

Contentious Politics and the Jewish Community

ERIC LEVINE

"Hell, no, we won't go!" "Let my people go."

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These are familiar chants, shouted in protest on behalf of two compelling causes: the anti-Vietnam War and Soviet Jewry movements, respectively. The "Occupy" movements, the Arab Spring, and Israel's tent city demonstrations in 2011 have given greater visibility to the subject of social movements. Historically, people have mobilized for institutional, policy, and cultural change over a range of political, social, religious, self-help, and social justice causes. And they have targeted governments, corporations, religious institutions, social attitudes, and more. Well-known causes have included movements and counter-movements to promote or oppose women's liberation, black power, reproductive rights, civil rights, immigrant rights, gay and lesbian rights, protection of the environment, economic justice, and peace.

The Jewish experience, too, has been rich with social, political, religious, and sectarian movements that have changed the course of Jewish history and altered the texture and fabric of communal life. Historically, some movements have focused on internal Jewish issues, such as Israeli settlement policy, religious pluralism, rescuing Ethiopian Jews, or new immigrant rights in Israel, while other efforts have focused externally against an occupying or oppressive authority.

The rapidly growing body of social science literature and social movement theory¹ provides important theoretical and methodological tools that help to deepen our understanding of Jewish collective action, potentially covering cases as diverse as those mentioned earlier, as well as messianic movements such as that led by Shabbetai Tzvi in the 17th century; the Eastern European ethicist Musar movement; the emergence of Hasidism; the 2nd-century Bar Kochba-led rebellion against the Roman Empire; socialism; Zionism; the Warsaw Ghetto uprising; and the Israeli peace and settler movements, to name only a few. Scholars have developed several models to analyze precipitating grievances as well as the contexts, dynamics, modes of participation, and outcomes of social movements. In one approach, social movements are collective challenges to

systems or structures of authority — collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity partly outside institutional or organizational channels, often displaying both conventional and unconventional tactics, for the purpose of challenging or defending authority.²

Another approach views social movements as but one manifestation of "contentious politics" among various forms of protest, such as revolutions, rebellions, terrorism, civil wars, strikes, and interest group politics. Contentious politics represents interactions in which actors make claims bearing on the interests of others; a government or another source of power or authority is targeted. A social movement, then, is a sustained campaign that uses repeated performances to advertise a claim; it includes an array of tactics such as the creation of new organizations, marches, rallies, demonstrations, public statements, petitions, and lobbying.³

For all the sensational, even romantic media treatment and dramatic repertoire of public performances, social movements tend to be infrequent and most people never participate in them. There is, even, a tendency to exaggerate their ubiquity and impact. The changes sought by movements often happen, if at all, because of the interplay of numerous forces and actors.⁴ Still, movements in the Jewish community and beyond have produced noticeable impact and serve as harbingers of change. The jury is still out on the Israeli tent protest, the Occupy movement, and the Arab Spring (a much more complicated and precarious case), although they offer hope for a brighter future, seeking greater equality, prosperity, democracy, and justice. Clearly, there are significant differences in the grievances, contexts, participation, dynamics, and outcomes of different cases.

On the American Jewish scene, while there are periodic mobilizations, and many Jews have participated in several movements mentioned in these pages, there is less current public movement activity. However, the nascent innovation ecosystem — with its focus on social entrepreneurship and the dynamic building of diverse

¹ The academic journal *Mobilization – The International Quarterly Review of Social Movement Research* is an excellent resource. For further reading, see a list posted on shma.com.

² See David A. Snow and Sarah A. Soule (2010), *A Primer on Social Movements*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; and David A. Snow (2004), "Social Movements as Challenges to Authority: Resistance to an Emerging Conceptual Hegemony." *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 25, 3-25.

³ See Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2007), *Contentious Politics*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

⁴ See Doug McAdam and Hilary Schaffer Boudet (2012), *Putting Social Movements in Their Place*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

organizations and communities — might qualify as a social movement.

While organizing to produce social change is normally to be celebrated and supported, some movements can be unconstructive — even dangerous, such as the Weather Underground of the 1960s and 1970s, neo-Nazis, religious cult movements, and racist supremacy or right-wing extremist groups.

At their best, social movements not only

have the potential to produce needed change, they have a unique capacity to bear witness and represent a moral response to a shattered world. I especially find the passion and vision framed by social movements to be powerful and inspiring, as illustrated by a slogan employed in the recent protests in Israel.

“*Ha’am doresh tzedek chevrati.*” “The people demand social justice.”

We shall overcome — some day.

Roots of Radicalism

TONY MICHELS

What explains the prominent and disproportionate role of Jews on the political left? It’s an old question, dating back more than a century, but one that scholars and political commentators continue to puzzle over. For even though the Jewish romance with radical ideologies has waned, Jews continue to lean to the left compared to most other Americans. The majority of Jews still support the Democratic Party as well as a host of social issues, from reproductive rights to environmental protection — despite millions of dollars spent by the Republican Party to disabuse them of these ideas.

Analysts have advanced various explanations as to why the majority of American Jews have been drawn to liberal and radical politics. The most common and persistent one has to do with religion. As a system of beliefs and practices inherently concerned with social justice and ethical behavior, so goes the argument, Judaism has predisposed Jews toward the political left. Reform rabbis were among the first to describe Judaism as a religion of social justice in their Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. A century later, the magazine *Tikkun* enshrined the kabbalistic concept of *tikkun olam* on its masthead with the words “to heal, repair, and transform the world.” Soon thereafter, journalists and historians began to identify *tikkun olam* as the key idea behind a Jewish tradition of social justice.

Orthodox rabbis have historically ignored the notion of Judaism as a religion of social justice. In 1898, the Orthodox Jewish Congregational Union was more focused on condemning improper conversions to Judaism than rectifying “the labor question,” which defined urban Jewish life between the 1880s and 1930s. Labor organizing and political activism fell to the socialists. During the 1910s, a quarter of a million Jewish workers joined socialist trade unions, the *Forverts* dominated the

Yiddish newspaper market, and the Socialist Party was the favored choice in New York City’s predominantly Jewish electoral districts.

A host of social and economic factors further radicalized Jews. Economic exploitation, usually at the hands of Jewish employers, heightened the appeal of socialism’s class-war message. In a situation where Jews worked mostly with and for other Jews, the potential for interethnic conflict diminished. An important structural factor further strengthened the socialists. Jews dominated the production of readymade clothes, the largest manufacturing industry in New York City. This strategic economic position enabled socialists to wield, via the mighty garment unions, real power — not only inside the Jewish community but also in local, state, and national politics.

Influences from abroad, especially from Russia, played a major role. From the early 1900s to World War I, thousands of Bundists, socialist-Zionists, Mensheviks, and even a few Bolsheviks immigrated to the United States and brought with them preformulated ideologies. In the five years following the war, many young men and women who had been radicalized by years of war, revolution, and pogroms, arrived as part of the final wave of mass immigration. A good many of these postwar arrivals were fervent supporters of the Bolshevik regime and, after settling in America, gravitated to the Communist Party. Like socialists the world over, they were inspired by the first workers’ revolution, but they also viewed the revolution through a specifically Jewish lens. The horrific slaughter of Jews by anti-Bolshevik forces convinced Jewish leftists across the board, and many liberals, that the Red Army was the only thing that stood between Russian

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