

# Reaching the parts

Opening a debate on Jews and Socialism in the '90s, Adam Lent suggests some ways of breaking out of the ghetto.

1990 should be seen as the earliest indication of a watershed for Jewish socialism. The loss of Thatcher and the collapse of the economic policies that had been designed to benefit the lower middle and upper working classes, the largest sector of British Jewry, have both damaged the conservative Jewish establishment's hegemony.

Perhaps the most important effect of these changes was the multiformed political attack on the Board of Deputies, kindled by an atmosphere of perceptibly rising antisemitism. The large-scale derision that faced the Board last year should be of vital interest to Jewish socialists; it not only showed that a firm critical faculty still resides in the community but it also illustrated the great difficulties for our community 'leaders' when this faculty is actively exercised. This suggests that the post-war consensus dominating the Jewish community, that reached its peak in the '80s, is beginning to show the earliest signs of ideological and economic fatigue. The question is: how can Jewish socialists use these early changes to best advantage?

Organisations like the Jewish Socialists' Group (JSG) have for many years shown themselves eminently capable of converting socialists who are Jews to the cause of Jewish socialism, persuading people that there is not only value in promoting socialist ideals and principles within the community but that it is also vital to recreate a progressive Jewish identity that differs from the Zionist affiliations which now predominate. However, if Jewish socialism is to remain true to this project by becoming a truly dynamic and effective force, it must start reaching out to others less con-

vinced of the values of revolutionary socialism and anti-Zionism. Jewish socialists must diversify their activities in order to match the diversity within the Jewish community and to allow for a widening of the campaign sphere to reach out to non-radical Jews. This does not mean abandoning the traditional constituency of Jewish socialism nor does it mean weakening the radical message of our grassroots appeal; this is not a *Marxism Today* capitulation! It is a tactical programme aimed at providing more political space for a marginalised set of ideas and organisations. The mutually exclusive distinction between tactical, political work in the broader community and radical, organisational work on the radical left is false. The traditional constituency, the radical message, and the grassroots appeal are all ultimately strengthened by successful campaigns that challenge the ruling orthodoxy, buoy confidence and, most importantly, carry out the most fundamental political and organisational groundwork in the whole Jewish community. Jewish socialists have to start inserting a whole variety of political and ideological levers into the thin cracks appearing in the wall of community consensus before it can expect to gain anything beyond minority support. To do so we must ask three vital questions: To whom can we appeal? Upon what issues should we appeal? And by what methods can we appeal?

## Appealing to whom?

There are three main sectors of the Jewish community that Jewish socialists should now be targeting. Firstly, the mass of Jews who work in the public services. Often

employed in education, by local authorities or care organisations, they have been the silent sector of British Jewry throughout the '80s. At the sharp end of Thatcherite vandalism, they have been alienated by the praise heaped on the British government by the Chief Rabbi, the *Jewish Chronicle* and various figures on the Board of Deputies.

Secondly, there are the lower middle and upper working class sectors of the community. This large group has been consistently underestimated in importance by the Left and the Right, as the post-war myth of 'ever-upwardly mobile Jew' was peddled by liberal meritocrats and Jewish community leaders alike. This sector has benefited from new access to company shares, health care, property and self employment that sprung up in the last decade, but it now faces new economic insecurities as the recession deepens. The international rise in antisemitism of last year heightened this sense of vulnerability. It is hardly surprising that it was from these people that the Board of Deputies received its most hostile criticism.

Finally, there are youth and students. A tendency towards liberal attitudes on both Israel and general social issues is more widespread amongst Jewish youth and students than within the community in general.

## What are the issues?

Even though these three sectors would benefit politically, socially and culturally from the acceptance of both radical socialism and anti-Zionism, there can be little doubt that neither of these canons of belief are close to being adopted by any substantial portion of the Jewish community. Like a large

### Reuben Hood looks at life for secular Jewish socialists in the 'provinces'

Outside London, Jewish life is often restricted to shul-based activities or Zionist fundraising – in many places the two are synonymous. This hasn't always been true but as the provincial communities have dispersed from localised Jewish areas to the suburbs, secular life has diminished. Londoners, with their Spiro Institute, Yakar, the Jewish film festivals, the delis and restaurants can still lead a fully Jewish life without ever seeing a *yarmulka* or a blue box – how lucky they are!

