

# JEWISH HOLIDAYS AND THE LEFT

by BURTON LEVINE

Who needs a Jewish calendar? If I want to know the date of the next Jewish holiday, I just look at the calendar in "progressive" publications. The Left will surely have planned an event to conflict with that holiday. A particularly odious example was 1979's anti-nuclear demonstration in New York City on Rosh Hashana. Both Bella Abzug, who never previously failed to exploit her Jewishness when trolling for votes, and Barry Commoner, warming up for last year's appearance as Jesse Jackson's court Jew and expert on what offends Jews, addressed the rally. This year the Left held its Socialist Scholar's Conference on the first days of Pesach.

I have given up protesting. I am tired of hearing that the organizers did not know the day was a Jewish holiday. I doubt that skilled political organizers can be so regularly incompetent and oblivious to their social environment. Their offices are often in New York, the city with the largest Jewish population in the world. Their children attend public schools that are often closed on Jewish holidays like Yom Kippur. Their city's newspapers and TV stations discuss every Jewish holiday.

I am also tired of the inevitable lecture on why we must sacrifice our petty parochialism for the good of humanity. The Christians, who give these lectures, rarely schedule events on Christmas or Easter in an effort to combat their own parochialism. The few exceptions, like the Socialist Scholars' Conference on Good Friday, are always used as examples to demand even greater and more consistent sacrifices from Jews and members of other minority religions.

Perhaps the Left persistently schedules events on Jewish holidays as a way to signal Jews that they are not welcome or, at least, that Jews who are too serious about their religion or national culture are not welcome. Or, perhaps, the organizers are just really stupid or inconsiderate. After all, they labor under the misconception that the socialist movement is so strong that it can do without Christians who celebrate Good Friday. Similarly they are cavalier to other religious, ethnic, and political minorities. After five years they still regularly use the phrase "voodoo economics", unaware that it slurs a group's religious beliefs. Nevertheless, the SSC was particularly disturbing because many of the planners, sponsors and participants, were Jewish.

Many of the Jews involved in the conference held on Erev Pesach have used Judaism and Jewishness both polemically and to build their careers. The Generation After and John Ranz have been tireless in talking about the evil done to Jews forty years ago. They are dedicated to enshrining the memory of those Jews killed by Hitler. Yet TGA sponsored two panels at the conference. The first was on Friday afternoon, when most Jews would be preparing for the evening's first seder. The second was on Shabbos, when some Jews out of walking distance could not attend. On the leaflet TGA issued about the conference, it also invited its supporters to its "most

important event of the year," a memorial meeting to say *Kaddish* for the martyrs of the Holocaust. But many, perhaps most, of those martyrs were observant Jews, who would not have been able to attend TGA's Socialist Scholars Conference panels. Whether Ranz and TGA's participation in the SSC tarnished their dedication to honoring the dead Jews of the Holocaust is debatable. But they certainly were callous toward the rights and feelings of today's living Jews. Rather than protest discrimination by the Left against Jews, they preferred to legitimize the conference with their attendance. They chose to be accomplices to the insulting of the thousands of observant Jews in their community in order to promote their own cause.

Even Jews with no Jewish organizational affiliation — such as Irving Howe and Ellen Willis — should think before publicly flouting Jewish traditions. Having written widely and profitably on Jews and Judaism, their betrayal of other Jews undermines their credibility. In the early days of New Jewish Agenda, Willis wrote that it should avoid the mistakes of Breira and focus on anti-Semitism and Jewish oppression. "I think that by not addressing itself first and centrally to the basic dilemma of every Jew ie.. how are we to insure our physical and spiritual survival — Breira failed to reach a great many actually and potentially dissident Jews and so was easily isolated by its enemies." Perhaps Willis, as an expert on Jewish oppression, can explain how Jewish leftists like her ensure our physical and spiritual survival by planning, sponsoring, and attending Socialist Scholars Conference on Pesach. Why wasn't the conference an insult by the Left to all those "potentially dissident Jews", who are either observant or feel a greater sense of loyalty to other Jews than does Willis? Likewise Stanley Aronowitz, Willis's colleague on *Social Text*, an SSC sponsor, might explain how his participation furthered his recent call for a Marxist "theory of Jewish liberation that can provide the basis for a new alliance between socialists and Jews."

