

Jerusalem Letter

the Jerusalem center

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR
FEDERAL STUDIES

CENTER FOR
JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher • David Clayman, Executive Editor

ISSN: 0334-4096

No. 30: July 1, 1980/17 Tammuz 5740

AMERICAN JEWISH POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE 1980's: FIVE DILEMMAS

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In recent years, American Jews have acquired a reputation as vigorous and astute participants in the political process. This perception--with its accompanying respect for the "Jewish vote" and the "Israel lobby"--in fact coincides with a growing acceptance on the part of Jewish communal leadership that political involvement is indeed a vital component of an enlightened Jewish activism, and not merely an expression of good citizenship. Yet, now, perhaps more than ever before, one can also detect an undercurrent of uncertainty, confusion, and doubt among politically active Jewish communal leaders--not only about the substance of policies or the suitability of candidates, but about the fundamental directions which Jewish political activity ought to be pursuing in the coming decade. These Jewishly - committed, politically concerned leaders have come face to face with a set of dilemmas in their political activities, dilemmas which are forcing them to make uncomfortable choices among less than desirable alternatives. At least five such dilemmas can be identified, each contributing to the current mood of malaise.

1. The dilemma of one issue, or many

Jews active in American political life have traditionally displayed a broad range of concerns. They have contributed their energies and resources to a variety of causes and candidates--usually, but not exclusively, those identifiable as "progressive."

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The Jerusalem Letter is a periodic report intended to objectively clarify and analyze issues of Jewish and Israel public policy.
Subscriptions: \$25 per year

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During the past decade, however, the focus of Jewish political concern has (at least in the eyes of some) been narrowing. Specifically "Jewish" issues--and above all the Jewish issue: support for Israel--have moved to the forefront, to the point where not a few observers have begun to speak of Jews as a "single-issue" constituency.

There can be little doubt that this year's Presidential contest has indeed raised for many Jewish communal leaders the question of whether to embrace a "single-issue" politics. Should satisfactory support for Israel become the litmus test applied to all candidates (and to the virtual exclusion of other issues), Ronald Reagan could well receive Jewish support even greater than that given to Richard Nixon in 1972. Yet, there are many who are genuinely unhappy with the implications of adopting a "single-issue" posture, but who wonder what alternative activist Jews have in the face of a candidate like President Carter, whom many regard as dangerously unsupportive of Israel's security needs.

Underlying the specific dilemma in this instance is a more important question: if politically active Jewish leaders do define themselves as a "single-issue" constituency, what impact will that have on their effectiveness, on their capacity to sustain and communicate a vision for American society, and on their own self-image? Yet, if such Jews do not draw the line, if they do not insist on appropriate support for Israel as the price of their own support, if they do not reward their friends and punish their enemies on this issue, would that not in itself constitute a retreat into ineffectuality, both as political participants and as Jewish leaders?

2. The dilemma of old allies, or new

A corollary of American Jewish political "progressivism" has been Jewish participation in a set of alliances with other minority groups, organized labor, and liberal intellectuals. Today, this coalition is at best crippled, and at worst moribund. In the wake of its decline, however, a new dilemma has emerged for Jewish leaders: should they seek to reactivate the old Jewish alliances, or should they strike out in new directions in search of potential friends for Jewish political initiatives?

There are in fact three options which present themselves today in this respect--the two noted above, and a third: seeking ad hoc alliances on specific issues wherever they can be forged, and without long-term quid pro quos. Such a strategy would preserve maximum flexibility, but it might also preclude the creation of the kind of alliances which permit the development of trust, and therefore the possibility of gaining support on a basis other than the coincidence of immediate interest. Yet, if Jewish leaders are to opt for a strategy of more long-term alliance building, the question then is indeed with whom?

