

Breaking the Taboo: Critics of Israel and the American Jewish Establishment

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What does the wicked child ask? "What does this ritual mean to you?" To "you" and not to "him." Since he takes himself out of the community and denies God's essential role in the Exodus, shock him by replying, "This is done because God did for *me* when I went out of mitzrayim." For *me* and not for *him*. Had he been there he would not have been redeemed.

DISSENTING GROUPS — Passover Haggadah

The vituperative struggle that surrounded the eventually successful bid by Americans for Peace Now to join the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in late March of 1993, brought to public attention once again a bitter, often vicious, battle that had raged in the organized Jewish community of the United States for two decades. Since the founding of Breira in 1973 and continuing with the establishment of such groups as the New Jewish Agenda and the New Israel Fund, as well as Americans for Peace Now, the American Jewish community has been challenged to define the limits of diversity and pluralism, by groups that have publicly dissented from the official policy of the State of Israel and the consensus of American Jewry's established leadership. Perhaps no other set of issues has provoked such intemperate denunciations and mudslinging in the American Jewish press and organizational world; even the highly charged religious confrontations of recent decades have paled by comparison. Opponents of these dissenting groups have publicly cast them as traitors to the Jewish people, collaborators with the enemies of Israel (constituting a branch of

“Jews for al-Fatah”), and a fifth column within the American Jewish community. Their defenders, in turn, have vilified the critics as “witch-hunters,” “McCarthyists,” and slanderers.

Decades from now, historians will assess the charges and counter-charges; perhaps with some historical perspective it will be possible to sort out the motives of the antagonists and evaluate their contentions. But even in the absence of such judgments, students of contemporary Jewry, and particularly those interested in the “tangled relations” between American and Israeli Jews, need to examine this conflict from a different perspective — namely, how has the organized American Jewish community responded to dissenters, and what do such responses tell us about the community and its relationship with the State of Israel? Which types of dissent are judged acceptable and which types place a group outside the tent!¹ What sanctions does the contemporary Jewish community exercise to delegitimize a group? And what is the relationship between American Jewish and Israeli elites in this process of delegitimation?

The formation of Breira in 1973 raised a new set of issues for the organized American Jewish community, even though criticism of Zionism and Israel were not new to the American Jewish scene. In the past, anti-Zionist organizations such as the American Council for Judaism and the friends of Neturei Karta, rejected any identification with the State of Israel and at times vehemently criticized the policies of the Jewish state. Breira, however, represented a new phenomenon, one that resulted from the far-reaching Israeli conquests of 1967. According to its in-house, official history:

The creation of Breira was an indication that its founders and members honestly believe that there can be an alternative to

1 In a different context, I plan to analyze the responses of American Jewish leaders to different types of dissenting groups. These groups include those on the right of the political spectrum, such as the Jewish Defense League, as well as groups that were highly critical of the Israeli government and the American Jewish leadership for their lack of militancy in rescuing beleaguered Jews — groups such as the American Association for Ethiopian Jews and the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. Each of these groups collided with both Israeli and American Jewish leaders — and the dissent of each group was treated with considerable brutality.

the endless cycle of war and violence between Israel and the Arabs, and that American Jews committed to a strong Jewish state could actually encourage Israel to do more than it was doing to initiate peace talks. This meant in practice that Breira would break the "taboo" on public criticism of Israel within the American Jewish community. In particular, Breira gave American Jewry its first serious introduction to the "dovish" perspective on Israeli affairs...by hosting...prestigious Israeli advocates of mutual recognition of Israeli and Palestinian rights as the basis for Middle East peace negotiations.²

Indeed, in Breira's self-understanding, it differed from all other groups because it posed an internal challenge to the Jewish community. Precisely because it represented a movement of concerned Jews, including Zionists, it was "a child of the establishment, and [therefore]...caused a serious reevaluation of the future of Diaspora-Israel relations."³

Breira also raised the hackles of the organized Jewish community because it directly challenged the legitimacy of established organizations and leaders within the American Jewish community. Breira's commission on Jewish life, chaired by Arthur Waskow, defined the organization's goals within American Jewry as follows:

[To find a] means of freeing debate, especially through a newly independent Jewish press; new forms for doing tzedakah (fund-raising and allocation) that are both democratic and which serve the needs of those now ignored; ...the creation of a grass-roots based democratic structure for American Jewry⁴

By repeatedly charging the organized community with muzzling honest debate and by portraying itself as the true spokesman for grass-roots sentiment, Breira sought to delegitimize the official organizations and leaders of the organized community. Breira promised to democratize Jewish life by providing a forum for "those Jews who

2 *Proceedings of Breira's First Annual Membership Conference* (New York: Breira, 1977), 3.

3 "Factual and Other Errors in 'Why Breira?' by Joseph Shattan, *Commentary*, April 1977." Issued by Breira, unpagged, 1977.

