

Jerusalem Letter:
VIEWPOINTS
the Jerusalem center

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR FEDERAL STUDIES • CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

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ISSN: 0334-4096

VP#16 - 1 Sivan 5741 / June 3, 1981

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN THE 1980'S:

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE 1980-81 NJCRAC JOINT PROGRAM FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Murray Friedman

The process of protecting Jews from anti-Semitism and discrimination at home and abroad, working for improved intergroup relations generally and pressing forward the Jewish agenda is a highly developed form of Jewish organization in the United States. There are 10 "national agencies" (countrywide organizations) including the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith along with local community relations organizations in more than 100 cities engaged in this task. Together, their combined budgets may be as much as 35 million dollars, a small but significant portion of the Jewish communal funds raised in the U.S.

Jewish community relations is a unique form of ethnic and religious group organization in the United States. Only blacks have anything comparable. Groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League, however, are, in fact, interracial organizations. The International Order of the Sons of Italy is just getting around to developing a structure modeled on the Jewish pattern after a number of false starts made by Italian groups, as are Catholics through the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Moreover, Jewish community relations organizations have been unusually effective over the years in achieving their goals. When the American Jewish Committee and Anti-Defamation League came into existence in 1906 and 1913 respectively, they found a society heavily dominated by prejudice and discrimination and occasional violence directed against Jews. They worked hard to counteract this to a point where anti-Semitic behavior has been sharply reduced. In his book, The Quest for the Dream, political scientist John P. Roche has credited these organizations with having helped create a climate of civil liberties that greatly facilitated the integration of Jews in American life. At the same time, they were able to move the U.S. government into support for oppressed Jews abroad as in the case of abrogation of the Russo-American treaty of commerce and navigation in 1911.

In recent years, they have successfully broadened their efforts to seek governmental and public support for Israel, lobbied for and obtained the Jackson-Vanik bill which linked trade concessions to the Soviet Union to relaxing barriers to Jews seeking to emigrate from that country, and secured passage of legislation providing penalties for businesses that succumb to the Arab boycott. In accomplishing this, they have been the wonder and envy of other groups. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, with considerably more numbers, has had less success in winning support for key items on its social agenda including governmental aid for parochial schools or agreement by the courts that abortion is unlawful. A major

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reason for Jewish success is that the agencies have managed to link their objectives to what the broader citizenry believe to be basic, American principles. To paraphrase a former head of General Motors, what is good for the Jews has often been seen as good for America.

Another feature of Jewish community relations programming has been that the agencies have gone beyond battling only on behalf of rights of Jews. They have devoted an important part of their energies to seeking the improvement of the lot of other minorities. This was based initially on the premise that human rights are indivisible, that the person who discriminated against one minority would very likely do so against other minorities. National Jewish agencies and local community relations councils pioneered in the development of litigation and legislation outlawing discrimination in employment, housing and education on the state, local, and national planes. Even after the Jewish position improved and discriminatory barriers for Jews began to come down in the 1950's and 1960's, Jewish agencies continued strong efforts in the field of civil rights reflecting their understanding of traditional Jewish social justice concerns.

While each of the national and local agencies has developed its programs according to its special history, philosophy and constituencies, they are joined together in the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) through which they come together for consultation and planning purposes. The fruit of this collaboration can be found each year in the Joint Program Plan For Jewish Community Relations published by the NJCRAC. That document represents an annual effort "to appraise the changes that occurred during the year...to project into the year ahead the programmatic accommodations that those changes suggest." As such, it is a photograph of the mind of Jewish communal leadership as it is currently wrestling with this important aspect of the group and American social experience more generally.

The document is, indeed, an impressive one in the range of its concerns and projected activities. Opening with a major section on Israel, it covers energy, Soviet Jewry, Jews in other lands, holocaust programming, Jewish security and individual freedom, religious freedom and church-state separation, Jewish-Christian relations, domestic and family issues and the position of Jewish agencies on affirmative action. The diversity of the topics here is one indication of the flexibility of the agencies and the organizational strategies for dealing with this constantly changing situation. Eleven out of 51 pages are given over to various aspects of the Israel situation reflective of the centrality of the Jewish state to American Jews in recent years. A dozen or so years ago farsighted officials like Albert D. Chernin, now Executive Vice Chairman of the NJCRAC, and others identified the cultural genocide directed against Soviet Jews as a serious threat and placed it on the Jewish community relations agenda where it presently occupies a prominent place. More recently, the growth of Arab oil power and its ability to hold American foreign policy and American Jewry hostage to its will brought appeals by the American Jewish Committee and the Zionist Organization of America to gain wider support for energy independence, a goal adopted by the Joint Program Plan. The American Jewish Committee has been exploring in recent years broader issues of Jewish survival in the United States growing out of the low Jewish birth rate, the sharp growth in intermarriage, and other societal forces eroding the Jewish community, and it is likely that the Plan will begin to reflect more of these family concerns in the coming period.

The arena where Jewish community relations agencies and the Joint Program Plan itself seem to be having the most trouble in adjusting their agenda to the times is in relating to the American domestic scene. Here the problem is that of American liberalism itself. The national agencies were founded during the Progressive Era, the first two decades of the century, and along with local community relations councils (CRCs) came to their full growth during the New Deal-

Fair Deal-Great Society era. Although the period was marked by a series of domestic and overseas storms, it was generally accepted among liberals, who in the main dominated the political scene during this time, that social progress could best be achieved and the position of Jews strengthened by broadening the role of the federal government. They worked to provide an economic floor for the disadvantaged and to impose national authority on the states, certain of which frequently were violating or interposing few if any objections to those violating the rights of racial and religious minorities. As a result, an important body of social welfare and civil rights legislation was enacted with active Jewish leadership and support. Moreover, the courts generally fell in line with this thrust, sometimes even broadening it, as well as with efforts to remove bible-reading, prayer, and other Christian and religious manifestations in the public schools and other governmental areas.

