

Syd Nestel

## THE LEFT IN ISRAEL

### An Interview with Amos Kenan

(Courtesy of the Jewish Student Press Service)

#### What, today, comprises the left in Israel?

There was once a left in Israel. Until five, six or seven years ago one could consider Maapam the Israeli leftist party. Since then Maapam has become part of the Israeli establishment; and now not only is it part of the establishment and a member of the Government, but it is directly responsible for every single act of the government. So there is a vacant place where the left should be. This vacant place is somehow filled with the dissidents from Maapam. This is Siach, the New Israeli Left. It was founded by young dissidents of Maapam who were unhappy with their party's attitude. They are today not only the most, but maybe the only militant leftist group in Israel. I can't tell you what their real force is. It's not much, but they have an impact because they are young intellectuals, and they form the body of the Movement for Peace and Security; they are the body of everything which is opposition in Israel.

#### What about "Haolam Hazeh," Uri Avneri's party?

"Haolam Hazeh" has a seat in the Knesset but no movement behind it. It's a kind of tactical arrangement for elections. People voted for Avneri for so many different reasons that you can't put them together. Some liked the idea that there should be some new blood in the Knesset. Some thought it a good thing that a Knesset member be serious and precise and accurate and never miss a session. It sets a good example for other Knesset members who don't frequent the house. Some think that Avneri's big campaign for free transportation for soldiers was a very good idea. Some also agree with his political ideas. But altogether there are just some, not many; Avneri did not attempt to create a movement.

#### What about parties like Maki and Matzpen? Are they doing anything on the Israeli left?

Maki is now the legitimate Israeli left — for exportation. Matzpen has no power in Israel and does not represent anything; it's an army in which the generals are abroad and some true soldiers have remained in Israel.

#### That means the only left party with any force in Israel is Siach?

Well, not only; there is the young section of Maapam which has emerged recently almost in open opposition to the party. I don't think they will become dissidents but Maapam is not a big, happy family. The younger generation is in open revolt against the leadership.

#### What have groups like Siach and young Maapam been doing about Israel's social and economic problems?

First of all, they are becoming conscious of these problems, trying to develop an ideological attitude and join in the struggle. I mean, whenever there is anything happening with the Black Panthers, those people participate and help. They don't even want to become a party. They are a debating club, but when it comes to action, they also act.

#### Is there any unity in the Israeli left? Are they forming some-sort of united pressure group?

No, nor is it advisable. You see, the Israeli establishment would do anything possible to identify Siach with Matzpen. But actually, they are quite different, because Siach is Zionist and Matzpen is not. Siach, of course, not only recognizes the right of Israel to exist, but is made up of people who are good Israeli patriots, in their own way. There is no question about their Zionism. But Matzpen doesn't accept the right of a Jewish state to exist. Matzpen is now divided into three main factions. There are the Maoists, the Trotskyites, and the authentic Matzpen, none of whom accept the idea of a Jewish national state. The Israeli press, the establishment, and the mass media make every possible effort to identify Siach with Matzpen. When the Black Panthers first started they did everything possible to connect the Black Panthers with Siach and Matzpen. They said that the Black Panthers are manipulated by this bunch of crazy, leftist intellectuals, and that they are traitors to the state, to the people and to the nation. I think, therefore, that if Siach and other opposition groups want to help the Black Panthers, they should do it in a discreet way, in order to avoid the impression that the Panthers are manipulated by anybody. That would be the end of it.

#### What about the Movement for Peace and Security? Have they formed an alliance with Siach?

The Movement for Peace and Security is a commodity. It's the only place where people from different parties could meet. There are members of Maapam, of the Labor Party, of the Liberal Party, and even some members of the Religious Party. And Maki, of course. It's a non-party organization where people are supposed to meet. But they are only supposed to meet; the parties involved prevent it from taking any extreme anti-government positions. The Maapam and the Labor Party delegates in the Movement for Peace and Security, wouldn't allow for such a position, so that the Movement, for all practical purposes, doesn't exist. From time to time, it comes out with a declaration or something; and if they sponsored a demonstration, no Maapam, no Labor Party, no Liberal, no Religious, nobody would come to this demonstration. Then they would need Siach, and Siach would come.