4 *Breira Report*, June 1977, unpagged.

have not found a voice or place in existing structures (particularly youth, women, and the poor).”⁵ To express further their displeasure with the established leadership, some Breira leaders urged that Jews withhold financial support from the official community to signal their protest. Arthur Waskow asked rhetorically: “Do we have a responsibility to oppose the giving of money or support through conventional channels, if that means adding to the political power of those presently in power who we feel are blindly marching toward the destruction of Israel?”⁶

The critique of Israeli policies, then, was intertwined with a rebellion against the leadership of American Jewry. Both Israeli and American Jewish leaders were misguided in their policies; the only recourse for concerned Jews was to alter the entire system of American Jewish support for Israel and the undemocratic system that produced such an inadequate American Jewish leadership. Breira’s public pronouncements explicitly noted the entanglement of Israeli and American Jewish public life:

This attitude of “my country right or wrong” was reflected in all areas of American Jewish life because Israel is the “glue” that holds the disparate elements of the community together, as well as the “cause” which unites separate and faltering fundraising efforts into an effective campaign. The lack of news and analysis in Jewish journalism, the one-dimensional level of Jewish education, the growth of the checkbook “mentality” as the basis of communal life, and the hierarchical and exclusive nature of Jewish organizational structures all mirrored an increasingly intolerable rigidity in Jewish affairs. Believing that

- 5 “An Open letter from Breira’s Executive Board.” undated (c. May 1976). From a historical perspective, we can gauge the shifts in the organized American Jewish community by noting that in the decades prior to the Holocaust it was the Zionist organizations that intertwined their ideology with a call for democratization; Zionism, they claimed, would revitalize the American Jewish community by bringing genuine democratic representation. By the last quarter of the century, it was the Zionist left and their non-Zionist allies that promoted democratization. By contrast, support for Israeli policies was now viewed as an expression of non-democratic process.
- 6 Quoted by Rael Isaac and Erich Isaac, “The Rabbis of Breira,” *Midstream*, April 1977, 15.

Diaspora Jewry has more than a charitable stake in the future of the Jewish state, and more than an impersonal interest in the quality of Jewish life everywhere, this situation could not be ignored.⁷

Breira broadcast its dual critique of Israeli and American Jewish leaders through advertisements in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*, mailings to concerned Jews, public testimony to congressional committees, and press releases.⁸

In the winter and spring of 1977, a strong counterattack was launched against Breira's provocative challenge. The precipitating factor was a shift in outlook that took place at Breira's first national conference in Washington in February of that year. In the words of one activist, Breira "ceased to be merely a 'position pamphlet' organization and publicly defended its right to act on its principles by meeting with moderate Palestinians."⁹ At a time when the Israeli government rejected contacts with the PLO and insisted that the U.S. government keep the PLO at arm's length, it was a particularly brazen provocation for an American Jewish group to participate in such talks.¹⁰

The first — and most public — phase of the confrontation was waged on the printed page, in pamphlet and periodical literature. Spearheaded by writers associated with Americans for a Safe Israel, a group founded in 1971 to persuade American Jews to reject a "peace for territory" solution and only accept "peace for peace," the critics of Breira focused exclusively on the dangers the group posed to Israeli interests. Americans for a Safe Israel published a

7 *Proceedings of Breira's First Annual Membership Conference*, 4-5.

8 Elenore Lester, letter to the editor of the *Jewish Week* (New York), 1 May 1977, 1-2, in the files of the American Jewish Committee's Blaustein Library.

9 Carolyn Toll, "American Jews and the Middle East Dilemma," *Progressive*, August 1979, 33.

10 The entire matter came to public attention through a frontpage article by Bernard Gwertzman entitled "American Jewish Leaders Are Split over Issue of Meeting with the PLO," *New York Times*, 30 December 1976. Gwertzman reported on meetings in Washington and New York between PLO representatives and ten American Jewish individuals. When the Conference of Presidents denounced such meetings, Breira defended contacts with the PLO and particularly the role of two of its prominent members in those meetings.

detailed pamphlet by Rael Jean Isaac entitled *Breira — Counsel for Judaism*, which linked some Breira members to pro-PLO groups and castigated Breira as more dangerous than the anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism, because even as they claim “to save Israel... they in fact facilitate her destruction.”¹¹ Rael Isaac and her husband, Erich Isaac, continued the assault with a hard-hitting critique of “the rabbis of Breira” in *Midstream*, followed a month later by Joseph Shattan’s “Why Breira?” in *Commentary*.¹² Around the same time, two former sympathizers published accounts of their growing disenchantment with Breira, particularly stressing the absence of genuine commitment to and empathy for Israel among Breira members.¹³ When the *Village Voice* published an article on “the angry debate among American Jews,” news of the Breira controversy reached an even broader audience.¹⁴

The public airing of this debate forced groups within the organized Jewish community to define a policy regarding the rights of its own members to dissent, thus opening a second level of controversy. As the employer of the largest contingent of rabbis associated with Breira, the B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation was especially pressed to act. Rabbi Joseph Sternstein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, questioned the president of B’nai B’rith as to why “the most articulate spokesmen for the ‘Palestinian’ position were the Hillel rabbis”; and though he denied any intention to meddle in the internal affairs of B’nai B’rith, Sternstein justified his concern by noting that “many of these rabbis are in contact with the pliable minds of campus Jews.”¹⁵ Within the B’nai B’rith, as well, voices were raised urging the organization to discipline its employees. Benjamin Epstein, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, (ADL), called on the

11 Rael Jean Isaac, *Breira — Counsel for Judaism* (New York: Americans for a Safe Israel, 1977), 28.

12 *Midstream*, April 1977, 3–17; *Commentary*, April 1977, 60–66.

