

"O Havruta O Mituta"

"Give Me Friendship Or Give Me Death" (Talmud Taanit, 23a)

How To Strengthen the Palestine Solidarity Movement by Making Friends With Jews

by Guy Izhak Austrian and Ella Goldman



PASS THIS ON TO A FRIEND!

Communiques are an e-mail supplement to Clamor Magazine's bimonthly coverage of politics, culture, media and life. We hope that you will enjoy receiving regular, great articles featuring articles too time-sensitive to wait for print.

As always, you can subscribe to Clamor at
www.clamormagazine.org/buy.html

Cover photo: Israeli Jewish and Palestinian activists join farmers at the olive harvest on October 19, 2002, in the West Bank, to shield the farmers from raids by settlers. Credit: Ta'ayush: Arab Jewish Partnership, <http://www.taayush.org>.

clamor communiqué #20

Countless Jews in the U.S. hate what the Israeli government and army are doing, support the rights of Palestinians, and want to speak out and take action. They're longing to fight for a cause that they feel calling so closely to their Jewishness, but instead they're watching the Palestine solidarity movement from an uneasy distance. Some who did join have left, like one Jewish Israeli-American woman who dropped out of a radical media collective after a fellow activist, returning from Palestine, looked at her and said, "Israelis are the ugliest people I've ever seen... no offense," while other collective members watched in silence.

We are two Israeli-American Jewish activists in the New York-based organization Jews Against the Occupation. JATO (which we're not speaking for in this article) is a Jewish group that works in support of self-determination for Palestinian people, recognizes the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and calls for an end to U.S. aid to Israel. We are Palestine activists because of our outrage and grief over the crimes against humanity committed in our name.

We're writing this article because it's apparent that the Palestine solidarity movement in the U.S. and Europe often stumbles over Jewish issues. Our political opponents use any insensitivity toward Jews to discredit our movement and justify the repression of Palestinians. Yet the movement has a historic opportunity--by including a progressive vision for Jewish liberation--to grow tremendously in influence and numbers, to confound its critics, and to help put a stop to the war on Palestinians.

Seeing the links between Jewish and Palestinian liberation is necessary in part because anti-Jewish oppression doesn't only harm Jews. Throughout history and in a consistent, predictable pattern, anti-Jewish prejudice has been used to disrupt people's resistance to oppression. During times of relative stability, ruling elites bribe some Jews with material privileges and public positions of limited power. Most Jews have neither wealth nor political power, but enough of us appear as the visible faces of a larger oppressive system to make it look as though Jews are not oppressed. Some leftists who see oppression only in economic terms also fall for this illusion and don't include Jews on their progressive agendas.

The Clamor Communique format has been reworked so you can easily distribute them as half-page pamphlets. Simply photocopy them double-sided in the order they are delivered here, fold copies in half, and staple in the middle.

January 2003, New York City, by Guy Izhak Austrian and Ella Goldman. Please freely copy and distribute this pamphlet, or quote from it, but we ask that you credit us and don't take things out of context.

E-mail us at havruta@lkyu.com

- * Remember that Jews can hear anything you want to say about Israel/Palestine if it's obvious that you care about Jews and our safety. It's not enough to refrain from saying insensitive things. Find ways to communicate that the liberation of Jews is on your agenda.

AND A FEWS FOR JEWS:

- * Remember that there is room for Jewish liberation on progressive agendas. Keeping it off the agenda will trip up all other liberation struggles. So get out of the closet! And remember that being visibly Jewish is different for everyone. There is no such thing as "too Jewish" or "not Jewish enough." Know that you are a good Jew.
- * Don't fall into the trap of isolation by taking on Jewish liberation with Jews only. Reach for allies, and work from the assumption that our gentile comrades want to know and to do the right thing. And always address Jewish liberation through your commitment to the liberation of Palestinians and the struggle to end all oppressions.

Every time we communicate care to Jewish communities, that is activism against our oppression. Taking on the fight for Jewish liberation will transform and advance the Palestinian liberation movement in ways we have hardly begun to imagine.

MORE BOOKS TO READ:

Michael Lerner, The Socialism of Fools: Anti-Semitism on the Left.

Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism.

Thanks to Sara Marcus for help with editing, and thanks to many others who gave input, feedback, and support.

Meanwhile, the elites subtly nurture stereotypes and myths that Jews are in control, hungry for money and power, and so on. When the system is threatened by internal crisis or popular resistance, anti-Jewish prejudice diverts anger and violence away from the root of the problem and onto this group of scapegoats. After surviving an outbreak of persecution, Jews are left vulnerable to cooperating with our own oppression by accepting once again the short-term privileges of an illusory alliance with the ruling class. At the same time, Jews become isolated from the struggles of other oppressed peoples.

Tenants, for example, may hate their Jewish landlord instead of organizing against city and state housing laws and the larger system of private property. A recent example of this dynamic happened at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001. The U.S. didn't want to attend because its entire economic system is based on the racism and imperialism that the conference was confronting. But the U.S. declared that it wouldn't attend because the conference would be critical of Israel. This manipulation sparked overt displays of Jew-hating in Durban that the media played up to discredit this crucial conference, obscuring the Palestinian cause and the resistance to Western imperialism.

The war on Palestinians shows the same set-up on a global, extreme scale. The imperial powers funded a people traumatized by the holocaust to colonize the Middle East. Israeli Jews receive material benefits and a false sense of safety while the primary drive is the interests of U.S. arms and oil companies. Israel is just one small arm of U.S. worldwide imperialism, and U.S. "aid" to Israel is really just a tiny part of U.S. military spending.

