

THE LEFT QUESTION AND THE JEWS

by Bob Lamm

(This article represents remarks made at a panel on “Anti-Semitism” at the Jewish Socialist Conference at the Henry Street Settlement House in New York City on December 14, 1975)

My topic today is “Anti-Semitism and Jewish Self-Hatred in Left Politics.” I wish to make one important preceding statement. I’m speaking here as a Jewish man, not simply as a Jewish person. I’m speaking as a Jewish man who benefits from male supremacy and male privilege. Therefore, I don’t want to pretend in any way to be speaking for Jewish women. There are many fine writings by Jewish women on the connection between sexism and anti-Semitism, and I owe a real debt to these feminist writers.

In my personal experiences as an American Jewish man, the Left has been about as difficult a place to be as any other part of this society. I’ve encountered as little understanding of my life and feelings from radicals—including Jewish radicals—as I have from liberals, conservatives, and apolitical people.

To illustrate this statement, I want to describe what happened to me when I worked in an “anti-imperialist” group a few years ago. I’m not going to name the group or the individuals involved, since I believe that what happened to me could have occurred in just about any part of the American Left. I’ve witnessed anti-Jewish attitudes in pacifist circles, in anarchist circles, in “anti-imperialist” circles, and so forth. It would be too easy to point the finger at any one group.

When I joined this “anti-imperialist” group, the composition was roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ Christians and $\frac{1}{4}$ Jews. How the Christians felt about Jews can best be illustrated by one brief story. I walked into the office one afternoon and noticed a pile of old books on a table. Included was Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money*. I showed the book to a Christian member of the group, and began explaining what a wonderful work it was. The response was: “Oh, *Jews Without Money*, what a funny title! Ha! Ha!” Somehow the humor didn’t strike me, and I found myself furious and hurt and totally unable to speak.

I honestly didn’t know how to reply, because this particular person was not an active, conscious Jew-hater. This was a typical Christian who had no understanding of Jewish people’s lives, who had no understanding of how I might feel about a remark like that, who simply *didn’t understand*. And, at that moment, I didn’t feel like educating that person. I was much too upset. I just felt like walking away.

That incident well represented the awareness of these Christian “radicals” about the feelings of Jews. None of them was militantly hostile to Jewish people. But all of them were subtly, stupidly, unthinkingly insensitive to Jewish people all of the time.

The Jews in the group were no better. A few simply wouldn’t speak about their Jewishness, including one person who had lived for a year on a kibbutz. One Jewish member of the group couldn’t stop speaking on the subject. This person would inject openly anti-Semitic comments into meetings on a regular basis. There would always be cutting remarks or outright attacks concerning Yeshiva or Hadassah or B’nai B’rith, about Hasidic Jews or Israeli Jews or *any* Jews. Predictably enough, “Zionism” was the ultimate dirty word in the vocabulary of this Jewish radical.

One night, at a regular meeting of the group, we decided to go around in a circle and present brief autobiographical statements. I was one of the first to speak, and I explained how for me being a Jew and being a radical were interconnected in a way that I couldn’t separate; how I felt myself to be part of a tradition of Jews who had fought against anti-Semitism, against Jewish reactionaries, and against non-Jewish reactionaries. And I spoke of the very special emotional meaning that the Rosenberg-Sobell case had for me—even beyond the meaning that I believe it should have for *any* progressive person.

I knew that my remarks would not sit well with at least one Jewish member of the group. Sure enough, when this person’s turn came, there was an immediate attack on me. The anger was explosive: “I DON’T SEE HOW ANYONE WHO’S POLITICAL CAN FEEL GOOD ABOUT BEING JEWISH!!!!” And on and on and on. Again, I just didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t figure out any way that my feelings and my politics would be understood or respected in that room. Meanwhile, all of the other Jews in the group silently witnessed the attack on me.

For the first few months in this “anti-imperialist” group, I had to hold in many of my feelings as a Jew. The reason was simple: I felt alone. I saw 15 potential adversaries and not one likely supporter. Eventually, I began working with a local radical Jewish organization on efforts to reopen the Rosenberg-Sobell case. After sharing feelings with other Jews who *cared* about their Jewishness, I realized it was time to confront the issue within the “anti-imperialist” group. I couldn’t let it go by forever. Even if I wasn’t eager to fight all of them at once, I was determined to say *something*. I wanted them to know exactly where I stood.

So I announced that I was a member of the radical Jewish group, and that we were holding a forum on the Rosenberg-Sobell case. And, over the next few months, I announced other events in our campaign to reopen the case. But *not one person* from the “anti-imperialist” group—not the Jews, not the Christians—ever asked me a single question about the Rosenbergs or about my work on the issue. Not to

mention that they didn't attend the forums. Not to mention that they didn't give a damn about Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. They never even asked a *question* about it.

There was a very difficult choice being forced on me, which I want to illustrate with a brief story. I went to Foley Square one day when Assata Shakur of the Black Liberation Army was on trial. I was sitting in the courtroom when someone said to me, "This is the same courtroom where Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were tried." *The same courtroom!* To me, that information was overwhelming. And, to me, the choice was not between caring about Assata Shakur on the other hand and caring about the Rosenbergs on the other. That's not an either-or choice. But, *in that "anti-imperialist" group*, it was an either-or.