13 Lester, letter to *Jewish Week*; Alan Mintz, “The People’s Choice — A Demurral on Breira,” *Response*, Winter 1976–1977, 5–10.

14 Alexander Cockburn and James Ridgeway, “Doves, the Diaspora, and the Future of Israel: The Angry Debate among American Jews,” *Village Voice*, 7 March 1977, 26.

15 Quoted by Cockburn and Ridgeway, “Doves,” 26.

B'nai B'rith International [to] take such steps as are necessary to ensure that in matters of fundamental principle and policy of B'nai B'rith, members of the professional staff shall, in their pronouncements and activities refrain from promoting views contrary to those of B'nai B'rith.¹⁶

The president of the B'nai B'rith, David Blumberg, publicly rejected these demands; he cast aside the ADL recommendation as unnecessary and determined that "participation in Breira in no way violated B'nai B'rith policy." But these assurances failed to still the criticism emanating from local lodges within the organization and from outside groups such as the Zionist Organization of America, the Jewish Defense League, and even Hadassah.¹⁷ Some of the critics demanded that the B'nai B'rith fire Hillel directors associated with Breira. Blumberg finally convened a "blue ribbon panel" to offer recommendations on the internal policy of B'nai B'rith regarding Breira. The panel upheld the rights of free expression of employees but recommended that they not hold office in Breira or use their identification with Hillel to endorse Breira policies or any other group's policies that were contrary to B'nai B'rith's position. Staff members were also warned that they were "expected to take into account the effects of conduct, including the expression of opinions that conflict with the objectives of B'nai B'rith and its maintenance and growth...and also weigh the effects of actions and speech...upon the fulfillment of the responsibilities of [a]...staff position."¹⁸ It is unlikely that Hillel rabbis associated with Breira could have taken much comfort from such a broadly construed code of obligations.

Other Jewish organizations debated yet a third issue: How should they relate institutionally to Breira? Some organizations refused to send speakers to programs that also included Breira representatives.¹⁹ Some agonized over whether they would be granting

16 Quoted in William Novak, "The Campaign against Breira," Part II, *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 1 April 1977, 24.

17 Novak, "The Campaign against Breira," 24-25.

18 Bernard Postal, "B'nai B'rith Rules on Breira: Right to Dissent Is Upheld, but Not to Exploit Its Name," *Jewish American-American Examiner*, 11 September 1977.

19 This seems to have been the intention of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), which urged all Jewish organizations

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legitimacy to Breira if they elected individuals associated with the dissenting group to positions of influence within their own organizations.²⁰ And still others debated the wisdom of bringing Breira into the communal tent, a step that might provide some leverage to temper the group's provocative policies, or whether to treat Breira as an outcast and thereby make it serve as an object lesson to other dissident groups. Staff members at the American Jewish Committee issued an internal memorandum for the organization's Foreign Affairs Steering Committee that urged the former approach; it suggested the need to "be critical of some of Breira's positions and tactics" but also to recognize its effectiveness in bringing back into the community disaffected academics, intellectuals, and Jewish youth. The memo suggested that

the best way to test whether or not Breira is prepared to become a truly responsible element within the diverse and multi-faceted Jewish community is to co-opt them into the community structure... One of the groundrules for such co-option might well be...that member agencies direct the exposition of their different views on sensitive Israel-Diaspora issues to the Jewish community itself and refrain from appealing to the general public.²¹

Here at last the fundamental question of communal legitimation and integration was posed explicitly: Should the umbrella organizations of American Jewry treat Breira and other dissenting groups as

to avoid participation in meetings with the PLO. Cockburn and Ridgeway, "Doves," 26. According to one report, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, then president of the American Jewish Congress, also eschewed participation in a program when he learned that two Breira representatives had been invited without his prior permission. Novak, "The Campaign against Breira," 25.

20 A slate of Breira sympathizers was defeated in elections held by the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly. The RA also debated but ultimately tabled a resolution calling for American Jews — and their rabbis — "to exercise self-restraint in the criticism of Israel's policies on security, defense, borders and the ultimate components of peace." *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 6 May 1977, 2.

21 George E. Gruen and Marc Brandriss, "Breira: A Background Memorandum," 13 April 1977, 20-21. In the American Jewish Committee's Blaustein Library.

pariahs or as potential constituents? According to the AJ Committee memo, the Jewish community council of New Haven had adopted the latter approach: it admitted the local Breira chapter on condition that Breira keep its criticism within the community. Other Jewish community councils took a more aggressive position and explicitly stigmatized Breira as beyond the pale. The council in Washington, D.C., for example deplored “the activities and policies of organizations which seek to divide and politicize American Jewish support for Israel” and urged its constituents to “advise and caution their members about Breira’s activities which are injurious to Israel.”²² It appears that few Jewish umbrella organizations on either the local or national level were prepared to offer Breira their ultimate form of legitimation — admission as a constituent member.²³

Within a year after the explosion of this controversy, Breira folded its operations.²⁴ Interestingly, Breira’s most avid opponents and defenders agreed that Breira had fallen victim to a campaign aimed at its elimination. The Americans for a Safe Israel proudly claimed that its exposés had destroyed Breira.²⁵ For their part, Breira activists consistently interpreted the public controversy as an orchestrated smear campaign.