Jews fought hard for the right to practice their religion freely and unencumbered. Socialist Jews, supposedly concerned with social solidarity and liberty,

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should be mindful of that struggle. When nonreligious Jews publicly ignore Jewish holidays, they make life harder for religious Jews. They undermine the rights of Jews and other religious minorities. They let nonJews say to the religious Jews, why do you need time off, or an excuse from school or some minor special consideration, when those other Jews do not. When Jews like Howe, Willis, and TGA, who are publicly identified with Judaism, say that they must attend the conference to spread their ideas, they encourage nonJews to think that Jews do not care about their culture.

**A**s a simple political calculation the conference and Jewish participation were stupid. First, Jews on the Left should be trying to make alliances with religious Jews. A conference held on Pesach only drives them away. Second, the tactics of Howe, Willis, Ranz, and TGA throw religious Jews into the arms of the Christian right. Religious Jews might distrust the political goals and tactics of conservative Christians. But at least those Christians understand the centrality of religion in the life of observant Jews. Third, Jews are a large nonChristian religious minority in the United States. But others exist and are growing. A common feeling of religious marginality could be a starting point for a coalition among Jews, American Indians, Hindus, Sikhs, Animists, atheists and especially, Moslems. If the Left does not involve itself in that coalition, many groups will reluctantly drift—with observant Jews—to the Right. Fourth, scheduling a conference on Pesach lends credence to the argument that those who are anti-Zionist, anti-Israel, or merely critical of Israel are necessarily anti-Jewish. Fifth, the American Left, like

America itself, half or unconsciously uses the morals and idiom of Christianity. Think of the speeches and writings of Michael Harrington, Norman Thomas, Jesse Jackson, and A.J. Muste. In August, 1984, *Monthly Review* had a special issue on "Religion and the Left." The assumption of every article was that religion means Christianity. If Jews were to fight for Jewish self-interest within the Left, then leftist Christians might be less religiously sectarian, and the Left more inviting to members of all various religions of America.

Finally as the Jesse Jackson/Louis Farrakhan affair showed, groups cannot make coalitions if they have widely divergent levels of group solidarity. Most Blacks on the Left supported Jackson and his nonrepudiation of Farrakhan, even if they believed that Farrakhan was wrong. An example is Cornell West in *Social Text 11*, who argues for the primacy of Black Unity. Yet many leftist Jews like Commoner, trained by years of Rosh Hashanah demonstrations and Pesach conferences, automatically put what they perceived as the greater good above their own interest or Jewish unity. Unfortunately, they may have made Jewish-Black coalitions on the Left harder. They increased the expectation that supposedly progressive Jews will not fight for their own interests or those of fellow non-Left Jews. In future coalitions Jews will be expected to defend other people's rights and defer to their calls for ethnic unity. But since Jews do not defend themselves or maintain their own unity, others like Blacks, will certainly not be expected to defend Jewish rights. Even if such lopsided coalitions hold together, who wants to work with people who do not stick up for themselves?

## HOW IS THIS WEEK DIFFERENT

Everyone is hoping to leave the office early: in a rush to get home for the Passover holiday, or just anticipating heavy traffic as the transit strike begins. The office manager paces along the rows of desks and whips around corners, checking to see that we're all still at our typewriters.

We'll never get done in time to leave early, anyway; they've given us twice as many letters to type, though the office is out of white-out and carbon paper. And besides, we're in the middle of our break. We haven't even finished eating.

Behold the danish of our affliction, which our foremothers bought every morning at the coffee cart to solace themselves, when they had been pulled too soon from their beds, their first-born dreams taken from them and drowned in the second of the ritual four cups of coffee.

The office manager listens to the radio news, scratching his scalp. He's worried that we'll be marooned here by the transit strike, sleeping on the floor under our desks like wild animals. Then he'd be stuck here too, with the city dark all around and nothing to drink but the washroom's rusty red tap water.

The elevator brings corporate officers to our floor to drive us from our work stations. Management now doubts that the air conditioning system will keep out locusts.

"Out," the office manager rasps. He has a frog in his throat. "Please leave now. We're closing up." We can't be sure whether to believe him. The decision is terrifying: If we go now, we may never be able to return. But if we delay, we may never be able to leave.

We approach the red-carpeted reception area. The strike starts. We are safe across. The office door shuts behind us.

But their hearts have hardened. The office manager calls us at home from work. "How are you getting in?" he asks. "Can we put you in a car pool? Do you have a bicycle? When will you be in?"

We won't be. With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm we are freed from the house of bondage. The horse and his rider, rider and subway car, bus and railroad car have been thrown into the sea.

ELLEN GARVEY