Editorials

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The Pro-flag and Anti-abortion Pathology

In recent months, the right wing has managed to galvanize large numbers of people around pro-flag and anti-abortion campaigns. What accounts for the popular attraction of these causes? Israeli philosopher Yishayahu Leibowitz says that from the standpoint of Jewish law (halakha), a flag is simply a *shmate* (a rag) on a pole. So why all the passion? And why the seeming deeper commitment to the fate of the unborn than to the fate of the millions of children living in severe poverty and conditions of oppression?

Of course, some of the people involved in these movements are motivated by the surface arguments and have reasonable things to say. The abortion issue, for example, is complex, and many of those who have been most committed, as we are, to the pro-choice position, nevertheless insist that abortion is often troubling, and that it is reasonable to make complex moral judgments about when abortion is appropriate. Still, it appears to us that pro-choicers have a more consistent pro-life attitude than many of those in the anti-abortion movement, who care little about the fate of the fetus once it becomes a baby. While many individuals have legitimate moral concerns about abortion (and we all need to struggle with these concerns), the anti-abortion movement exhibits distinctly pathological features.

We also understand the legitimate desires of Americans to build cultural symbols of their shared values, but when they are whipped into such a frenzy that they would amend the Constitution to defend the flag from a mere handful of people who wish to burn that flag in order to signify their anger at various aspects of American society, we are dealing with a phenomenon that goes far beyond rational concerns.

To understand the pathology fully, we need to look at the pervasive pain and frustration, the feelings of worthlessness and lack of connection to others, and the alienation and desperate search for communities of meaning and purpose that underlie so much of contemporary American politics. In a society that offers people few opportunities to achieve the mutual recognition and affirmation that are fundamental human needs, the longing for connection with others is frequently coupled with a melancholy resignation that such longing is utopian and cannot be fulfilled in this world. Yet the desire for this connection—a desire normally denied by human beings so alienated by the dynamics of contemporary capitalist society that most people have given up all conscious hope for its realization—remains a driving force in the unconscious lives of most Americans.

Part of the energy of the anti-abortion movement comes from its ability to symbolically address this desire. The fetus is a symbol of an idealized, innocent being—actually the little child within us, who is not being adequately loved and accepted in our daily experience. The desire to be loved and accepted as human beings—a completely rational desire—is split off and projected onto the fetus. This object of fantasy is idealized and made pure—an innocent and perfect unborn creature (and because unborn, not yet sullied by the world).

But because this projection and process of idealization in fact involves an evasion and denial of actual pain, it is accompanied by another split-off part of their consciousness: the rage and hatred that people feel when they are not confirmed in their fundamental humanity. That anger is directed at a demonized "other" whose humanity is ignored or denied, transformed by imagination into the "murderers" killing little babies; the communists who are to be nuked out of existence; the criminals who must be executed; the drug addicts upon whom we must wage war; the Jews, Blacks, or Arabs who are routinely deemed responsible for the world's or a given society's problems. This is why it makes sense for so many supposed "pro-lifers" to fanatically oppose abortion and yet support the death penalty and American militarism. At the rational level, these views may seem inconsistent, but at the deeper psychological level they are expressive of the same distorted dynamic. Both the unborn fetus and the evil "other" are imaginary constructs that carry an unconscious meaning reflecting repression of people's most fundamental social need.

A similar loss of connectedness to others underlies the frantic attempts to amend the Constitution to "protect the flag." The commotion isn't really about a *shmate* on a pole, but rather is about the loss of the idealized community that the flag symbolizes. In the past, part of what gave coherence to individual and family life was its embeddedness in larger communities of meaning and shared purpose. Religious, ethnic, and political communities, even unions and social change organizations

such as the socialist and communist parties, provided a context within which people could feel connected to a larger purpose and historical meaning that transcended their individual lives.

With the erosion of genuine community within which people can feel recognized and confirmed for who they are, people in their isolation feel driven to seek out the imaginary communities provided them through an identification with "the nation." Yet the very lack of substance in these fantasies makes people's connection to these pseudo-communities feel unstable, and hence generates a frenzy and hysteria that is used to sustain a sense of a reality that might otherwise fade. In this context, the flag, the symbol of a perfect community that exists only in the imagination, becomes the vulnerable embodiment of all that people fear they are losing.