Defenders of Breira have accused Israeli consular officials of actively coordinating a campaign to discredit Breira. It is known that in several cities — notably, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia — Israeli consular officials called in Breira leaders and community officials to warn that Breira was “giving aid and comfort to the enemy.”²⁶ Israel’s prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, pointedly observed to Jewish organizational leaders during a trip to the United

22 *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 2 February 1977, 3.

23 The exceptions were the Jewish community councils of New Haven and San Francisco. Breira did not have enough chapters or members or a broad enough agenda to qualify for the larger umbrella organizations such as the Presidents’ Conference or NJCRAC.

24 Paul M. Foer, “The War against Breira,” *Jewish Spectator*, Summer 1983, 23. Foer claimed that the Washington chapter held on longest.

25 Joseph Proudler, *The New Israel Fund: A Fund for Israel’s Enemies* (New York: Americans for a Safe Israel, 1990), 3.

26 William Novak, “The Breira Story,” *Genesis 2* (March–April 1977): 10.

States that “there is no Breira.”²⁷ But there is as yet no public evidence to substantiate the claims of Paul M. Foer that “there were high level meetings between Jewish leaders, and in some instances, the Israeli Ambassador, for planning anti-Breira strategy and to compare notes and dossiers.”²⁸ As with so much else relating to the Breira affair, only the passage of time will provide us with the documentation and perspective to assess whether there was a coordinated campaign against Breira, as opposed to a more limited offensive by sympathizers with the Israeli right, and what role, if any, Israeli visitors in the United States might have played in such a campaign.

It is noteworthy that throughout the public controversy so little attention was paid to Breira’s program to undermine the established Jewish community of the United States. Breira was cast as a group subversive to Israel. Its harsh critique of the organized American Jewish community, its program to democratize and rechannel Jewish life in the United States, its denigration of established leaders, were barely noted. The simplest explanation of course is that a group that never numbered more than 1,500 members posed no real threat to the large membership organizations, which counted their followers in the thousands and even hundreds of thousands. Indeed, had opponents of Breira highlighted its subversive intention within the American Jewish community, they would have found it far more difficult to drum up support against so puny an enemy.

An additional reason for this silence may stem from the generational dimension of the conflict. Breira was an outgrowth of the Jewish counterculture, an expression of “the sixties generation” — a generation that had been nurtured in Conservative and Reform summer camps, had found Jewish expression in the Havurah movement, and had been politicized in the struggle against the Vietnam War. Breira drew its rank and file from this rebellious generation, and its mentors from older rabbis and ideologues who sympathized

27 Quoted in Rael Isaac, “An Open Letter to William Novak,” *Outpost*, no. 15 (April 1977): 7.

28 Foer, “The War against Breira,” 22. Foer claimed to “have in my possession confidential documents from various Jewish organizations” to support his allegations. Until they are released and authenticated, such documents have no more validity than those purported by the late Senator Joseph McCarthy.

with the left. We may speculate that the emphasis placed by Breira's opponents on its subversion of a vulnerable Israel may have served as a convenient means to deflect attention from Breira's announced goal of toppling the established elders of American Jewry.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the leadership of American Jewry did not know how to react to their rebellious youth. Steven Shaw, then a professional with the Metrowest Federation, captured this generational component well in an anguished private appeal to Jewish leaders for understanding of the Breira phenomenon:

Through its totally inappropriate response to the challenge posed by Breira, our national organizations (with one notable exception — the American Jewish Committee) ...have again proven that many of our constituent bodies have little understanding of a whole generation of young Jews and even less relevance to their concerns and life styles.... Rather than condemnation and hysteria and threats of job loss (presently directed at some of the best Hillel staff), I would expect that a more mature and healthy Jewish community would welcome the intellectual stimulation and youthfully refreshing energy that such individuals could provide for the wider Jewish polity. That this has not exactly been the case bears sad witness to the state of Jewish organizational life in the diaspora and to the potential for misunderstandings that exist between Israel and America through inadequate Israeli organizational structures which seem incapable of dealing creatively or intelligently with such forces.²⁹

Shaw's analysis points to an important consequence of the tangled relations between Israeli and American Jewish leaders — an intensification of generational conflict in the organized American Jewish community because of the disparate experiences of younger Israeli and American Jews during the sixties and seventies. Israeli officials may have responded so harshly because they had little experience with, let alone empathy for, "the sixties generation."

29 Memo by Steven Shaw to Albert Chernin, executive vice chairman of NJCRAC, 2 March 1977, 3-4. In the American Jewish Committee's Blaustein Library.

The Breira controversy represented the most heated confrontation in a series of debates within the organized Jewish community over the proper handling of dissenting groups. Three other organizations situated on the left of the political spectrum, which share much of Breira's criticism of Israeli policies and the Jewish establishment, have sparked more recent debates within the Jewish community. The New Jewish Agenda, the New Israel Fund, and Americans for Peace Now have each in turn forced the organized Jewish community to define the parameters of dissent. But each was treated differently within the institutional structure of American Jewry.³⁰

The New Jewish Agenda was founded in May 1979, approximately one year after the demise of Breira, by "disaffected members of Jewish organizations, refugees from the non-Jewish left, and former members of Breira."³¹ From its inception, the New Jewish Agenda incorporated the vocabulary and rituals of Judaism, as well as those of the political left. Thus at its founding national conference, time was set aside for Jewish study, worship, and cultural expression. The Sabbath was particularly moving to many participants because of "the potential breakthrough in the combination of intense emotional ties to the various Jewish traditions, with no compromising of political and moral ideals."³² Agenda (as it was called by insiders) explicitly endorsed a program to draw on Jewish traditions in the formulation of its programs.³³

Agenda's statement of purpose outlined an ambitious and far-reaching program:

We are Jews concerned with the retreat from social action

30 By combining the discussion of these three organizations, this essay does not intend to suggest that they are interchangeable. On the contrary, it will be seen that each group has fared differently precisely because its unique program and behavior raised a different set of issues. They are discussed in tandem because they all framed a critique, from the left of the political spectrum, of Israel's policies regarding peace with its neighbors.

