

ONE VOICE LESS FOR THE JEWISH LEFT: NEW JEWISH AGENDA 1981 -- 1993

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After 12 years as a voice for the American Jewish left, New Jewish Agenda (NJA) formally closed down in the Fall of 1993. During its peak in the mid 1980's, having roughly 5,000 members in 40 chapters across the U.S. and Canada, NJA was an exemplar of progressive Jewish identity politics: the largest locus at the time of overtly Jewish identified left activism, as well as the major Jewish component in the lives of many of its members. Why did NJA fold, just as some of its views on the Middle East such as a two state solution and Israeli/PLO mutual recognition, for which NJA and other groups were long vilified, were coming into widespread acceptance, and when its recent focus on racism and anti-Semitism was becoming increasingly important?

The ostensible reasons were a financial crisis leading to the laying off of the national staff and the closing of Agenda's office, as well as the collapse (and in one case secession) of some chapters. There were also vicious attacks by the mainstream and right-wing Jewish organizations, and the hard times felt by many left groups during the Reagan/Bush era. But the root causes of NJA's demise are, I believe, internal no less than external.

I was not a founding member of NJA but an ending one; I was the last chair of NJA's National Middle East Task Force, and the organizer of the last National Council meeting, at which the question of folding the organization was the only topic. My aim here is not a narrative history, but rather a brief account of what NJA accomplished, and why this work ended so prematurely. Though my remarks must at times be critical if we are to learn the appropriate lessons for future progressive Jewish organizing, any criticism I make is unquestionably in the context of great affection and respect for the many dedicated activists with whom I found a home in Agenda.

ORIGINS

NJA was formed in the wake of the demise of Breira, a Jewish group in the 1970's that focussed on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Breira was severely hurt by attacks from the right, and to avoid the same fate NJA was designed to contrast with its predecessor: it was to be multi-issue, and was organized around grass roots activism. Agenda's slogan was to be "a progressive voice in the Jewish community and a Jewish voice in the progressive community."

Though Agenda did some good work on a variety of issues, including feminism, gay and lesbian rights, disarmament, Central America and economic and social justice, these areas never seemed to grab hold of the broad membership as did the Middle East -- the one topic among these that is strongly tied to the self-identity of American Jews. The one other area of activism that touched real existential questions was the racism and anti-Semitism work of NJA's final years, though by that point NJA's lack of funds and energy never allowed the issue to be developed as it might have been.

The membership of NJA, at core baby boomer though not exclusively so, was surprisingly diverse: Jewishly involved mainstream liberals and far leftists with little Jewish identity; Zionists and non-Zionists; religious Jews and equally devout secularists; lesbian, gay, bisexual and straight members. Some members were progressive Jews seeking to avoid the anti-Semitism found in some places on the left.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Agenda provided a political and Jewish home in which ideas could be discussed and from which activism could be launched. NJA members often did their activist work as participants in coalitions with other groups, leading to good results but a lack of public credit for NJA's role, and in turn to a lack of outside interest, new members and funding. Various independent projects were spawned in NJA, such as the Jewish feminist magazine Bridges, a direct offshoot of the NJA National Feminist Task Force; some indirect offshoots include the Shefa Fund and Project Nishma.

Among the highlights of NJA's accomplishments as a national organization: sponsoring a number of national speaking tours, including a Palestinian together with an Israeli peace activist, and a South African rabbi together with a black South African activist; providing a Jewish voice in sanctuary movement for Central American refugees; sending a delegation to Nicaragua which debunked the Reagan allegation of Sandinista anti-Semitism; organizing the standing room only Havdallah ceremony at the gay and lesbian march in Washington DC in 1987.

Agenda's best ongoing work was often at the chapter level. Chapters located away from the Jewish population centers in the Northeast, where no other progressive Jewish groups were to be found, proved particularly important for providing a home for Jewish progressives. Some chapters focussed on particular political issues, whereas others became essentially havurot. Though by design a political organization, one of NJA's greatest accomplishments was providing a Jewish home for many American Jews who would not have joined a more traditional Jewish institution. For some of our members we provided their only Passover Seders and their only Shabbat dinners since childhood. Some who were drawn into Agenda by our politics, left with a Jewish identity -- whether religious or secularist. Ironically, had NJA primarily intended to promote the development of Jewish identity it would probably not have attracted most of those who eventually joined.