In consequence, non-religious young Jews in the provinces who also eschew supporting dodgy Israeli governments soon find themselves adrift from the community. In their angst-ridden thirties, they find themselves thinking, 'I'm Jewish, I don't know a synagogue from the Salvation Army, people hate me because I'm Jewish, what does it all mean?'

Recently, we've had cause to think more on this. Last summer Nottingham

Jewish Socialists' Group organised a large public meeting on antisemitism and many non-religious Jews attended. In the winter we helped organise a similar large meeting in Leicester. Many Jews from the formal community were surprised to see all the unaffiliated people. Even more to the point, a Nottingham 'Evening of Jewish Culture' with Michael Rosen, Jewish food and books, and the Royte Klezmores band attracted 160 people (with many more having to be turned away), including Jews from as far afield as Birmingham, Leamington and Leicester. The audience included a woman whose father was Jewish but who had never been to any Jewish event before, a man who had had no contact with the community for 20 years though he came from a very traditional background, a gay Jewish man who had been unaware that there was anything more to being Jewish than religion...

In both Nottingham and Leicester good contact has been built between the Progressive Synagogues and the small secular groups who organised these events and we are perhaps lucky in this, but the scattered individuals are being found by leafleting in libraries,

bookshops and other public places. Locally it seems that the JSG has been able to reach some parts of our community who would eventually lose their Jewish identity. The JSG could perhaps benefit by organising more large local events within the provincial communities, enabling people to be Jewish in a cultural and political context. As a by-product we may also find greater understanding for our critical views on the community leadership and on Israel within the mainstream community, who might come to recognise us as a genuine part of the community rather than snipers from outside.

Hopefully, through drawing in people who are wanting to regain their cultural heritage, we can also give them enough confidence to challenge Zionist and other orthodoxies from *within* the community rather than assimilating into Left groups or wandering into the wilderness. The danger is, of course, that the distinct politics of the JSG could themselves be diluted too far. Away from the hot-house politics of London this inevitably happens to a certain extent, but there must be limits on how far we can drift.

section of British society, British Jewry has achieved a greater degree of economic security and political influence than it has ever known. As a result it accepts the establishment options of Labour and Conservative as choice enough. Any lingering fears about antisemitism or loss of identity have been soaked up by the ever-increasing commitment to a Zionist ideology. This does not mean that a new radicalism can never be reborn; it can. However, it must be built through a war of attrition and position against the dominant forces in the community and alongside real social changes within British Jewry.

Any high-profile attempt to win the hearts and minds of the community to anti-Zionism should, for the moment, be scaled down. Room exists in the community to campaign for Palestinian rights and against Israeli brutality, but it does not exist for the intricate, and often Marxist-oriented, debates concerning Zionism versus anti-Zionism

versus non-Zionism.

A campaign to win Jewish support for Palestinian struggle could learn something from the right-wing Zionists, especially in youth and student work. BIPAC (British-Israel Public Affairs Committee) has provided speakers and information kits on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for youth movements and student bodies with great success by presenting apparently factual material in accessible and attractive ways, often under the guise of impartiality.

Inevitably, an organisation such as BIPAC has the common desire for Zionist self-justification on its side, but if factual material about Palestinian issues could gain some circulation it would begin to counter the weekly propaganda fed through the *Jewish Chronicle* and may challenge accepted myths about Israeli history. If myths are evenhandedly challenged in this way then the seemingly impenetrable armour of Zionist hege-

mony may begin to weaken.

