

# New York Demonstrations

December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1995

by Leonard Fein

Growing up in Baltimore, I learned that the Jews were a people in exile - not merely 'diaspora,' but, Exile (and yes, with a capital "E"). But I didn't understand then that "Exile" is an existential condition, not a geographic location. Instead, I believed (or so it now seems in retrospect) that the place we were in Exile from was New York.

It's been a long while since that time, the time when New York was plainly the leading Jewish city of the world, a city a third of whose residents were Jewish, a city with more Jews than the entire new state of Israel. But in 48 hours of this week, New York's centrality as a Jewish place came crashing in once more.

\* On Tuesday, we learned definitively that the tragic 125th Street fire of last Friday in which eight people died was, in part, about antisemitism. (I say "in part" because we have yet to learn enough about the business practices of Freddy's clothing store and its Jewish owner.) And not just about antisemitism as the disease of a random arsonist who "happened" to hate Jews, but about antisemitism as an end-product of the language of incitement. Specifically, we learned from an affidavit filed before the fire by Freddy's owner that among the epithets of the protesters during the two weeks in which they demonstrated in front of the store was "bloodsucking Jews."

The word "bloodsucking" is not part of general discourse, not even of the conventional vocabulary of antisemites in America. Its provenance, instead, is quite specific: It is Louis Farrakhan's contribution to our civic culture. Roland Smith, Jr., the dead arsonist - and murderer of the seven others - might have done what he did without the encouragement of Minister

Farrakahn. (We do not know, for example, whether he was among those who used the hateful term.) But if, only weeks ago, we were all caught up in the consequences of the language of incitement, suddenly made aware of how such language can create a climate that encourages murder, we cannot now shrink from that awareness. In Israel, rabbis who used such words as "traitor" to describe Prime Minister Rabin have been questioned by the police. No laws in the United States allow, or should, such interrogation of Louis Farrakahn. But in Israel, some rabbis - and others - have expressed contrition for their use of inflammatory language. It is likely too much to expect that the loony Louis Farrakahn, convinced as he is that he speaks the words God gives him (as Yigal Amir evidently believes he was instructed by God to assassinate the Israeli prime minister), will apologize for his incitement. But surely others who have felt it useful to make common cause with him ought now reconsider that judgment. The language of the Minister renders him - or should - a pariah.

\* On Monday night, several hundred demonstrators of all ages gathered across from the Pierre Hotel at 61st and Fifth Avenue, there to protest the Jewish Theological Seminary's Louis Marshall Award Dinner. In the uncommonly bitter cold, they marched and chanted rhythmically, "Jews say 'no' to Newt," referring, of course, to House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the speaker at this year's dinner.

My own sentiments regarding the Seminary's decision to invite Mr. Gingrich are no secret; months ago, describing the invitation as "a disgrace," I wrote that, "the Seminary apparently misunderstands the real arithmetic of the matter: Newt Gingrich adds nothing to its luster by his presence at its dinner; it is the Seminary that adds to Newt Gingrich - and in so doing, subtracts from itself." I was, therefore, pleased to witness and, for a short time, to join with the marchers. These days, it doesn't take much to be opposed to Newt Gingrich; some 60

percent of all Americans, the polls tell us, have a negative view of him. The issue here was more the Seminary than the Speaker; the demonstration, savvily organized by Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, included numbers of Conservative Jews, carrying signs with such slogans as, "a shandeh" - a disgrace.

JTS Chancellor Ismar Schorsch is quoted in the press the morning after as defending the Gingrich invitation on the grounds that the goal of the dinner is to raise money, and Gingrich - at least back nine months or so ago, when the invitation was extended - was sure to be a draw. "Listen," he said, "the business I'm in is a very pragmatic one."

One hopes that by the time the dinner rolled around, even the pragmatists were embarrassed. After all, even his colleagues in the House are now seeking to distance themselves from him. One hopes, as well, that Chancellor Schorsch will have second thoughts about the status of "pragmatism" in the fund-raising strategy of the Seminary. After all, if drawing a crowd is the determining variable, why not Michael Millken, or Dr. Ruth, or Madonna? The Jewish Theological Seminary deserves generous financial support, no question. But on the other side of the equation, it owes something back, and what it owes is a constant demonstration of the priority we assign to the ethical claims of our tradition, claims that Newt Gingrich daily violates.

\* The big demonstration of the weekend was, of course, Sunday's Madison Square Garden Rally on behalf of peace in Israel. Not, mind you, on behalf of the current peace process, for fear that might inhibit the attendance of those who apparently want peace at no price. Even so, the Zionist Organization of America and the National Council of Young Israel announced, in a full-page ad in the New York Times, their refusal to participate in the rally, arguing that absent a speaker opposed to the peace process the rally was intended "to promote a partisan political agenda." The notion that the Prime Minister of Israel cannot appear before a Jewish rally unless

the opposition is also present is absurd on the face of it. My last Madison Square Garden rally was in 1946, where Chaim Weizman (among others) spoke on behalf of a Jewish state. Should a representative of the American Council of Judaism, which opposed Jewish statehood, have been invited to share the platform? Get real.