When NJA folded one veteran member summed it up: "We are a little worse for the wear, but we were a scrappy little group with an abundance of chutzpah! To our former members we should say, Long Live Chutzpah!"

POLITICAL PROBLEMS -- EXTERNAL & INTERNAL

The organized Jewish world usually wanted nothing to do with NJA, often viewing us as a collection of grass-roots radicals who knew nothing about organized Jewry. Many NJA members, coming from the left and identifying as such, indeed knew little not only of the structure of mainstream American Jewish organizations, but also of the deep-seated feelings of large segments of American Jews. In retrospect it appears incredibly naive to

have hoped to influence the organized Jewish world without knowing more about those we wished to educate.

If we were naive about the mainstream Jewish community, we were completely unprepared for the unbelievable intolerance for dissent found in that world. Our real crime, as it were, was ultimately neither image, nor naivete, nor even leftist views, but our explicit belief in the need to break the hegemony that the mainstream Jewish organizations had, and particularly to challenge the one-sided views they promoted in the 1980's about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. NJA's bold stance opposing the 1982 war in Lebanon, at a time when public Jewish criticism of Israeli government policies was even more rare than today, was both a catalyst for NJA's early growth and a source of much enmity. On non-Middle East issues our views were not always outside the pale, but our Middle East position often left us completely untouchable.

While viewed as monolithically "leftist" by the mainstream, the internal political disagreements in NJA were vigorous -- though not, contrary to some views, the cause of NJA's dissolution. Despite the potential divisiveness of NJA's broad membership, the autonomy of the chapters was such that most members felt they had political room to do what they wanted, as long as it was not explicitly opposed to the NJA platform. By the mid 1980's the only real internal political division concerned the Middle East. On the core Middle East issues, namely Israel/PLO mutual recognition and a two-state solution, there were no arguments. What did almost cause a split in NJA was the question of ongoing U.S. aid to Israel.

The split was partly along Zionist vs. non-Zionist lines (though "non-Zionist" did not mean "anti-Zionist" -- the NJA platform always supported the right of Israel to exist); I preferred the terms "Israel-identified" and "non-Israel-Identified" as more accurate. I was a partisan of the former group, whose members felt that a Jewish outlook necessitated a special attachment to Israel no matter how critical we were of Israeli government policy, whereas the other group tended to view the Middle East through the lens of U.S. foreign policy. The non-Israel-identified wanted to link U.S. aid at minimum to an improvement in Israeli human rights practices in the occupied territories, if not to an end to the occupation, similar to our approach to human rights elsewhere. The other side claimed that our core message was mutual recognition and two-states, and that a strong stance on aid would hurt the chances of effectively conveying our message to the Jewish community.

At the start of the Intifadah in 1987, when media attention to the Palestinian issue could have led to excellent NJA outreach, NJA's Middle East work was paralyzed by the aid debate. A combination of sheer exhaustion, the desire to avoid a split in the organization and changes in leadership, led to a subsiding of the aid debate after the contentious but indecisive NJA National Convention of 1989, dedicated solely to the issue of aid to Israel. NJA's Middle East work never fully recovered. Funding that used to go to NJA was now going to more mainstream groups (such as Americans for Peace Now) which were finally coming round publicly to the views that NJA had previously been almost alone in promoting. The emergence of Tikkun, a few years after NJA was founded, provided a publicly accessible forum for the sorts of ideas that had previously been discussed less visibly in groups such as NJA.

Additionally, just as Agenda's position in the Middle East debate was becoming less unique, changes in the general political climate in the late 1980's also undercut the urgency of some of NJA's other national foci such as Central America, nuclear disarmament and South Africa.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

The internal debate in NJA over whether to fold centered only on whether and how NJA could sustain itself given diminishing resources and membership. I believe our organizational problems were due in part to the ideological legacies of the 1960's and 1970's, which informed the organizing style at all levels. It was the political movements of these two decades that made possible Agenda's particular mix of grass-roots activism and Jewish consciousness-raising, but paradoxically they also planted the seeds of some problematic organizational practices that undermined our growth and effectiveness over time.