Many Jews feel inclined to defend Zionism and Israel against all criticism. They often regard an attack on these as a direct attack on both the Jewish people and its identity. As a result, appeals to ideological or political reason are either ignored or rejected as veiled attempts by antisemites to discredit Jews. Only on a moral ground are many Jews still susceptible. But before a substantial group can become aware of the national rights of Palestinians or of the fundamental racism underlying Israel's social and political system, they must be given access to information about specific injustices the Palestinians have faced historically. Especially within the youth and public service sectors, many Jews *do* have doubts about Israel's behaviour. However, they often feel at a disadvantage in argument, without information and well-structured political responses to hand. Amongst such people, impartial information will not

only be snapped up but more complex arguments about the origins of these injustices may receive a sympathetic hearing.

This does not mean that *anti-Zionist* work should be completely shelved, but its present audience will most likely be those on the Left already actively engaged in ideological debate on Israel. There is a stronger imperative to carry out more clearly targeted political groundwork amongst the broader body of British Jews.

It is time to challenge directly the structure as well as the ideology of the Board of Deputies. The Board has only a nominal concession to democracy, in the form of monthly meetings which



JSG public meeting  
on antisemitism

all Deputies, several hundred, can attend. Apart from the fact that some of these Deputies are appointed rather than elected by the shuls and organisations they represent, these meetings are notoriously controlled and manipulated by a tiny clique. The Board also has a reputation for blacklisting certain groups and individuals. If we add to this the monopoly on information held by the tacky and politically narrow *Jewish Chronicle*, we are left with an array of issues offering themselves to a campaign for democracy and pluralism in the community. Such a campaign would find itself not only gaining support from those Jews working in the public sector, who traditionally have a strong sense of

political rights, but from all those the conservative leadership would rather did not exist and who are denied an autonomous and audible voice in the community.

A recent poll has already shown that there is a swing back to the Labour Party amongst British Jews, but Jewish socialist must continue to re-encourage stronger commitment to the principles and structures of the *Labour* movement. Though many Jewish socialists are leaving the Labour Party to strengthen the independent socialist sector, it would be foolish to allow this important work to blind us to the value of centring other activity around the Labour Party. For the majority of British people, let alone Jews, Labour and its affiliated organisations present not only the sole alternative government but also the sole alternative arena for political allegiance and activity. A shift to support for Labour in the community would open up areas of debate, making them more accessible to radical Left intervention and may encourage some individuals to become politically active within the Labour movement. This would place them in a political and ideological arena within which they will be brought into closer contact with the views and the activities of Jewish socialists.

The impending general election presents an excellent opportunity for such campaigning. A provisional movement aiming to gain support for the Labour Party in all three sectors outlined above will be of vital importance for the future of Jewish socialism.

So four basic campaigns could open up new opportunities for Jewish socialism: a campaign for Palestinian rights; a campaign for democracy and pluralism within the Jewish community; a campaign for a Labour victory at the next election; and one must add to this the ongoing struggle against racism and anti-semitism.

## How can Jewish socialism appeal?

Firstly, a strong emphasis must be placed upon networking through the campaigns to establish good communication and relations with a large number of individuals and organisations. Last year's spontaneous and hastily arranged anti-fascist demonstrations were often poorly attended, especially by Jews – a sad fact considering that the marches were mostly in response to desecrations of Jewish cemeteries. Although some people undoubtedly have an aversion to demonstrations, a much better attendance could have been assured if more Jews had simply heard about the protests in time. Information circulated exclusively on the Left is not going to reach the mass of Jews.

Secondly, if any activity of these campaigns is publicised widely within a specific sector of the community, well in advance, and is linked to cultural activity and entertainment, then there is no reason why they should not prove successful. A case in point is Hackney JSG's 'Day of Jewish Culture and Resistance' last year, which was widely publicised amongst Jews in education, the public sector and in the locality. Organised with imagination and enthusiasm, its popularity exceeded anyone's wildest dreams, attracting hundreds of people.

The 1980s have been a time of marginalisation and introspection for Jewish socialists but, as cracks appear in the New Right façade and in the Zionist, enterprise hegemony in the Jewish community, there are opportunities to be grasped in the 1990s that open the way for a multiplicity of political activities that will build and benefit our constituency.

● Jewish Socialist invites its readers to take this important strategic and practical debate further. We invite responses, up to 800 words, to be received by 17 November.