighborhoods. Jews respond to this in different ways; many become liberals or radicals, thus trying to identify with the most oppressed; others, out of fear, identify with those in power, become conservative and frequently racist. Either way they become the target of the ruling group and the oppressed. Examples which I know best are in New York City. Jewish teachers fear loss of job security when the examinations and job hiring practices in New York are challenged by Black groups. Those exams insured that hiring practices years ago in the school system would not be anti-semitic, when that was a serious problem. Now, the Blacks legitimately claim that exams are culture-biased and propose their abolition. That which is protection for one group often oppresses or potentially oppresses the other.

The Jewish Defense League is, I believe, a response to some of these tensions as well as a desire of Jews to *never again* let the atrocities of other ages recur. My problem with the J.D.L. is not the needs to which

it is responding, but its answer. To identify with the ruling power in the way that J.D.L.'s super-patriotic, pro-war, racist, and sexist stance does is not only terribly oppressive but an incredible misreading of history. When has any government ever protected Jews when the chips were down? The answer to the problems of Jews must come about through radical change in the institutions of America, which at present create and confirm power relationships as a way of life. The response has to be a humane democratic movement which is also self-consciously Jewish.

Back to the issue of Israel. I am beginning to learn that there is an Israeli Left which believes in self-determination for both Arabs and Jews. As an American radical Jew, I can support that Left and any Palestinian liberation group which also supports the right to Jewish self-determination. In that context it no longer bothers me to criticize those Israeli policies which oppress Arabs.

In finishing, I wish to point out another element in American life which affects all of us on a day-to-day and psychic level. I am referring to the pressure to melt into the pot! In the United States, being different is a crime. Therefore, we get nose jobs, we straighten our hair, we change our names, we forget the language of our grandparents. In short, we hate ourselves. We hate ourselves in order to fulfill the American Dream, but that kind of a dream is a nightmare. The movement that we build must, above all else, help us to feel proud and loving of ourselves and each other.