And I say here that those people did not care and did not want to know about Ethel and Julius Rosenberg *because the Rosenbergs were Jews*. These "radicals" never spoke about, never thought about, and didn't care about the Holocaust. If the murder of six million Jews didn't seem important to them, what was two more?

These attitudes forced me into a choice, a choice I didn't want to make. But I had to ask myself: "How can I last here? How can I survive here? How can I even *pretend* that these people are my comrades?"

I quit the group. I left over a variety of issues, including continual sexism against women and gay people. I also quit because of my feelings as a Jew, and I explained why.

But the story wasn't quite over. After I resigned, I learned an interesting fact about one of my closer friends in the group. I had worked with this person for a year, always believing that the individual was Protestant. There had never even been a *hint* of Jewish identity. But this member of the group was and is a Jew. And this Jewish radical—like more Jews than any of us know—is deliberately keeping a secret.

I believe that this "anti-imperialist" Jew is a victim of oppression. I believe that this person is a political prisoner, and I want to free *all* political prisoners. I want to free the political prisoners that the male Left talks about, like Assata Shakur and Lolita Lebron. I want to free the political prisoners that the male Left *does not* talk about, like Susan Saxe. And I want to free the Jewish political prisoners within the Left, who can't even *admit* that they're Jewish, much less deal in any decent way with their Jewish roots and feelings.

All of us know how difficult it is merely to say to Christians or to Jews in the Left: "I'm going to a Jewish Socialist Conference today." What are the reactions we get? Either blank looks, or mocking laughter, or immediately provocative interrogation. We all know what the different forms of attack are, and how we are made to feel.

Thus, I want to conclude with three final statements. The first is that, to me, the Left shows no signs of dealing with its own internal anti-Semitism, much less with its attacks on Jewish people in the United States, much less with the attacks on Jewish people around the world. What is the Left position on Idi Amin? What is the Left position on Soviet Jews? What is the Left position on the right of Israeli Jews to live in the Middle East? Why does the American Left never speak about the Holocaust? When will we hear from our “comrades” in the Left on these matters?

Secondly, I believe that many Jews in the Left are in the same historical position that Jews have occupied through most of our history of being *court Jews*. Court Jews do the bidding of powerful rulers who aren’t Jewish and who control the lives of Jews.

Jews in the Left immediately have to face the burden of proving that we’re “good Jews,” as lots of Jews have had to do in lots of societies. Being a “good Jew” means facing an intense cross-examination. “Aha, you’re Jewish! OK, what’s your position on the JDL? What’s your position on Zionism? Do you unconditionally support all actions of the P.L.O.? How do you feel about Jewish teachers? How do you feel about Jewish religion? What’s your position on this? What’s your position on that?” We’re on the witness stand. The questions come rapid-fire from all sides, and Jewishness is taken as a presumption of guilt.

And even if we have the “right” positions—and even if we don’t agree with the politics of some Jewish leaders—we still have to prove our validity as people and as Jews to these Leftists. I refuse to do so any more. I’m done with that. I don’t have to prove my validity as a Jew to anyone. I don’t have to defend my existence as a Jew to anyone. And I won’t apologize for my unconditional commitment to the survival of Jewish people wherever we live—in the United States, in Israel, in Syria, in the Soviet Union, in Argentina, anywhere.

But we’re in a position of oppression when we must face those pressures. We must continually demonstrate that we’re “good Jews” in the terms that someone else sets down for us. And not only that. We’re the ones whom they use to deal with the “bad Jews.” Watch the way we get used. Watch the way we get trotted out to deal with Jews whom the Left finds unacceptable.

Most of the time, we’re expected to keep silent and never identify proudly as Jews. But, occasionally, when the Left finds it convenient to have a bunch of Jews attack Israel or “Zionism,” then, suddenly, they want us to be publicly Jewish. So that we can more effectively be used to attack other Jews.

This is a role that some Jews have always played, and not solely in the Left. Some Jews play this role in liberal circles, even in right-wing circles. The John Birch Society needs token Jews every once in a while who hate Jews enough, and the

Chase Manhattan Bank needs Jews to play that role, and the Catholic Church needs Jews to play that role. That's painful enough for me. But when I see that the Left also needs Jews to play that role, it's more than I can bear.

One final point. Another speaker at the conference made an important presentation about our need to read about the history of Third World peoples. It's not surprising that he can come here and make that statement. But how easy is it for any of us to go to Left groups we work in and say to those Christians and Jews: "Go do some reading about Jewish history!" How many of us have ever done it? How many of us will ever do it? And what price do we pay if we even *dare* to do things like that in the Left?

So I merely say that I've had it. When people show no concern for my life and my feelings, when people declare that I can't work in their groups and be myself, then I have to wonder how they're going to free *anyone*.

Bob Lamm is a writer in New York and teaches literature classes at NYU. His work has appeared in the New York Times, Publishers Weekly, the Village Voice, Ms. Magazine, and many other venues. He has taught at Yale, Queens College, the New School, and the City University of New York Graduate Center. He can be reached at blamm86@nyc.rr.com

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