

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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Jewry and death. A similar feeling resurfaced during World War II, when, once again, the Red Army assumed the role of protector.

The roots of radicalism among second- and third-generation American Jews are to be found, though, not in Russia directly but in locales such as Harlem, Brownsville, the Lower East Side, and the East Bronx. Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and other memoirists have eloquently described Jewish neighborhoods, thick with Yiddish-language socialism, as cradles of radical politics. At the same time, harsh external realities — antisemitism, economic depression, and the international threat of fascism — steered many second-generation American Jews toward the left.

Circumstances shifted again during the 1960s, when middle-class Jews flocked to that decade's social protest movements. Though they had little direct exposure to poverty and antisemitism, young Jews — instilled with

liberal values from their parents, Jewish summer camps, and Jewish communal agencies — were disgruntled that the United States failed to live up to its professed values. The conviction that one must not remain silent in the face of injustice, a “lesson” learned from Holocaust commemorations, also informed the consciousness of New Left Jews.

There's much more — good, bad, and otherwise — to American Jewish politics than abiding attachments to social idealism. But the close relationship between Jews and the left, across decades and generations, is one of the more remarkable features of Jewish political history. If radical and liberal ideologies no longer hold sway as they did in the 1960s, 1930s, or 1910s, they haven't entirely lost their purchase, either. A majority of Jews — 69 percent — voted for President Obama, and commentators will, once again, try to explain this. They would do well to turn to history. 

Jews and Their Isms: A Convergence of Two Historical Moments

EDDY PORTNOY

The number of isms to which Jews attached themselves during the first decades of the 20th century was quite remarkable: bundism, communism, yiddishism, zionism, diaspora nationalism, socialism, trade unionism, and territorialism. Some Jews were drawn to a movement's political orientation, while others made choices based on a group's sports club or library, or on the attraction of a group's comrades. The reason one joins a movement, after all, may not always be based on its founding ideology.

The success of a political or social movement often depended upon how much noise was made or how powerful it was on the street. An example: Esteem for the Bund rose enormously in 1905 after members took to Warsaw's streets, pummeling the pimps and criminals who had for years been terrorizing poor Jewish neighborhoods. Around the same time, Zionists were accused of failing to achieve much at all, anywhere, fiddling with ideas like the Uganda Plan while Bialystok burned. Zionism had been birthed as a movement whose goal was “over there,” and that required the demure intercession of the movement's leaders with politicians and heads of state. So, while it received support from a fair chunk of Eastern Europe's Jewish masses, it wasn't particularly clear to these

same masses what, exactly, their Zionist leaders were doing. With the violent convulsions of World War I veiling their activities, the behind-the-scenes engagements of political Zionism were not well known to most Jews.

This is why publication of the Balfour Declaration (the first governmental recognition of Jewish national rights in Palestine, issued by Great Britain) at the end of the first week of November of 1917 was such a startling surprise. Though it received some attention in London's newspapers, it was scantily addressed in the news cycle of the Yiddish press, even by papers like Warsaw's *Haynt*, which was staunchly Zionist. And while some cities — notably Odessa — held large demonstrations in support of Zionism, the reality of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine didn't seem tangible at the time. News of the Balfour Declaration was also obscured by that week's other big event, the Bolshevik Revolution. Because the former Russian Empire held the world's largest Jewish population, the revolution became the major news story for Yiddish readers.

While Balfour was major, Bolsheviks were truly the big news — and also the Jewish story — of the day. While the declaration was a Zionist success, Russia's second massive

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