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Social Movements

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“Ten days that shook the world” is the way Oregon-born radical and journalist John Reed famously described the Russian Revolution of 1917. Some events and movements shake the world and seem to tear it apart; others pass from the scene at the speed of light. How do we explain the difference? This issue of *Sh'ma* is pegged to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the massive D.C. rally that propelled the Soviet Jewry movement into its final triumphant years. With that movement, arguably the most powerful of all social movements to shake the Jewish world in the last few decades, and its significant impact in mind (it resulted in 2 million people leaving the FSU), we tour a wide range of activist initiatives that have arisen and, in some instances, disappeared rapidly, such as Tel Aviv’s tent city of the summer of 2011. We examine what happens to a movement, such as “Save Darfur,” that experiences fatigue and loses momentum — even when the issues that launched it persist. We take a look at these and other movements to learn what they teach us about social organization, about change, and about their impact on contemporary Judaism. What are the movements of change that continue to capture the minds and attract the hearts of Jews?

We open the issue with an exploration of the power of song, and of how and why it is that the tunes of Woody Guthrie, Shlomo Carlebach, or, more recently, the enigmatic musician Jeff Magnum, can fuel generations; we also examine why a movement often depends on song — an anthem (“We Shall Overcome,” for one example) — for its existence.

Some of us are movement activists; others fight change. Still others take note of or foster change quietly. This issue offers a glimpse at what we might learn about these options.

—Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

Sideways and Upward

LILI BEN AMI

Instead of the oft-heard question, “Where did the energy of last summer’s tent protest go?” one should be asking, “Where did the energy of last summer come from?”

The Israeli tent protest movement of the summer of 2011 was a thrilling and exceptional historical phenomenon. For the past decade, I have been active in social issues in Israel. I led (volunteer) struggles for workers’ rights, for improving the status of women, and for strengthening the educational system. I coordinated hundreds of conferences, demonstrations, and petitions and founded and directed two social organizations and four nonprofit institutions. But it was only in front of an audience of tens of thousands, after only two days of organizing, that I stood amazed at the awakening of the nation. Finally, I saw the mass exit from a state of apathy, and the coalescing of groups that took to the streets to set up tents. The message was

an appeal to the government: “Enough Erosion of the Middle Class” and “The Nation Demands Social Justice.”

For the entire summer, it was clear to me that this phenomenon was temporary and rare, and at any moment the tents might fold up and disappear. But the protest was authentic and

The protest translated economic issues, such as the inability to purchase an apartment, into an accessible social agenda.

heartfelt, even if it was chaotic and disorganized and it sometimes offered unclear messages.

After a month or so, we were able to articulate an agenda and formulate reasonable demands based on research data, statistics, and

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