Agenda's main structural problem was the result of the continual split, right from Agenda's founding, between the grass roots purists who wanted a loose association of local chapters, and those who wanted a strong national organization. The former camp was suspicious of so-called "paper members," that is, members who pay their dues but are not active; the latter camp wanted as many paper members as possible to support the national organization. The grass roots camp was hostile to a strong national organization, and preferred as much chapter autonomy on political stances as possible.

One example of the pervasive silliness that resulted from this split: for years NJA lost many "paper members" (and their dues) because the national organization did not send out dues renewal notices; the task was left to the often incapable or unwilling chapters. When I naively suggested at a national meeting that we start national dues collection I was warned that such a suggestion would arouse the suspicions of the chapters. Though a motion to nationalize dues collection was eventually passed, it was never regularly implemented. To avoid such nonsense I would urge any newly formed group to conceptualize its organizational structure as well as its politics right from the start.

NJA's organizational structure was a compromise between the different camps, and not surprisingly it pleased no one: it was just strong enough so that chapters could not take independent political stances (e.g. on aid to Israel), but not sufficiently focussed so that the national could really grow. National leadership, both elected and staff, was never delegated sufficient responsibility, and those responsibilities they did have were never clearly formulated. By default many tasks fell to the two national co-chairs, so much so that many of our most qualified members would not run for these positions.

Activity at the national level can only occur when supported by sufficient paid staff and office resources, and NJA was always understaffed for its ambitions. Money is of course a problem for all radical groups, but NJA seems to have had even more money problems than many comparable groups, due at least in part to the anti-national leanings of some members, to legacies of the 1960's such as a fear of using well-known names (who belonged to our advisory board) in membership drives and the like, and perhaps to a

subconscious attempt by younger American Jews to resemble as little as possible the mainstream Jewish life so dominated by fundraising.

Agenda's democratic process was truly remarkable: national leaders were active members rather than the well-known or well-heeled; leadership positions were open to virtually anyone (whether capable or not); national decisions went through many levels of discussion before adoption; gender parity issues received prominent attention. But there was often in Agenda a mania for the details of process, the legacy of personal growth movements (such as co-counseling), that at times converted too much energy from the political to the procedural. Though some valuable facilitation techniques were learned from the personal growth movements, leading to meetings that were highly participatory, the admirable goal of fostering personal empowerment led, though its overemphasis, to an atmosphere where it often became more important to avoid unpleasantness in meetings than to get anything done. It was virtually impossible to criticize anyone for failing to accomplish what they were elected to do. We spent lots of money subsidizing chapter representatives flying to meetings, but the meetings were often wasted in discussions of process, of what we were supposed to be doing, and of who had authority for what. Democracy was the goal, but unaccountability and a sense of frustration and wasted effort was often the reality.

DID IT HAVE TO END?

I have begun to suspect that political organizations have natural life cycles, beyond which there is no point in artificially prolonging life. The changing political world, the aging of a generation of activists, the failure to organize the young, the natural decline of organizational energy as activism becomes routine -- all these led to the natural dissipation of NJA as an effective political organization beyond any mistakes we might have made. American Jewry still needs a grass roots, self-consciously radical group to nip at the heels of the complacent mainstream organizations; to promote new ideas that might eventually work their way to the center; and to be a Jewish voice in progressive coalitions as the mainstream turns away from liberal politics. But the issues and organizational styles of the current decade are not the same as a dozen years ago, and new groups are needed.

It would not have been hard to find more effective political organizations than NJA, and it would have been no harder to have found greater depth of Jewish understanding elsewhere. But for myself and many of my Agenda friends, it will be hard to find another group that so effectively merges the political and the Jewish aspects of our lives. It is the loss of this unity of vision, and the resulting camaraderie, that saddens many of us, even if we know rationally that the time to dissolve NJA had come.

But where there is politics there will be Jews of all political stripes, and the annals of progressive Jewish organizing in America is far from over.

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