Ironically, though, there is one element in the fantasies people have about America that actually is real—and it is precisely that one real element that is threatened by the controversies over the flag and abortion. That element is the real way that America *has* preserved individual freedom. While preserving individual freedoms is not a sufficient basis for the creation of a community of meaning that can replace those that have eroded, the absence of this value is one reason why some of the previous communities lost their popular support. Individual freedom would certainly be a central value in any new community of meaning we would try to create.

From a tactical standpoint, civil libertarians might wish that the Supreme Court had not agreed to hear the case and involve itself in the flag issue at this historical moment. Yet it is precisely in the willingness to say that even the symbol of the society, the American flag, can be attacked, that the Supreme Court embodies what is very best in American society. We do not advocate that people burn the flag, but we applaud the Supreme Court for confirming that flag burning is constitutional. That the Supreme Court in effect allows us to look at America's most holy symbol as though it were a *shmate* on a pole gives us immense reason to be proud of the United States of America. It was this fierce commitment to individual liberties and to the right of people to make up their own minds about what to call holy that made it possible for our foremothers and forefathers to find haven on these shores. Shame on those pathetic political misleaders in the Congress, administration, and media who now seek a way to overturn that decision.

Ironically, the best way to defend these important freedoms of choice is *not* to insist on the sanctity of choice. Freedom of choice is just another candidate for what should be holy—and it has to contend on the same level as the various right-wing candidates for holiness. Rather, the task is to understand the unmet needs that lead people to an irrational and pathological politics. Then we must charge the liberal and progressive forces with finding more healthy and rational ways to address those needs by showing a better way for people to secure the recognition and connectedness they rightfully desire. Only then will we reconstitute communities of meaning that have been undermined by the individualist ethos.

If all this sounds a bit too psychological for you, just look at how unsuccessful the liberal and progressive forces have been in waging a defensive war against a right wing that is willing to talk about these issues. It's time to deepen the level of analysis and insist that political strategies address this fundamental dimension of human reality.

Editor's Notes

During the month I spent in Israel this summer I made the painful discovery that few Israeli peace activists have concrete, strategic ideas about how they might change the Israeli political situation. Seeing themselves as powerless to change the minds of their fellow Israelis, many look to us in the U.S., hoping that the U.S. government eventually will pressure Israel to change its policies.

I'm worried that when the U.S. does change its policies, the pendulum may swing too far in an anti-Israel direction. Support for Israel is far softer than the conservatives in the Jewish world like to pretend. During the most recent hostage crisis precipitated by Israel's capture of Sheik Abdul Karim Obeid, the *Washington Post* ABC News Poll showed that support for Israel had fallen dramatically. Only 29 percent of Americans sampled in August said that Israel was a reliable ally of the United States, compared with 51 percent in a survey conducted four months earlier!

There is growing resentment against Israel's policies. Whether in Lebanon or on the West Bank, Israel seems to have no sense of limits. Every day the media tell the world about Israeli soldiers shooting and killing Palestinian civilians. When more than one-third of American Jews report that they are "morally outraged at some of Israel's actions," and almost half are "embarrassed by Israel's actions," something profound is happening.

Twenty months of the intifada have shaken many people's belief that Israel really does represent the commitment to democratic values and human rights that Americans found attractive about Israel in the first place.

That's part of the reason why we have urged Israel to change its policies quickly. No conceivable threat from a demilitarized Palestinian state of the sort *Tikkun* has championed could equal the very real military threat that would face Israel should its alliance with the U.S. dramatically weaken. Yet the occupation threatens

that alliance.

Even though I'm sure that American support for Israel will return to high levels once the hostage situation moves out of public consciousness, the variability in opinion shows what might happen one day when the underground resentment at Israel's insensitivity to Palestinians finds above-ground expression in the American political arena.

Those of us who love Israel must provide a way for the morally correct criticisms of the occupation to be expressed in a context that simultaneously validates both Israel and Zionism. If we don't, those who really hate Israel and those who have anti-Semitic subtexts to their criticism will appropriate the moral critiques and twist them dangerously. Many decent Americans, including some of our morally sensitive Jewish college students, feel absolutely sure that what Israel is doing is morally wrong. They are correct. But when they find that the only place where their insights get validated is amongst those who have an anti-Israel perspective, they get seduced into anti-Israel positions. It's in the interest of Israel to have its friends articulate the moral critique.