31 On the founding of the New Jewish Agenda and its first national conference, see Ellen Willis, "Radical Jews Caught in the Middle," *Village Voice*, 4-10 February 1981, 1ff.

32 Gerry Serotta, "What's New about the New Jewish Agenda," *New Outlook*, June 1981, 41.

33 *Ibid.*, 42.

concerns and openness to discussion within the organized Jewish community. As Jews who believe strongly that authentic Jewish life must involve serious and consistent attention to the just ordering of human society and the natural resources of our world (*tikun olam*), we seek to apply Jewish values to such questions as economic justice, ecological concerns, energy policy, world hunger, intergroup relations and affirmative action, women's rights, peace in the Middle East, and Jewish education.³⁴

In promoting this program, Agenda activists harked back to "the old agenda of American Jews: Jews used to be concerned with social issues and justice. In the last 20 years, the Jewish community has become extremely self-oriented. The more self-oriented it has become, the more self-defeating it has become."³⁵ The goal was to reorient the Jewish community and set it back on its former course.

In November 1982, Agenda issued a detailed platform outlining the specific ways in which this would be accomplished. Interestingly, the platform first discussed "Jewish communal life in the United States" before turning to foreign affairs. Agenda criticized "the existing network of Jewish communal institutions" for succeeding only partially. It called for "the transformation of Jewish institutions and the creation of new ones to represent the whole spectrum of views of U.S. Jewry." Highest on its list of demands was

the full empowerment of all Jews. Our communal institutions must involve those whose needs have been consistently disregarded: our elders, Jews with disabilities, the poor, Lesbians and Gay Men, Jews not living in nuclear families, Jews of color, Jews by choice, those of mixed marriages, and recent immigrants.³⁶

According to Agenda's most visible leader, Rabbi Gerold Serotta,

34 Quoted in Hillel Schenker, "The New Jewish Agenda," *New Outlook*, November — December 1980, 49.

35 Arthur J. Magida, "Radical Gadflies," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 3 August 1984, 34.

36 "New Jewish Agenda National Platform," 1-2. In the American Jewish Committee's Blaustein Library.

the organization's goal was to serve as "a loyal opposition in the Jewish community."³⁷

Arguing that all Jews are responsible for one another, Agenda also offered specific "principles of peace" in the Middle East. It called for mutual recognition by Israel, the Arab states, and the PLO. It urged a cessation of Jewish settlement activities in the West Bank and Gaza. And it called for Israeli recognition of "the right of Palestinians to national self-determination, including the right to the establishment, if they so choose, of an independent and viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, existing in peace with Israel."³⁸ These views, of course, were far removed from the existing policies of Israel's Likud government. Particularly provocative was the repeated assertion by Agenda that meetings must be held with the PLO — this in the era immediately after the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations was forced to resign because of his secret contacts with the PLO.

Agenda evoked much the same response from more conservative Jews as did Breira. Rael Jean Isaac weighed in once again with a scathing pamphlet entitled, "The New/Anti Jewish Agenda"; and once again she traced the pedigree and dangerous fellow travelers of a left-wing Jewish group. Isaac counseled the organized community to shun Agenda: "The Jewish community," she argued,

cannot prevent the development of groups like the New Jewish Agenda. Agenda itself is an outgrowth of the very similar Breira, which rose to brief prominence in the 1970s.... The reappearance of Breira in the shape of the New Jewish Agenda suggests that a group of this sort, under whatever name, is likely to persist. What the Jewish community can do is to isolate a group that is outside the consensus.... It isolated Breira, which died as a result of the internal dissension that isolation precipitated.³⁹

But despite the attacks in the Jewish press, Agenda did not suffer

37 Rael Jean Isaac, "New Jewish Agenda — Outside the Consensus," *Midstream*, December 1990, 19.

38 *New Jewish Agenda National Platform* (adopted 28 November 1982), 6.