#### You mentioned before that the Israeli establishment does everything in its power to stop these new opposition movements from growing by identifying them with Matzpen and anti-Israel forces. To what extent do you think the Israeli establishment is repressive toward society in general? Is it a repressive society, as some people say?

Yes, it is, only in a very subtle and discreet way. But there is social repression in Israel.

**Could you be more explicit? Could you give some examples?**

It's very simple. From the age of 18 until the age of 55 the Israeli is a soldier. So suppose you are 45. Suppose you are 50. You are somebody. You are a professor or a bank manager, or whatever you like to be. From time to time they call you to a military office, just to check. Just to sign your name. But that's enough. The moment you enter the military office you are no longer a professor or bank manager. You are nothing. You are a soldier, and that's all. You are under military jurisdiction. Even if it's only for 15 minutes. For 15 minutes you are again a soldier as you were when you were 18. And that's enough to put you in your proper place. You don't need more than that. You don't need more apparent means of repression. That alone puts you in line.

**Would you say the Israeli army is more similar to a professional army, as in Canada or Great Britain, or closer to the Chinese model of a "people's army"?**

It's neither one nor the other. It could be adequately described as a popular army. Only the picture is not so nice because there are classes in Israel; there is an upper class and there is a lower class. The professional or standing army is the upper class; the reserve army is the lower class.

**What about dissent within the army, such as the big outcry from within the army itself about the brutality in Gaza? Was that typical or an exception?**

It's not an exception. They try hard to maintain certain values, certain humanism. It becomes harder and harder to maintain, but a decent effort is made.

**What about inflation? I understand that in the last year or two inflation has skyrocketed in Israel. How is this affecting the Israeli working class? Are they reacting to it in any way?**

They are reacting, they are revolting, but they still don't make any connection between war expenses and the state of war, and the terrible economic situation. They just don't see that it's one thing.

**Is that because no one has spoken to this issue, or have people tried to speak to this issue in Israel?**

Nobody would dare say it in Israel. Nobody. Nobody would dare raise the question. It's a sacred thing, security. Nobody would dare touch it.

**Not even Siach or the left?**

Nobody.

**What about racism in Israel — toward Oriental Jews and toward Arabs. Would you call it racism, or something else?**

It's not racism, it's class struggle. The class configuration of Israel is this: You have the upper class, which is either European, or Israeli-born from European parents; then you have the Oriental Jew; then you have the Arabs as the lowest class. I think that in history, races and communities played the roles of social classes. The Oriental Jew plays the role of the proletariat, which is what he is. It is not the kibbutz which is the proletariat class. The kibbutz belongs to the upper class. It's the Oriental Jew who is the cheap labor power for the kibbutz. The kibbutz is the manager and the Oriental Jew is the worker. And the Arab is the even lower worker.

**What about the advent of the Black Panthers? Do you consider this the beginning of a serious class struggle in Israel?**

That's the only serious class struggle. There is no other serious class struggle. I think that it will mark the coming years in Israel. It will become more open and more violent.

**Do you think it will follow the pattern of the struggle between blacks and whites in America over the last ten years? Do you think it will get that violent and that hopeless, or is there more of a feeling of good will in Israel?**

There is not much good will and I'm afraid that to a certain degree it will follow the American pattern. And I think that the authorities have decided to crush it. The Panthers are bitter and they are desperate. They are young, inexperienced, illiterate, and they don't have any political formation — but they have a good instinct. They feel that they are being pushed and they don't want to be pushed. And they don't want charity. They don't want it slow, they want it quick, immediate; and all of it — not part of it.

**Have the Black Panthers and their constituents realized the connection between the war and inflation? Are they speaking up against the war at all?**

No, they don't and they wouldn't dare.

**Could you call the Black Panthers leftist? In America, one hears that the Panthers, or at least elements of the Panthers, are controlled by Gahal, and that the Oriental community has very strong sentiments toward Gahal.**

I don't think so. I think that in the next election every single party in Israel will try to have its own brand of Panthers. You will hear maybe hundreds of organizations saying the same things, but at the service of each particular party. And of course everybody will give more representation in the Knesset to the Oriental Jews because there is strong pressure in that direction. But, it's just that. I don't think that the Black Panthers themselves are leftists, but they have a class instinct.

**Do you think they'll be pushed into a leftist position by the coming struggles in Israel?**

Yes, they are being pushed left because the police, the government, and every authority is behaving in the classic pattern and they push them — they label them left so they force them to become left.