Beginning in the late 60's and then more forcefully in the 70's, however, this liberal coalition with which Jews have been so closely identified began to fall apart. The civil rights revolution became a race revolution and a number of black militants and white allies began to operate off a third world, anti-Israel, pro-quotas and even anti-Semitic ideology. A section, "Anti-Semitism in the Black Community," had to be added to the Joint Program Plan. This sadly recognizes the problem, particularly within the context of the Andrew Young affair, but attempts to get on programmatically with an older agenda by urging in its operational section "the strengthening of relationships with black leadership" and "intensive interpretation within the Jewish community to overcome anti-black animosity among Jews." The NJCRAC agencies stood firm in opposing racial quotas in admissions to the University of California medical school in the Bakke case since this endangered the principle of merit but the subsequent furor this created among black leaders and other caused the agencies to back off somewhat. The Joint Plan reports "no consensus...either in the general public or in the Jewish community" in the recent Fullilove or Weber cases where quotas were undeniably an issue.

The complexity of the black-Jewish relationship today is symptomatic of the difficulties Jewish organizations born and raised in one era have in confronting another. Post World War II economic progress in this country slowed in the 70's and, in fact, the nation found itself in several recessions. As the pie grew smaller, competition became keener. And despite the civil rights successes of the 50's and early 60's, the cumulative effects of past disadvantage and discrimination and growing sophistication of the economy disabled many minority group members from sharing in the gains made. Many Americans, Jews among them, have been angered by the growth of a permanent and costly welfare class, high taxes, inflation, crime, the drug culture, open and often violent pornography, and a sense that this country's power has eroded all over the world. Much of this anger has turned against an older-style liberalism which promoted the growth of big government and its broadened role in the lives of so many Americans.

The field of Jewish community relations, of course, is not unaware of the new mood symbolized by the election of Ronald Reagan as President. To some degree, it has attempted to adjust to it. However, the strains and omissions are evident throughout the Joint Program Plan. The section on Social Justice urges "study [of] means of easing the burden of inflation and rising taxes on the middle class..." But it immediately adds, "so as to diminish their hostility toward government programs for the disadvantaged." One can ask whether relief for the embattled middle class, which both powers and stabilizes the society and in whose ranks so many Jews are numbered, might not be an end in itself?

On another level, the Joint Plan notes that "the private sector shares in and must take responsibility for the creation of additional jobs," but this seems to be a bowing gesture since the Joint Plan continues to place its greatest emphasis on the role of government. The fact is that economic expansion may be the "new frontier" for civil rights in the 1980's.* If it is, as many have come to suspect, the legi-

* See Murray Friedman, "Economic Growth and Civil Rights," Journal of Contemporary Studies, Vol. IV, no. 1, winter 1981, pp. 51-57.

timate Jewish concern for the weak in the society may be better accomplished through reduction, and in some cases abandonment, of governmental regulations that inhibit economic growth. The Garcia-Kemp "free enterprise zones" legislation is an example of such an approach. Nor do programs such as these, of course, require any retreat from the effort to overcome prejudice and discrimination that still exist in American society. There is some indication, also, that within the minority community there is growing suspicion of governmental solutions to job opportunities, educational progress, and other problems they face.

The difficulty that Jewish community relations faces in relying too heavily on an older-style liberalism is seen also in the sections dealing with Jewish-Christian relations and "the Electronic Church." With regard to the latter, the document deals with the growth of the political Right, mainly the evangelical Protestant thrust, that has been so evident in recent years. It is properly concerned about the excesses of these groups, including the anti-Semitic sentiments voiced by several of their leaders, the targeting for political oblivion of candidates who wander even slightly away from the definition by these zealots as to what constitutes political morality which embraces support for the production of the B-1 bomber and bringing back prayer into the public schools. The Joint Plan voices the deep concern felt by most Jews at the rise of the Christian Right in the section, "Jewish Security and Individual Freedom," immediately after "Political Anti-Semitism." In doing so, however, the document does not deal with or speak out against the growing paganism in American life that has given rise in some measure to the Moral Majority, the Christian Voice, and similar groups. In focusing instead on freedom of expression when, for example, Americans worry increasingly about the problem of crime and violent pornography, or separation of church and state when Roman Catholics and orthodox Jews call for some form of relief for their schools, they have helped create an enormous vacuum that is being filled by more extreme elements. It may well be that urging the courts to pull the 10 Commandments off the wall of a public school at a time when the symbols as well as the reality of public morality needs bolstering is not a high community relations need of the Jewish community.

These are some of the questions Jewish community relations agencies need to ask themselves as they continue their excellent work on behalf of Jews and the broader community. The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency and the growth of a more conservative mood in the land since the late 1960's indicate that one era in this country has ended and another begun. Jewish community relations groups can take pride in having helped to shape the American conscience over the years in dealing with the problems of the discriminated against and disadvantaged as they went about the task of protecting Jewish interests. What they need today is to redefine the issues of the next stage of American social development more clearly and be as inventive in helping devise the policies and programs to deal with them.

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