39 Isaac, "Outside the Consensus," 19.

the fate of Breira. Members were not as besieged as their Breira predecessors; their jobs apparently were not on the line. And they were not roundly attacked or ostracized, as Breira activists had been. In fact, Agenda scored some impressive victories in gaining an entrée into local umbrella agencies. Agenda chapters in Kansas City, New Haven, Ann Arbor, and Santa Fe won admission into local Jewish councils or Jewish federations. In July 1984, the Los Angeles chapter of Agenda was voted into the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, thereby scoring a coup in Agenda's struggle for communal legitimation.⁴⁰

In contrast, the most bitter defeat came when the local Jewish council in Washington, D.C., overturned the recommendation of its own executive board and denied Agenda a place. The chairman of the ZOA's local chapter led the opposition, declaring: "We feel a group like this is not within the mainstream of thinking of the Jewish community.... They don't fall within the kind of thinking that is current in the Jewish community." He charged the New Jewish Agenda with being "pro-Arab rather than pro-Israel" and therefore "so far out we feel they really don't deserve [membership]." Moe Rodenstein expressed his chapter's disappointment, contending:

We'd like to be part of the debate...to say we are Jews; we're proud of what we're doing.... It's also important for us to work with a wide variety of issues...to try to push the Jewish community to concern with other issues than Israel and anti-Semitism."⁴¹

The New Jewish Agenda worked to carve out a place for itself in the organized Jewish community by cooperating in larger ventures. It formed a task force to involve itself in the Soviet Jewry movement.⁴² At the request of the Reform movement, Agenda activists worked behind the scenes to keep the issue of the Middle East off the agenda of a major civil rights march on Washington in 1983.⁴³

40 *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 24 July 1984, p. 2.

41 "Jewish Council Excludes New Group over Views on Rights of Palestinians," *Washington Post*, 4 June 1983, B4.

42 J. J. Goldberg, "The Graying of New Jewish Agenda," *Jewish Week*, 21 August 1987, 25.

43 *Ibid.*

And it participated in elections for U.S. delegates to the World Zionist Congress by joining forces with Americans for a Progressive Israel and Israel's Citizens Rights party.⁴⁴ The latter effort further enhanced Agenda's stature as a Zionist group.

When it folded its operations in 1992, the New Jewish Agenda could point to a record of legitimation by the umbrella organizations of local communities far beyond anything achieved by Breira. Undoubtedly, it won such legitimation in part because of the greater receptivity of American Jewry to Agenda's message regarding a solution in the Middle East. But it also showed a far greater willingness than Breira to participate in the life of the Jewish community. From its inception, Agenda employed a Jewish vocabulary. Its leaders determined early on that their message would receive a far wider hearing if Agenda joined the Jewish community. Hence, it sought to balance its self-declared role as the "alternative" to the "established" Jewish community with a deliberate program of seeking inclusion within the structure of that establishment.⁴⁵

The New Israel Fund founded in 1979 has provided still another outlet for Jews on the left who are critical of Israeli policies. Unlike Breira and Agenda, which served as critics of Israel and the American Jewish establishment, the New Israel Fund has devoted its energies to disbursing funds in Israel to groups that embody its vision of what is needed in Israeli society. By serving as a conduit of funds, the New Israel Fund enables American Jews to strengthen those sectors of Israeli society that foster the civil rights of Israeli Jews and Arabs, ameliorate the suffering of abused women and children and victims of discrimination, and work toward Arab-Jewish reconciliation. The goal, according to David Arnov, the Fund's American chairman, is to reshape Israeli society: "Our concept of philanthropy for Israel must be broadened to include not only *tzedakah*, providing concrete needs and services, but also *tikun*, the healing, mending and transformation of a suffering society."⁴⁶ Here, then, is another

44 Isaac, "Outside the Consensus," 18.

45 Kevin Freeman, "New Jewish Agenda to Seek Communal Status," *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 29 June 1983, 2.

46 Marvin Schick, "New Israel Fund Pours Leftist Salt on Jewish Wound," *Long Island Jewish World*, 19-25 December 1986, 6.

aspect of the tangled relationship — an American Jewish group that takes it upon itself to reshape Israel by supporting groups that conform to its own image.

In virtually all of its public pronouncements, the New Israel Fund justifies its work on the basis of Israel's Declaration of Independence. Israel, it proclaims, must be true to its founders' original dream: "To be a state based on freedom, justice, and peace envisaged by the prophets of Israel"; to be a state that will "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex."⁴⁷ Thus the Fund legitimizes itself on the basis of Israel's self-declared ideals. American Jews need to serve as guardians of the true Israel: "The fight to preserve the founding vision of Israel has been raging and has finally shaken the American Jewish community," claims Arnow. "Today we stand at the head of a movement to build the kind of Israel we too long took for granted."⁴⁸

The Fund also invokes Jewish tradition and American democratic values to justify its programs. Its publications hark back to the prophets of Israel and then intertwine Jewish traditions with American values:

In our view, the values of democracy are not merely consonant with Jewish values; they are inseparable from them. In our view, they are not merely afterthoughts to the basic question of Israel's safety; they are part and parcel of that question.⁴⁹

The Fund's president, Mary Ann Stein, conflates three sets of ideals in her description of her group: "We seek what we view as traditional Jewish values; the values of pluralism, tolerance, and equality for all citizens, adopted in Israel's Declaration of Independence, remain promises — just as in the United States they are promises."⁵⁰ This approach is then touted as the best means to protect Israel and

47 Letter to the editor defending the New Israel Fund against attack by Americans for a Safe Israel, *Jewish Week*, 21 September 1990, 28, 46.

48 *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 3 July 1992, 4.

49 From the New Israel Fund's *Guide to the Issues, Grantees, and Programs*, 1991, ii.

50 "The New Israel Fund at Ten: An Interview with NIF President Mary Ann Stein," *New Outlook*, March 1990, 42.

strengthen its ties with America. Karen Friedman, media director for the New Israel Fund, contends that with the end of the Cold War, America no longer needs Israel as it once did. "The only thing that the two countries have in common are shared values."⁵¹ Therefore, by supporting organizations that foster democracy, tolerance, and pluralism, the Fund is promoting the best in Jewish and American traditions and binding Israel and America more closely.

