

October 21st, 2011

Protests Are Spreading Across an Angry Globe

By Leonard Fein

It took all of nine weeks for Israel's summer protests to cross the oceans to America. What began on Rothschild Boulevard (or, truth be told, in Tahrir Square, in Cairo) on July 14 and moved from there to dozens of cities and towns in Israel came to New York City's Wall Street on September 17 and by now is under way in 1,343 cities across the globe. On October 15, in some 40 countries, there will be protest marches, people demanding a variety of things, some outlandish, some obvious, most centered on greater equity.

It is almost impossible to imagine an effective worldwide protest against corporate greed and malfeasance or governmental complicity in stacking the deck in favor of corporations, "the people" be damned. Even if we consider just the United States, starting with the Occupy Wall Street movement and burgeoning to include many hundreds of offshoots, the same questions that have haunted Israel's summer protests apply to the Occupy movement in this country. How does one craft a politically relevant program out of a charmingly diverse (not to say conflicting) array of demands? Once the tents have been removed, once winter sets in, what happens next?

I have now visited the Occupy Boston assembly several times; it is conveniently located just a few blocks from where I live. The 200 tents crowded into Dewey Square; the leavening of the mainly young people there gathered with a solid sprinkling of old-timers; the signage; the thoughtfulness; the cordiality — all these are impressive, even uplifting. But they do not answer "the morning after" question. Massachusetts Senator John Kerry has said, "I'm very, very understanding of where they're coming from," but, like many of the rest of us, he likely has no idea at all regarding where they are going.

At the same time, it is premature to dismiss the Occupy effort as inherently doomed. The voices may be cacophonous, but they are in the main being raised for the first time, and no one can safely say that they are destined to soon become merely elements of nostalgic recollection. Perhaps there is truth to my favorite sign here at the Occupy Boston: “The beginning is near!”

Eric Cantor (R-Va.) majority leader of the House of Representatives, calls the protesters a “mob.” In so doing, he positions himself quite to the right of Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s foreign minister. While Lieberman did not refrain from calling Israel’s protesters “loudmouths for hire” and from dismissing them as “sushi eaters” and “spoiled brats,” his more extended response took a very different tack: “The protests are not Woodstock. This is a real protest. There is no doubt that everyone is right: the doctors, the dairy farmers, the social workers, the lawyers, the teachers and the police.” In fact, Lieberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu party has proposed an economic plan that includes fines for builders who do not build on land they acquire, a tax on empty apartments, bonuses for soldiers at the end of compulsory service and free child care from age 3. All this is scarcely enough as a response to the anger that drew 450,000 Israelis to a mega-march September 3, but it is several light-years beyond what the nyetnik Cantor is likely to come up with. Cantor is temperamentally much closer to Rush Limbaugh, who says, “There’s no doubt in my mind that the White House is behind this. Obama is setting up riots. He is fanning the flames.”

True, the president has indicated that he understands the frustration that inspires the Occupy movement. But the movement is not just about Wall Street per se; it is also about Timothy Geithner, Obama’s secretary of the Treasury; about bailouts that have worked for the banks and other financial institutions and for the auto industry, but have failed miserably in responding to the foreclosure (or, as I prefer, the “eviction”) crisis. It is as if there are those (corporations) that are “too big to fail” and those (people) who are too small to care about. That, at any rate, is the overwhelming sentiment of the Occupy people. The Republicans are plainly the principal villains of the day, but Obama is not (yet?) the hero who is saving the day, nor are his fellow Democrats.

I cannot write about all this without mentioning the reports I’ve read of the Kol Nidre service across the street from the main protest in Zuccotti Park, the gathering point for the original and ongoing Occupy Wall Street movement. (I’m told that similar services were held in Boston, Philadelphia and Washington.) The brainchild of Daniel Sieradski, an increasingly and

impressively prominent presence in the new media world, the Wall Street service attracted some 700 people. It was a deftly creative amalgam of the tradition (most of the prayers were in Hebrew) and of the spirit of the Occupy movement. Getzel Davis, a fourth-year rabbinic student at Boston's Hebrew College, delivered the sermon: "Yom Kippur is the day we are forgiven for worshipping the golden calf. What is the golden calf? It is the essence of idol worship; it is the fallacy that gold is God."

Denouncing such fallacies, as we are reminded every Yom Kippur that Isaiah did, is in itself a public service. Perhaps in the sukkah the protesters plan to build there will be time to consider how public policy can come to reflect Isaiah's eloquent statement of what is required of us. If, and as, more of us come to be occupied by that question, perhaps we can call the process Occupation 2.0.