It's in this context that we have to think of the recent set of attacks directed at *Tikkun* by *Moment* magazine's editor Hershel Shanks, by American Jewish Committee consultant Stephen M. Cohen, and by other self-described "centrists." *Tikkun* has made these "centrists" uncomfortable by insisting that Israeli policy on the West Bank, including documented human rights abuses, is not only self-destructive but also immoral and a violation of what is best in the Jewish tradition. Our sin, according to these "centrists," is that we have articulated moralizing critiques of Israel rather than restricting ourselves to the "responsible" self-interest critiques that the "centrists" deem appropriate.

In fact, *Tikkun*-bashing has worked well for those who make their career as the "court critics" of the Jewish establishment: mix a critique of *Tikkun* with a few vague notions about the need to be both dovish and realistic, and you have an entrance ticket to see Jewish funders and establishment leaders. But the critique is misguided not only because we've always made the "self-interest" critique alongside the moral critique, but also because *making the moral critique is in the self-interest of Zionism and the Jewish people*—for reasons articulated above.

Many Israeli peace activists have made another point, as well: "The occupation has gradually eroded the moral sensitivities of many Israelis. The dynamics of the occupation lead toward an increasing brutalization of the Palestinian population. One thing that contributes to the current level of human rights abuses is the gradual decrease in our ability to recognize the humanity of Palestinians—precisely because we in Israel have created a discourse that legitimates only *Jewish self-interest* and has no other categories of concern. So, American Jews who insist on the primacy of moral considerations and remind Israelis of the long Jewish tradition of identifying with the oppressed and seeking peace and justice are doing us a real service and helping the Israeli peace movement." Or, as one activist put it: "Don't let the morally muddled moderates of the middle intimidate you folks who do insist on the primacy of values."

Some people told me we should be proud that we are getting so widely criticized by the Jewish establishment and their "court critics"—it proves that we are being taken seriously and having an effect. I could do with less of that kind of validation. But I was impressed by how seriously *Tikkun* is taken in Israel. Thousands of Israelis regularly read the magazine, and hundreds of thousands more read about *Tikkun*'s positions in Israeli newspapers and hear about them from the electronic media. Moreover, *Tikkun*'s positions are heard not only by those who agree with its perspective. Minutes after arriving at my hotel in Jerusalem, I received a phone call from the prime minister's office. Yitzhak Shamir's adviser on terrorism needed to see me; he wanted to argue with me about some of the details in the interview that I conducted with Nabil Shaath (*Tikkun,* May/June 1989). We met, but his arguments didn't convince me. I was convinced, however, that many people in the Israeli government read *Tikkun* and take its arguments very seriously.

Many doves see *Tikkun*'s role as pivotal. By making known to the American public the existence of many American Jews who are strong supporters of Israel and Zionism but who nevertheless deeply oppose the occupation, *Tikkun* is creating the political space in the U.S. that may allow the U.S. government to put moral pressure on Israel to move toward accommodation with the Palestinians without being labeled anti-Semitic or anti-Israel. Some of these doves told me that the small steps the U.S. has taken to pressure Israel into negotiations would have been politically more difficult without *Tikkun*'s presence on the scene.

Naturally, I was pleased with the enthusiasm about *Tikkun*. But I think it unrealistic for Israeli peace activists to wait around for the U.S. My reading of Bush and Baker is that they have no intention of risking any political capital by getting mired down in the details of Mideast negotiations. True, some State Department people think that, once negotiations start, everything will work out. But the basic approach at the highest level of the Baker State Department seems to be this: drag the issue out, keep it on a low burner, don't let it blow up in Bush's face, at least not before his possible reelection in 1992. Shamir's election proposal seems

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clarify the legal consciousness that he engendered. One need not rely solely on the Hirsch biography (apparently despised by Professor Henkin) to gain such insight. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that (even if he did not go all the way) Frankfurter distanced himself from his "alien" Jewishness in fervent pursuit of an idealized assimilationist Americanism, with direct consequences for his judicial performance and philosophy.

