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Jewish, Radical and Proud

This article is addressed to leftists who don't under-stand our Jewish involvement, and to Jews who won-der how we can be radicals and maintain our positive Jewish identities.

Chutzpah is a radical Jewish newspaper and we share many common goals with other radicals. However, we have found it necessary to put out a Jewish newspaper because we find it impossible to be proud of or ex-plore our Jewish identity within the Movement. Our Jewish identity is an important part of our lives, and in many ways was responsible for our attraction to the Left. Our historical experience as Jews has taught us the horror of genocide and racism, and the horror of silence in the face of genocide and racism. Our Jewish ethical tradition taught us our responsibility to other peoples.

For these reasons we have all been attracted to and involved with civil rights, student, and anti-war move-ments. At the same time, many of us rejected our Jew-ish identities. Jewish establishment organizations hedged on those issues with which we felt so person-ally involved. The Left was a place for us to question and grow in ways that were impossible in the assimi-lated Jewish community. The liberal Jewish establish-ment did not offer us a sense of community or an alternative to the mediocrity and alienation of Ameri-can life. Going to "the church or synagogue of your choice" seemed like a poor choice to us. The Jewish establishment stressed similarities with the main-stream culture that we were trying to reject.

The Women's and Gay Liberation movements changed basic ways of perceiving ourselves and each other. We learned that our personal experiences as women and men had political implications. Turning inward and examining our experience led us back to the question of our Jewish identities. We needed to figure out what our Jewishness meant, but felt un-comfortable exploring this in Movement organiza-tions. As we became more openly Jewish we were increasingly aware of the anti-semitic stereotypes

and misconceptions that many of our Movement friends had inherited from American society.

There seemed to be a tacit assumption on the Left that after Hitler anti-semitism was impossible. This attitude took the form of "After all, we're all pro-gressive people, and Judaism is just another religion for progressive people to reject, and all Jews are middle class or rich and have all the white skin and class privileges that we are rejecting. Therefore, anti-semitism does not exist and progressive people must move on to the problems of the Third World and U.S. imperialism. Jewish problems—if they exist—do not fit neatly into these categories, so let's not deal with them."

Jews were stereotyped as oppressors of Blacks, as rich Jew rip-off storeowners, slumlords, racist teachers and social workers. The assumption that the Left could not be anti-semitic blinded many Jewish and gentile Movement people to the prev-alence of these traditional stereotypes.

There was no discussion of *why* and *how* Jews seemed to be sandwiched into buffer zone positions between the ruling class and the most oppressed segments of our society. Jews in this plight were dismissed as racist, in a way that the gentile work-ing class never was.

The stereotype that all Jews are middle class or rich has blinded the Movement to the fact that there are many poor and working-class Jews, and blinded many of us to our own class origins. We need a sense of national pride and cultural identity, an awareness of class, race, and sexual oppression, and the means to eliminate this oppression.

While calling for self-determination for all peoples, the Left (including anti-USSR factions) has remained strangely silent about the cultural genocide of Soviet Jews.

In many socialist organizations it has become an article of faith that Israel is a racist stooge of United States ruling-class imperialism, and that it has no right to exist as a nation. Once again the needs Jews might

have are ignored or dismissed with simplistic labels.

As children we were painted a picture of Israel as a perfect, non-sexist, egalitarian, crime-free society. Discovering deep faults in Israeli society was in many ways more confusing for us than discovering contradictions in American society. It was extremely difficult for us to deal with these Israeli weaknesses and combat Movement anti-semitism at the same time.

Not-so-distant European-Jewish, Arab-Jewish and Israeli history seems to be left out of Movement analyses of the Middle East. We know the Palestinian people have a just cause, but we also know that the Jews who founded Israel were not colonialists who wanted to get rich by exploiting the Palestinians. To many, a Jewish state seemed the only refuge from anti-semitism and genocide (at the hands of Arabs as well as Europeans). Rather than feeling that our Left community was sensitive to our fears for Jewish survival, we were afraid to explore the issue at all for fear of being branded reactionary Zionist pigs. Some groups use the words Zionist and Jewish interchangeably.

Those of us who needed to explore our spiritual tradition felt that this was put down, ignored, and was not socially acceptable in the same sense as was Catholic radicalism or an eastern belief (yoga, meditation, karate).

In short, we feel that an important part of our lives has been buttoned up into simplistic labels and categories that don't represent who we are. We have learned from the women's, gay, and black liberation movements that if we do not demand our right to self-determination, the Left is not going to acknowledge our right to exist as a Jewish people. This experience is one reason we are putting out a separate, specifically Jewish newspaper. But it has not weakened our determination to struggle against the war, and work toward our vision of a society without class, sex or racial barriers. In this struggle we desire alliances with those sisters and brothers who treat our particular struggles with the same respect and concern we give to theirs.

Nazi pickets enforce a boycott on Jewish shops in Germany (1933).