Jewish communal leaders have been notably reluctant, even in the wake of the "Andrew Young affair" and other recent tensions with erstwhile allies, to break all ties with their traditional coalition partners. Yet, many do feel shabbily treated, are doubtful about the positions currently being espoused by some of these allies (on issues like the Middle East, affirmative action, and economic policy), and are questioning the long assumed compatibility of Jewish interests and political "liberalism." On some of these issues in dispute, ideological "conservatives" now appear as the "natural" allies for the Jewish community. But here too, there are matters of substance, style, and historical sentiment which preclude the consummation of a new alliance, at least for many Jewish leaders. Thus, the prospect of narrower, more tentative, and more diverse partnerships presents itself again--less as a desideratum, than an inevitability--and with it, possibly, a diminished Jewish capacity to mobilize any of these "allies" effectively on issues which do not call forth their own spontaneous energies.

3. The dilemma of being "out front," or "laying back"

The question of what kind of alliances to seek to forge, and with whom, takes on added significance in light of another traditional feature of American Jewish politics: the preference for working as much as possible "behind the scenes." Jewish leaders have generally sought to avoid having even their most particularist political concerns labelled as "Jewish issues." Likewise, they have tried to prevent specific candidates from being identified as "Jewish" candidates, even where these individuals enjoy (as several do this year) substantial Jewish financial and logistical support. At a time, however, when the political focus of Jewish communal leaders is on "Jewish" issues and when alliances are tenuous and shifting, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain this posture of remaining "behind the scenes."

Jewish leaders are not being disingenuous when they claim that those issues which are of special concern to American Jewry--support for Israel, policies bearing on the fate of Soviet Jewry, protection of the rights of religious minorities--have much broader implications. The problem they face is how, in the present political climate, to present these issues, and, thereby, how to define their own role in the political arena. Emphasizing the special Jewish interest implies direct and vigorous action, which may well be the best way both to mobilize maximum unified effort within the Jewish community and to make certain that other political actors are aware of Jewish concerns. The risk in assuming such a posture lies in the possibility that these issues will be labelled as merely Jewish, and, even more ominously, that Jewish concern will be perceived as being at odds with the interests of the polity as a whole.

The alternative to getting "out front" in support of policies and candidates supportive of Jewish political concerns is to try to insert the Jewish political agenda into a broader context. This

might imply, e.g., an effort to link aid for Israel to an overall build-up of Western defense capabilities in the Middle East, or pressure on the Soviet Union with respect to Jewish emigration to a harder "cold war" line in general. Such a strategy would appear to mitigate the possibilities of having Jewish concerns isolated and identified as narrowly particularistic, and would permit Jewish leaders to step into the background when they wished to do so. The corresponding risks in this instance, however, are also real: by submerging Jewish concerns in a larger context, Jewish leaders may lose the capacity to define those concerns in accordance with their own (possibly changing) perceptions. They may also be forced to "buy in" to policies which they would otherwise not support. Here too, then, there is a genuine dilemma, and a strategic decision for one or the other course could well affect not only the American Jewish community, but the fate and fortunes of world Jewry as a whole.

4. The dilemma of being a "mouthpiece," or a "middleman"

Nowhere must American Jewish leaders be more sensitive about the role they play in the American political process than where the security of Israel may be at stake. Here also, these leaders face a dilemma today: put (perhaps too) simply, should they serve as Israel's spokesmen within the American political system, or as quasi-independent actors, attempting to reconcile Israeli and American policy positions while retaining a critical distance from both? This dilemma has both strategic and substantive components, the latter centering on the evident dissatisfaction of many communal leaders with the current policies of both the Carter and Begin administrations.