The Fund's religious and democratic rhetoric has not spared it the kinds of attack leveled by the right against left-wing critics of Israel. Americans for a Safe Israel once again issued a pamphlet denouncing its left-wing opponents. The author approvingly quoted Ze'ev Chafets's quip that the NIF people wish to transform Israel into a state that will "meet the approval of the ACLU, *The Nation* magazine, and the Sierra Club."⁵² More ominously, the pamphlet charges that the NIF "serves to provide the financial muscle to a handful of Israel extremists who, lacking the electoral mandate to radically transform the Jewish State, seek a constituency in New York and Berkeley that they cannot muster in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem."⁵³ According to this reading, the Fund subverts rather than encourages Israel's democratic process, because it favors extremist groups that have no support in Israel. Another critic of the Fund has charged that the group is "a virtual Who's Who of Israel's American Jewish critics."⁵⁴ The Fund is even more dangerous than earlier left-wing groups because it

actively sponsors those forces that seek to do to Israel from within what Breira and the Americans for Peace Now have sought to do from without. Whereas the political efforts of Jewish doves in the Diaspora have generally had little impact beyond occasional public-relations splashes, the New Israel

51 Alexandra Wall, "The New Israel Fund Comes of Age," *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 3 July 1992, 4.

52 Joseph Puder, *The New Israel Fund: A New Fund for Israel's Enemies* (New York: Americans for a Safe Israel, 1990), 30.

53 Ibid.

54 Rafael Medoff "The New Israel Fund — For Whom?" *Midstream*, May 1986, 15.

Fund applies a form of subtle financial pressure within Israel that is far more likely to have longlasting effects.⁵⁵

Despite these attacks, the New Israel Fund has flourished; its allocations have steadily increased, from \$80,000 in 1980 to over \$8 million in 1992.⁵⁶ Moreover, it has been publicly defended by leading members of the American Jewish establishment. In response to attacks by Americans for a Safe Israel, a public letter of support was issued in 1990 defending the legitimacy and Zionist credentials of the New Israel Fund. It was signed by past chairs of the Council of Jewish Federations, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the United Jewish Appeal, and the heads of all the non-Orthodox rabbinical seminaries.⁵⁷

The New Israel Fund won such legitimization by virtue of its close ties with Israeli institutions and the strong credentials of its supporters as Zionists and workers within the established American Jewish community. When Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, publicly endorsed the work of the New Israel Fund and its contribution to Israeli society,⁵⁸ it became far harder to delegitimize the Fund. Moreover, defenders of the Fund could claim that "among the people explicitly smeared [by opponents of the Fund] are many who hold positions of enormous responsibility in the most important (and, for that matter, the most mainstream) organizations in American Jewish life."⁵⁹ Even the incoming executive of the national United Jewish Appeal viewed the Fund as a constructive force.⁶⁰ By working directly with Israeli clients and reaching out to established Jewish communal officials, the Fund has been remarkably successful in blunting its critics' efforts to delegitimize its work.

Indeed, for the first time, right-wing critics were thrown on the defensive by communal officials who pointed out to the Americans

55 Ibid.

56 Alexandra Wall, *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 3 July 1992, 4.

57 *Jewish Week*, 21 September 1990, 28, 46. Although the president of Yeshiva University did not sign the letter, two other leaders of modern Orthodoxy — Emanuel Rackman and Irving Greenberg — did lend their names.

58 Letter to the *Jewish Week*, 21 September 1990, 32.

59 *Jewish Week*, 21 September 1990, 28, 46.

60 Robert Greenberger, "Growing Pains: The New Israel Fund," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 27 December 1991, 54ff.

for a Safe Israel that it had no right "to call into question the devotion to Israel of those with whom it disagrees."⁶¹ Defenders of the Fund impugned such critics as the Americans for a Safe Israel, asking: "Is it not curious that while Israelis...welcome the Fund and choose to participate in its work, a fringe American organization seeks to damage it?" Thus by working with Israelis, the Fund legitimated itself in the eyes of American Jewish leaders, and right-wing critics were relegated to the periphery by virtue of their overstepping the bounds, by their disrespect for pluralism.⁶² As we shall see, the organized Jewish community was gradually crystallizing a set of guidelines for dissent that took into account the values of pluralism and democracy.

It is within this context that the admission of Americans for Peace Now (APN) into the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations must be placed. Opponents argued against admission on the grounds that it supported the PLO and tilted too far to the pro-Arab position. In addition, questions were raised about the wisdom of including a group that might paralyze deliberations within the umbrella organization by failing to submerge its organizational views so as to permit the conference to speak out on behalf of the community. (According to Presidents' Conference rules, a dissenting member may prevent the conference from taking public stands with which it disagrees.)⁶³ But ultimately these concerns were overridden by the compelling case put forward by those favoring admission, which were twofold: (1) How could the American Jewish community refuse to grant legitimacy to a group that had members serving in the cabinet of Yitzhak Rabin? (2) How could the Presidents' Conference work with the new Clinton administration, which had

61 *Jewish Week*, 21 September 1990, 28, 46.