Meanwhile, the primary blame is shifted onto Israel by manipulating common anti-Jewish ideas. Bigots spread the myths that Jews control the U.S. budget and government and are draining resources from Americans' domestic needs. The U.S. government and corporate media foster racism against Arabs and other people of color, while giving loud attention to Israel and to denouncing anti-Jewish prejudice. This imbalance makes us highly visible while infuriating other oppressed groups and isolating our oppression from theirs.

In the absence of a progressive, loud, and consistent voice against their oppression, many Jews make the mistake of fighting for their liberation without allies and without addressing other oppressions. On the other hand, Jews in progressive movements often feel pressured to assimilate, to not "take up space" when other struggles appear so much more pressing. In reality, movements do have room to struggle against all oppressions together. Jews need progressive allies to fight with us for our liberation. And when we fight in solidarity with other groups, we need our allies to encourage us to wear our Jewish identities proudly.

TIPS FROM JEWS TO YOUSE:

- * Anti-Jewish prejudice is everywhere. There is no need to pretend that the Palestine solidarity movement is untouched by it. Because a part of this oppres-

sion is the idea that it doesn't exist, denying accusations only fuels them. It's more effective to receive such accusations respectfully and consider them, even if they come from the right. It's never reassuring to Jews to hear you say, "I'm not anti-Semitic." Instead, let us know that you're aware of the oppression and that you want to confront it.

- * Interrupt anti-Jewish prejudice when you see or hear it happening. Instances in which a gentile voices opposition to attacks on Jews, such as removing a swastika from a demonstration, stay etched in our minds and build trust and solidarity.
- * When Jews are struggling to articulate their experiences of an oppression that is kept so eerily invisible, your first response should not sound like a debate. Don't get technical about the term "anti-Semitism" excluding Arabs, lecture us about how the holocaust has been used for political gains, or remind us that we're not the only victims of war and oppression. Instead, value our trust in you and listen. Put thought and caring into appropriate ways to raise these other points.
- * Let's face it, Israel/Palestine is and isn't about the holocaust. People tell us that the holocaust is irrelevant to Palestine and then bring a swastika to a demonstration. No one is really done dealing with this trauma, and that makes it hard to understand the present without being overwhelmed by the past. We're not saying don't talk about it, just don't get too clinical and analytical. And don't imply that we should have gotten over it by now.
- * Don't treat Jews who support Palestinian liberation like "the good Jews"--it implies that Jewish culture is generally reactionary, and it's like asking us to betray our people. Like all cultures, Jewish cultures are exciting and complex, as well as scarred by irrationalities that stem from oppression. The Palestine solidarity movement would reap enormous benefits from showing respect and care for Jewish cultures. There is nothing inherently reactionary about Jews finding meaning in our languages, customs, literature, the Jewish star, or other symbols. Also, being an atheist or a critic of organized religion is not a reason to dismiss Judaism; our Jewishness is a big part of why many of us are inspired to fight for justice.
- * As activists we may want to criticize the way the state of Israel sets up Jewishness as its legal basis. But it's a mistake to challenge that by denying the reality of Jewish identity. It's true that Jewish identities are made of diverse combinations of cultures, ethnicities, languages, and religious traditions, but all are equally and legitimately Jewish. We have a right to feel a sense of peoplehood, and we want to hear that our allies desire Jewishness in all its forms to flourish in multicultural, democratic, and just societies.
- * Keep in mind that the vast majority of Jews who oppose the occupation are

Zionists, that is, they believe that a Jewish nation-state is essential for Jewish safety and survival. You may disagree (and we do too), but your criticism of Zionism will be more effective if you show that you understand why it has such an emotional appeal to Jews. For example, the phrase "Zionism=racism" seems true to us. But in its simplicity, it says that the main or only motive for all Jews who came to Palestine/Israel was to exert supremacy over Palestinians, when in fact it was survival. Holocaust survivors, sitting in the Allies' displaced-persons camps in 1945, weren't privy to the diaries and letters of Zionist leaders who described their frankly racist and colonial intentions. When criticizing Zionism, we should always offer a compelling, radical, alternative vision of Jewish liberation, in which Jews would thrive safely as equal citizens, everywhere in the world, at all times.

- * It may help to be aware that the word "Israel" was not invented by Theodor Herzl in the 1800's. Israel (meaning, struggle with God) is a word by which Jews described themselves for over 3000 years. So while we criticize nation-states and fight to end the occupation, we must understand that words like "anti-Israel," or stickers like "apartheid IS-REAL" sound like a personal attack to many Jews. Additionally, and regardless of Zionism, the concept of "the land of Israel" has been a profound part of our consciousness through history. A realistic approach to the future of Palestine would factor in this permanent, though not exclusive, Jewish connection to the land.
- * Recognize the Israeli radical left as an invaluable arm of our movement that needs to be included, supported, and consulted. Dismissing Israelis is anti-Jewish bigotry and bad politics.
- * Get information about Jewish liberation from Jews who understand it. A Jew who claims that it's not an issue should not be the token Jew on a panel. Help each other get educated as allies for Jewish liberation. Organize discussions, study groups, and cultural events, and write articles like this one. Don't leave Jews alone to do this work.
- * Dig up your earliest memories of hearing about Jews. Examine any oppressive ideas and feelings about Jews with other gentiles, not with Jews. Come to us for input, not for an opportunity to vent.
- * Understand internalized oppression: the ways that any oppressed people come to believe the lies about themselves and others in their group, and even to act on those stereotypes and reinforce them. Learn to gently question Jews' expressions of anger or contempt for other Jews. Encourage us to be visibly Jewish and to celebrate our culture. And when it comes to telling Jews that we're liked and wanted and totally good-looking, you really can't overdo it.