

Arab Citizens of Israel: Considerations

Leonard Fein, July 2001

When I began writing this memo, I imagined it would have two parts, the first dealing with immediate goals for the informal group - federation executives, agency representatives working through the Interagency Task Force on Israeli Arabs, and others - that has lately taken on the problem of Israeli Arabs, the second a reflection on long-term needs. But as I wrote, it became clear to me that there is no useful division between the two: Short of a major national mobilization on behalf of, say, a 10-year plan - and that is plainly not going to happen in the current climate, if ever - what we do in the short term must include elements that prepare for the long term.

1. For whatever it is worth - and I am not competent to assess just what it may be worth - I had the impression during my conversations with government people in June that the notion that the Arab problem might bubble into full public view in the U.S. was, as it was intended to be, disturbing to them. (One measure, by the way, of the urgency of the problem is that when, some six months or so ago, I first developed that idea as part of our "message," I thought that the problem with the message was that if Israeli consular officials were asked, they'd accurately report that there was no possibility of the problem "bubbling into public view." It was, I believed, a problem of concern to a very, very few American Jews. Six months later, the situation has changed quite dramatically. I believe that a combination of circumstances has led to the beginning of genuine concern in broad, and often surprising, quarters, and that the threat that Israel may find itself in the dock of public opinion on this issue is real and imminent.) My own meetings were principally with peripheral people; the message needs to be brought to the attention of central leadership in Israel. The strategy for setting up the needed meetings depends, for the time being, on the Prime Minister's response to the letter he is soon to receive.

2. It is time, I believe, for the creation of an Israeli "Kerner Commission," a highly visible body, established by the government, with a timetable and appropriate publicity, to report to the government and the people of Israel on the problem. Absent government readiness to create such a commission, we should consider doing it ourselves - that is to say, as a group of prominent American Jewish leaders with a professed concern for the problem, and aware that one aspect of the problem is the behavior of Israel's government(s), very publicly name and provide the budget for a report on the condition of Israel's Arab citizens. Such a departure from the routines of the Israel-Diaspora relationship makes sense only if we can identify at least five, and preferably, say, nine commissioners of substantial visibility and credibility in Israeli society.

It will be said, no doubt, that the nation is not ready for such a commission, whether named by the government or by a Diaspora leadership group. In America, Kerner followed years of burning cities - and, more important, could appeal to an established national consensus regarding the "ideal" America. But surely progress on the Israeli Arab issue cannot be allowed to await the emergence of a comparable consensus in that country. (In fact, Kerner followed Myrdal's American Dilemma by 14 years. Myrdal, it is scarcely remembered, was on the whole an optimistic book, optimistic because it could and did appeal to the American consensus. That is what gave rise to the book's title.) More: It will be said that Kerner followed years of an explosive black literature that had commanded the attention of a substantial segment of America's elite. To the best of my knowledge, if there is an Israeli Arab James Baldwin or Claude Brown, no one in the Jewish community is

paying attention. But again: The search for a perfect analogy is futile, and the search for a solution is long overdue.

3. I heartily endorse Brian's "tri-partite" proposal. At the same time, I call attention to its inherent difficulties. While I quite agree that his proposal may be the only route to the mobilization of significant resources from the American Jewish community, and is a clever strategy for encouraging interaction between Jews and Arab in Israel, I call attention to Brian's favorite example of a tri-partite alliance - San Francisco, Hadera, and Baka al Garbiya (sp?). Everything I am told about the relationship between the two Israeli cities suggests that it is close to impossible to imagine serious cooperation between them at any level. I very much hope that I am misinformed. And again, we have little choice but to try. Still, we should try with caution, picking our first Israeli pairings in such a way as to maximize the prospect of success.

4. No single approach is sufficient either to the task or to the excitement of public opinion and debate in Israel. The Ant-Defamation League should be encouraged to pursue both initiatives that have been raised with it - the development and implementation of sensitivity training courses for Israeli police personnel, as also the facilitation of an Arab (or Arab-Jewish?) anti-defamation league. American synagogues should be encouraged to launch a program for adopting Israeli Arab kindergartens. American leadership missions should routinely visit Israeli Arabs and meet with Israeli Arab leaders. At the same time, the groundwork should be laid for the consideration of the theoretical/ideological issues that are here at stake. It seems to me important that the debate over the "proper" place of Israel's citizens in Israeli society cannot be left wholly to the post-Zionists. Their proposals for "a state of its citizens," which include, for example, changing the name of the country, are sure to alienate the vast majority of Jewish Israelis. But other have not done their homework, beyond vague calls for equality.

It seems to me unlikely in the extreme that this or any subsequent government will ever marshal the resources that are required if equality is to be taken as a serious national goal in the absence of a vision of the Jewish state as embracing a heterogeneous society. The plain truth is that anyone who has ever thought at all about the matter knows that there are tensions inherent in being at one and the same time both a Jewish state and a democratic state. For a variety of reasons, it has been thought best to ignore those tensions, or to make light of them. Indeed, it may still be too dangerous to confront them directly, except as situationally required, even now. But someone, somewhere, must begin the thought process that will one day, when the times are better suited to the task, enable such a confrontation.

5. The government, it seems to me, has a difficult choice to make. It can force us to engage in the activities we select in opposition to its own policies, as a kind of dissident group, or it can assert its leadership, leading, as it were, where we choose to follow. If the former, it leaves itself open to brutal criticism, since there is no way we can engage in our activities without, at least inferentially, calling attention to the government's historic and current inaction. If the latter, it insulates itself against the charge of discrimination: "That was then, but this is now." Come to think of it, it is not so difficult a choice.