Divorced from these immediate concerns, however, the dilemma expresses an ongoing uncertainty about the impact which visible dissent from Israeli policies by American Jewish leaders has within American policy-making circles. Some argue that any deviation from Israeli governmental positions gives greater leverage to those within the American government who are not notably sympathetic to Israel and to an administration which seeks to push Israel to make "concessions" on critical points. Others argue, however, that if American Jewish leaders are perceived as nothing more than puppets of the Israeli government, they will lose all credibility, even on vital issues. Within the American Jewish community, this dilemma feeds the controversy over the legitimacy and limits of "dissent." For Jews looking outward, there is the additional spectre of the charge of "dual loyalty" which often remains just below the surface when Jewish leaders appear to be more supportive of the positions of Israel's government than of our own. Thus, what might for many be the central issue--how to be maximally effective in advancing Israel's real security needs--becomes clouded by several others, ranging from the issue of intra-communal "democracy" to debates over the substantive merits of particular policies, all of which tend to exacerbate the dilemma of what role to assume in the often tense interplay between the U.S. and Israel.

5. The dilemma of hanging together, or hanging separately

All of the dilemmas outlined thus far point towards a fifth one which will perhaps prove the ultimate test for politically active Jewish leaders in the coming decade. Will Jews strive to maintain their substantial cohesiveness as a political force, or will they consent to scatter to various points on the political landscape? In the past, Jewish communal leaders and organizations have been able to sustain a fairly broad consensus on a significant number of political issues--social welfare and economic policies, civil liberties, civil rights--even beyond those which have obvious "Jewish" components. The fruits of this consensus have been enhanced political effectiveness and a sense of communal unity.

Today, however, there are signs that this consensus is breaking down in some areas--e.g., on affirmative action or aid to religious schools--and is difficult to form on others--e.g., energy policy. Nor is there unanimity, at least on a tactical level, even with respect to many "Jewish" issues, including Middle East policy. Whether or not the Jewish populace as a whole is becoming more "conservative," as some have contended, it is certainly no longer true that Jewish leaders can be assumed to be "liberals." The movement of Jewish leaders to all parts of the political spectrum comes, however, at a time when other, largely demographic, factors appear to promise an overall decline in Jewish political influence. Those who welcome the diffusion of Jewish political commitments see it as a way of building bridges to all segments of the political community and increasing their attentiveness to Jewish political concerns. It may, however, be equally plausible to view this development as a further contributor to Jewish political weakness, and even as a potential barrier to unified action in those areas where considerable consensus still prevails.

For Jewish communal leaders, the cutting edge of the dilemma is whether to try to recreate in deliberate fashion what once existed almost as a matter of course. To attempt to do so may in any event be futile, but it also courts the risk of alienating minority factions within the community and focusing undue scrutiny on the Jewish community as a (possible imaginary) political bloc. Yet, not to do so might narrow still further the collective Jewish political agenda in this country, and, to the extent that shared social values expressed in social policy positions have helped weave the fabric of American Jewish communal unity, might rend that fabric as well.

Taken together, the dilemmas outlined above raise two questions: The first is a question of substance--what political policies and programs should Jewish communal leaders be espousing today? The second is a question of process--how can these leaders most effectively advance whatever policies and programs they do

endorse? The dilemmas I have pointed to reflect the difficulty of providing clear answers to these questions. At a minimum, however, politically active Jewish leaders need to begin to think these questions through in some systematic fashion if they are to be able to steer a reasonably steady course through the challenges ahead.

I would suggest that the starting point for such reflection may lie in the ability to distinguish among three areas of Jewish political concern: 1) those issues and policies where the survival, security, and basic rights of individual Jews and the Jewish people are at stake; 2) those issues and policies which affect the interests of Jews as an ethnic group or a religious community; and 3) those issues and policies which touch Jewish rights or interests only peripherally, but which Jews as citizens and the Jewish community as a social entity will wish to attend to. For each of these areas, a different approach to political action, both within the Jewish community and in the public arena, would seem to be appropriate.