**Do you think that any constructive social change can occur in Israel as long as there is tension on the borders? Or do you think they have to work first for peace and then for internal change?**

I think we have to work for peace first. Nothing is possible as long as there is a state of war.

**What about the Arabs in the occupied territory? Is anything being done about them or are they being kept in a state of limbo?**

Nothing is being done about them.

**Are any forces on the left speaking to that issue, or doing anything about it — going into the Arab communities?**

It's no use speaking with them because they are an occupied population. They wouldn't speak to us as long as they are in this state. They are controlled by the Israeli occupation. That's all.

**If it were in your power what would you do with the occupied territory?**

I would give them political freedom. I would let them resurrect their political life — the freedom of speech, the freedom of gathering, of forming parties, things like that. And I would engage in dialogue with them.

**Are you talking about setting up an autonomous Palestinian state on the West Bank?**

I think that we should recognize the Palestinians and leave them the choice; whether they want to have a separate state on the West Bank or a Palestinian state which would be composed of the West Bank and Jordan is an internal Palestinian affair.

**Do you think the present government, meaning Golda, Dayan, Allon, and the others recognize the internal and external problems of Israel and are trying to do something about it or are they just trying to sit tight and maintain the status quo?**

I think that they want to stay tight and that's it. They were somewhat surprised by the violence of social feeling in Israel. They were frightened for a moment, but they won't give up, they won't change their position; for them the best situation is the status quo. Just to go on like that — no peace, no war, no solution, consolidating the occupation, making it an accepted fact, just that.

**Are there any people in Israel within reach of power who could be considered progressive?**

Yes, there is a section of the Labor Party who is more liberal, less right wing, which is more open socially and more dovish than hawkish. There is a section. You can call Pinchas Sapir an Israeli Dove. Pinchas Sapir would give back every single inch of the occupied territories. Socially, he is not progressive, but politically he is. There are people like Ben Aharon, secretary of the Histadrut, who is a political dove and socially progressive. There are people like Bubyah Eliyav, ex-secretary of the Labor Party who is of the same view, and many others, not in the government, but in the Knesset and in the party. ■

Norman Roth

## JEWISH THEOLOGY AND THE "COUNTER COMMUNITY" A Review Article and a Proposal

Rabbi Louis Jacobs quotes a guidebook to the city of London which concludes its section on Jewish London as follows: "Theology may have been invented by Jews, but they have been content to resign it to the Gentiles. Or to use a peculiarly Jewish form of logic: If God is in His heaven, why worry? And if He isn't, what's the use of worrying?"<sup>1</sup> This seems to sum up the general theory about Judaism and theology. It is significant that Jacobs' column reviewing Jewish theological works in *Judaism* has apparently been discontinued, perhaps because the material for review was so scarce that the author had of late taken to reviewing Responsa literature and even non-Jewish theological writings.

Many writers, both popular and scholarly, continue to maintain that there are no dogmas in Judaism. Pressed for a source, they will undoubtedly refer to Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*; or, more usually, to the article "The Dogmas of Judaism," by Solomon Schechter in his *Studies in Judaism*, where he is supposed to have said that Mendelssohn said there are no dogmas in Judaism. (Actually, Schechter doesn't say that at all — what he says is that "there is Mendelssohn's assertion, or supposed assertion, in his *Jerusalem* that Judaism has no dogmas.") Looking at Mendelssohn's own book, which few of these writers do, we find that in fact he never said anything of the kind. He only distinguishes, correctly, that the Bible nowhere commands a belief.

What we are proposing here, however, is not that Judaism does have or should have dogmas, but rather that it surely should have a theology. More precisely, to borrow Eugene Borowitz's formulation, it should have "theological concern; theological informedness."<sup>2</sup>

Two of the problems, at least, that mitigate against this "theological concern" are that when one thinks of theology, one thinks of Christianity; and when one thinks of theologians, one thinks of stuffy old scholars in a study surrounded by books. Neither of these conclusions is necessarily sound or final. Christianity, it is true, is historically more given to "theologizing" than Judaism;

1. *The New London Spy*, by Anthony Bond; quoted by Louis Jacobs in "Current Theological Literature," *Judaism* Spring 1967, p.207.
2. Eugene B. Borowitz, *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*, p. 207.