In a 1988 book about Frankfurter and Brandeis (*Two Jewish Justices: Outcasts in the Promised Land*), Professor Robert Burt of Yale Law School reports that Frankfurter "embraced American citizenship with an almost religious fervor, so that ... he was 'no longer an exile' but 'at home.'" Burt feels that Frankfurter

> believed his successful passage from alien to fully assimilated citizen gave him special insight as a judge into fundamental American values because he embodied those values in his own experience. He drew no protective mandate or special sympathy for outsiders, however, from this experience. He instead derived a mandate zealously to protect the values and status of insiders, such as he had become.

We suggested in our essay that there is a direct relationship between that assimilationist perspective and Jewish opposition to affirmative action. It surprises us not at all, then, that the first Supreme Court opinion denouncing affirmative action and invoking the model of "ethnic fungibility" characteristic of today's "reverse discrimination" charges was written in 1950 by Felix Frankfurter (*Hughes v. Superior Court,* 339 U.S. 460). In upholding the illegality of a demand by civil rights activists for proportional hiring of Blacks, Frankfurter suggested that to allow such a request would lead to similar claims on behalf "of Hungarians in Cleveland, of Poles in Buffalo, of Germans in Milwaukee...." To allow Blacks to assert the oppressive specificity of their American experience would, Frankfurter feared, exacerbate "community tensions and conflicts" to the point where "differences in cultural traditions instead of adding flavor and variety to our common citizenry might well be hardened into hostilities...." To have quelled the aspirations of Blacks in 1950 America in the name of a melting-pot ideology seems more than a little disingenuous, or self-deluded.

This is not to engage in "name-calling," which, as Charles Berezin says, is not productive. The real problem lies with an American culture that holds constant, as objective and neutral, standards of merit that are rooted in and serve to perpetuate an entrenched class structure, and that relegate persons of color to the very bottom of the hierarchy. Levin's opposition to affirmative action is based on the assumed objectivity of those standards; that assumption led us to charge him with assimilationism. Berezin calls for political unity on broader issues such as the role of the professions. (We would add the entire structure of American education.) We agree. Affirmative action is not a transformative solution—just a partial step that will be divisive so long as people remain wedded to the false ideology of equality of opportunity. □

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perfectly suited for such simmering—it can drag on for years, appearing to be a solution without actually forcing anyone to deal with the fundamental issue of self-determination for the Palestinians. Here Shamir's and Bush's interests overlap. It may be only in Bush's second term that the U.S. might seriously pressure Israel toward peace talks—and then only if enough American Jews are willing to support such an effort.

Meanwhile, facing Yom Kippur this year will be harder than ever. We have to deal not only with our own personal issues, but also with our collective responsibility for Israel and for the Jewish people in this second year of the Palestinian uprising. May you and yours be inscribed for a year of peace. □

BLUE SKIES

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block. On the other hand, while my schoolmates had never learned Emerson's pretty rhyme ("Nor knowest thou what argument / Thy life to thy neighbor's creed has lent"), I knew what a kike was. Thus I went home, as commanded, from which sanctuary Arthur drove me to school in the Buick.

Once a year far-flung branches of the family gathered for the Passover Seder at my grandfather's house in Santa Monica, a time warp away from Bialystok. "Say, der!" we called it, gazing with some dismay at these strange, gawky relations, mole-covered, all thumbs. The only cousins who counted were Jimmy and Lizzie, who, since they were Julie's children, and because Julie and Phil—bald from their college days, two eggs in a carton, peas in a pod—were identical twins, were therefore my genetic half-brother and sister. Jim (later a starter at Stanford) and I made a point of throwing the football around the backyard and bowling over the pale kinfolk as if they were candlepins. During the ceremony itself, which droned on forever, Jim and I would sit at the far end of the table, arm wrestling amidst the lit candles, the bowls of hot soup, the plates of bitter herbs. The empty chair, we were told, the untouched glass of wine, were not for yet more distant cousins, missing in Europe, unheard from since the start of the war, but for Elijah, who was fed by ravens and departed the earth in a chariot of fire.

That was the extent of my religious knowledge. Not once had I set foot in a synagogue or been exposed to so much as a page of the Bible. I knew more about gospel music and Christmas hymns—