62 Andrew S. Carroll, "A Call for Civility," *Washington Jewish Week*, 9 August 1990, 15ff.

63 Seymour Reich, quoted in *Forward*, 26 March 1993, 16. In this newspaper report the claim is made that Americans for Peace Now had pledged to Lester Pollack, chairman of the Conference, its intention to work within the consensus spirit of the Presidents' Conference. Henry Siegman of the American Jewish Congress rejected the need for the APN or any other new member to accept and abide by the consensus position in advance: "It is the Presidents' Conference that must uphold its consensus, not the individual constituent members."

placed several prominent supporters of Americans for Peace Now in high government positions, if it refused to work with APN?⁶⁴

There is no single reason for the metamorphosis in the policies of the national umbrella agencies of American Jewry. But clearly, the tent has been expanded in the two decades since the founding of Breira, and the organized community has refined its views of pluralism and dissent. Among the major umbrella agencies, it appears that only the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council grappled openly with the issue of dissent. Already in the early 1970s, NJCRAC had to decide whether the Jewish Defense League should come under the communal umbrella of local Jewish councils. (It formally rejected the JDL in 1975.) As we have seen, the New Jewish Agenda formally applied for membership in local councils in the early 1980s. It was in this context that the chairman of NJCRAC, Bennet Yanowitz, devoted his keynote address to "Democracy and Discipline in the American Jewish Community — The Utility and Morality of Unity." Yanowitz strove to balance the conflicting needs for "unity, discipline, honesty, freedom and purposefulness." He defended the rights of dissenters — as long as they kept their dissent "within the tent or within the family." He objected strenuously to dissenters who insist not only on a hearing but also that their views become policy. He berated Israeli leaders for not always listening and for impugning the motives of critics. And he simultaneously called for "maintaining and strengthening those channels of free debate and free expression within the family...[to] reaffirm the concept of *kelal Yisrael*."⁶⁵

In the years that followed, NJCRAC struggled to define operationally what all this meant, and in October 1989 its executive board adopted "Guidelines for Participating in Jewish Community Events and Decision-Making."⁶⁶ The guidelines pose the critical questions:

64 David Twersky, "Welcome to Washington: Now, Peace Now," *Forward*, 19 February 1993, 6; Leonard Fein, "American Zealots," *Forward*, 5 March 1993, 7.

65 Chairman's Address, Plenary Session, NJCRAC, Cleveland, Ohio, 15 February 1983, 20–24.

66 I am grateful to Jerome Chanes of NJCRAC for bringing these guidelines to my attention.

Are Jewish communal instrumentalities that undertake community-wide groups events obliged to provide an opportunity for participation to any Jewish group that so wishes?... Are the central bodies of the Jewish community, national and local, which are representative in nature, obliged to permit any organization to participate in their decision-making process?

The paper sets forth four central commitments of the Jewish community that must be considered when answering these questions:

1. To a free, open, and pluralistic society
2. To the survival and security of the State of Israel
3. To *kelal Yisrael*, the integrity of Jewish peoplehood and the interlocking relationships of the community of Israel.
4. To the creative survival and continuity of Jewish life in America.

It then goes on to suggest that groups seeking to participate in community-wide events, seeking public platforms, or seeking participation in decision making should be included provided they are not "fundamentally anti-Semitic, anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, or anti-democratic." In short, NJCRAC, as one of the major umbrella agencies of American Jewry, has in principle come some distance in its willingness to bring Jewish groups under its tent.

The heated, often rancorous, debates precipitated by the appearance of groups critical of Israeli policies thus forced the organized Jewish community to take stock and rethink questions of pluralism. Contrary to the protestations of these groups that they could not receive a fair hearing, it was precisely their far-reaching criticisms of the American Jewish establishment, as well as their challenges to Israeli policies, that drew widespread attention in the American Jewish community. Indeed, they were accorded far more attention than their minuscule membership figures warranted.

Gradually, the consensus of the Jewish community regarding such groups has changed. In part, this is the case because American Jewish leaders have become less monolithic in their approach to the Israeli-Arab conflict.⁶⁷ But the dynamic of the American Jewish

67 See, for example, Steven M. Cohen, *Israel-Diaspora Relations: A Survey of American Jewish Leaders*, Report No. 8. (Tel Aviv: Israel Diaspora Institute, 1990).

community has also worked to encourage the expression of dissent: a voluntaristic community must find ways to accommodate diversity of viewpoints, lest it be marginalized. As Leonard Fein wrote during the debate over the admission of Americans for Peace Now, "The Conference of Presidents has one resource, and one only: It claims to speak on behalf of organized American Jewry."⁶⁸ The legitimacy of the umbrella organization is on the line if it cannot formulate a coherent position on dissent.

As for the particular organizations examined here, it is hardly coincidental that their treatment by the organized community was linked to their behavior. The more these groups allied themselves with Israeli groups, the stronger was their claim to legitimacy. Certainly, we see dramatic evidence of the "tangled relations" when legitimacy within the organized Jewish community is earned by a dissenting group when it links up with Israeli counterparts. These same groups have also moved from a confrontational stance vis à vis the organized American Jewish community to one in which they have allowed themselves to be coopted for some tasks. They included themselves in the collective of *kelal Yisrael* and thereby won legitimacy.


legit

68 Leonard Fein, "American Zealots," *Forward*, 5 March 1993, 7.