In the first area, I would argue, it is both legitimate for and incumbent upon Jewish leaders to assert a political claim as boldly and vigorously as possible. This does not mean that tactical questions even in this area are irrelevant. But on such issues as basic support for Israel's survival and security (though not necessarily all Israeli policies), rights of Jews in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, action against anti-semitism, and the preservation of religious freedom--the heart of today's Jewish political agenda--the clear bias of Jewish leaders should be towards unified, self-initiated, unself-conscious action. There should be no reluctance to advance these as "Jewish" concerns, but also as issues on which Jews expect unconditional support from all other Americans, precisely because they are not issues of Jewish interest, but of right and survival.

There are, however, other issues of Jewish concern which are at bottom matters of Jewish interests. Like all groups in a pluralistic society, Jews have a right to pursue these interests through collective political action. But here, two additional factors enter into consideration. One is that there will likely be considerably greater diversity among Jews in defining their interests as Jews, than there will be in defining their fundamental rights. The second, and more important, is that in addition to immediate economic, social, and political interests, American Jews also have a fundamental interest in the success of the political process in which the interests of all groups are aggregated and adjusted to produce a final outcome. Jews have an interest in a relatively stable, moderately progressive system in which all interests and aspirations are met sufficiently so that no group will turn against the system itself. Jewish leaders should not pretend that all issues which involve Jewish interests are issues of basic rights or survival, nor should they assume that compromise or

defeat on issues where an interest is asserted represents a setback to Jewish security, or even necessarily an undesirable outcome in the long run.

This approach to a Jewish politics of interest also holds out the best possibilities for erecting viable alliances, both on the basis of common interests and on trade-offs with respect to individual group concerns. Some of the tensions between Blacks and Jews in recent years might have been alleviated had not some Jewish leaders construed the issue of affirmative action and implicit quotas in terms of individual "rights" or sought to tie it to the explicitly anti-semitic quota practices of the past. Viewed as a matter of competing interests, the "confrontation" could be handled differently; indeed, it might even have been (and still be) worthwhile to sacrifice a measure of Jewish interest in the short-run in order to keep faith with a long-term ally and possibly reap a more fruitful political harvest in the future.

In the third substantive area--those issues and policies which touch Jewish rights or interests at best peripherally--the natural diversity of contemporary Jewish political viewpoints will, and probably should be permitted to, find expression. This does not mean, however, that such issues should not be discussed within Jewish contexts. Many, such as energy policy, welfare reform, aid to education, urban and housing policies, programs relating to the family, etc., do have implications for American Jews, both individually and collectively, even where it cannot be said that Jews as a group have a clear interest at stake. Debate on such issues within the framework of Jewish communal life may help to focus these implications, even where it does not lead to substantive agreement on policies and programs. By seeing the full range of social and political issues as suitable for Jewish discussion, though not necessarily as areas where Jewish leaders wish to assert a "Jewish" position, it is possible to preserve a breadth and fluidity to the Jewish political agenda which might otherwise be lost. Perhaps more important discussion of these issues in a Jewish context may promote renewed attention to the whole question of whether there is a tradition of Jewish political values and perspectives which remains relevant in the contemporary era. Somewhat ironically, then, Jewish political diversity could in fact serve as a unifying factor in Jewish life--not only in the United States, but between American Jews and Israelis, for whom the viability of a Jewish political tradition is a major issue--by drawing Jews into a serious discussion of the values and assumptions with which they enter into their own political endeavors.

It is worth reiterating that the analysis offered here does not pretend to resolve each of the dilemmas listed above. In the real world, the distinctions drawn among the three areas of policy and issues will surely not be as sharp as I have implied they are. Jews will undoubtedly differ in their estimation of what is in fact

at stake as they confront specific political problems and proposals. They will differ as well on how to translate broad strategic parameters--even when these have been agreed upon--into specific tactical options. Despite the dilemmas which face them, however, the coming era in American Jewish politics could be one of unparalleled opportunity for Jewish leaders: the opportunity both to develop a model of effective and responsible ethnic group participation within the American political system, and to extend and enrich the Jewish people's long tradition of political thought and action.

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