

# National Liberation and the Jewish Woman

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Sheryl Baron

It is very chic today in liberal circles to discuss women's liberation. And apparently it is even more chic to discuss it in Jewish liberal circles. The liberal literati of the American Jewish community have taken a few misplaced stabs at the topic, only to turn out a tiring discussion of the quantity and quality of orgasmic responses in middle-class Jewish females. Consequently, one has to consider whether or not a point is being stretched when the topic of "Jewish women and women's liberation" is discussed. Outside of a political context, this topic suggests only a sociological study or a survey, neither of which is crucial to the development of ideology in that anti-ideological stronghold called the American Jewish community. However, if we choose to deal politically with the topic of women's liberation as it relates to the condition of the Jewish nation, we can begin to pull ourselves out of the abyss of liberal ideology that the American Jewish condition has created.

Since the women's movement in this country started (as a middle-class phenomenon), it has expanded its thought and

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action into the area of women in oppressed national minorities. What at this point sounds rather hackneyed to the veterans of the radical feminism still rings true: women of oppressed national minorities are doubly oppressed; they are oppressed as women and, in our case, as Jews. Both of those contentions must be defended since many would debate them.

The fact that women are oppressed in this country and elsewhere should not continue to be disputable. However, a myriad of interpretations abounds from the egalitarian "piece of the pie" noises of the National Organization for Women to revolutionary feminist ideologists such as Ellen Willis of Red-stockings. For the most part the "piece of the pie" feminist ideology is useless to us, it has no link up to wider social ills (not to mention oppressed national minorities) nor does it even consider working-class women in its analysis.

Radical feminist ideology which links the liberation of women to the struggle for socialism provides the only viable and political explanation for the oppression of women. The primacy here is of an economic base: most women do nonpaying, but socially-necessary work in an economy based on wage-labor. This condition is a one-way ticket to second-class existence. What most feminists attack, however, is the ideology and social practice that society has developed to maintain that condition, i.e., the glorification of housewifery and motherhood, the training of women to accept subordination to men as a natural condition, etc. However, in order to eliminate the problem, the base of it must be attacked. Everything points to the fact that women are private property—socially necessary machines that are used in an individual consumption unit, the family. Such demands as free child-care for working mothers provided by the state and large corporations attack this, as do demands for paid pregnancy leave from work. Ultimately, the socialization of home labor is desirable as is the elimination of the economic system which created this condition in the first place.

It is unnecessary here to reiterate in detail the other condi-

tions of women's oppression—the ideology of male supremacy that attacks us at every turn from television to our own radical organizations. Those who claim ignorance of those conditions are, at this point, not to be excused.

Therefore, we will continue with the defense of our claims of oppression by attempting to analyze the position of the Jew in American society and to describe the Jew's general malaise. Primarily, the American Jew has found himself rising and falling with the tides of American capitalism. The Jews who immigrated to America in the 1840's walked right into an expanding country in need of merchants to link the industrial East with the developing West. Those Jews having a great deal of mercantile experience filled that need. Consequently, they prospered. They were, however, unlike their more unfortunate brethren who immigrated a half century later into an America that was in need of industrial workers to expand its economy. These people, our grandparents, were those who out of a response to some of the cruelest industrial working conditions created a large sector of the labor movement in America.

And in the next great change in American capitalism—the technological revolution—Jews have elevated almost entirely to the ranks of the *petit bourgeoisie*. And that is their social position today—albeit an unstable one with the growth of monopoly capital.

The social consequences of this progression have been enormous. The American Jew has lost all recollection of this national identity, he has instead been forced for purposes of social acceptance into the safe but illusory role of the third "Great American Religion." We must realize that this in itself is a very perverse form of oppression—the erasure of a nation's identity as a nation. When you have no national consciousness, you can neither sense national oppression nor can you fight it.

The American Jew, like his Western European counterparts, lives a marginal existence—abnormally concentrated into the most economically and politically tenuous sector of society, forced to renounce his national identity in order to maintain

his economic position. He is neither present in the strongholds of the large bourgeoisie—nor is he conspicuous in the ranks of the working class. Marginal to the class struggle, he is forced to walk a tightrope, unable because of his class interests to work for a socialist society, nor able to realize his own dilemma. Consequently, the Jew without the homogenizing benefits of national consolidation in the homeland finds himself in a marginal position—marginal to the progress of his own process of national liberation—as Memmi points out in *Liberation of the Jew*—for the Jew to engage in a process of self-affirmation would be for him to admit his oppression, and he is unwilling to do this.

Now that we have resolved that both women and Jews are oppressed, how do we deal with people who fall into both categories? The imperative for both is to resolve the contradictions inherent to their respective conditions. For the Jew, the contradiction of marginal economic and social existence is solved by national reconsolidation in the Jewish national homeland and the building of a socialist society in that homeland.

For Jewish women, however, there is the question that faces women of every oppressed national minority. We are confronted with the primacy of the national struggle. The elimination of national oppression as the precondition to the elimination of the contradictions internal to that national, and to the creation of a socialist egalitarian society; and, consequently, to the elimination of all male supremacy.

This tends to suggest that Jewish women must repress any movement toward women's liberation and subordinate it to national liberation. This, however, is not the intent. Rather, the point is that Jewish women can be most effective in their fight for women's liberation in the context of national consolidation—that is, in Israel.

The struggle for a socialist society is an essential component to the achievement of women's liberation and Diaspora Jewry is, for the most part, marginal to that struggle.

The answer then for Jewish women in the Diaspora is to

struggle in a Socialist-Zionist context. They must fight for equality in their organizations. They must work in general women's groups and they must maintain the integrity of their own interests, so that their struggle for women's liberation will not be quashed by the larger problem of Jewish national liberation.

This is an essential problem—women must always fight in their own interests even in the context of a national or social revolution. Jewish women are no exception. As Jews, they must free themselves from the contradiction of Diaspora existence—an existence which has forced them to be more “womanish” than other women for fear of appearing outside of the American cultural fold (the “Jewish mother” is in reality every other frustrated housewife-mother in Western culture, multiplied tenfold). And as women they must fight for the same things as all other women—the right to develop their full human potential free from undue social, political, and mythological encumbrances.

The discussion of women's liberation in a Socialist-Zionist context is not “me-tooism,” a polite afterthought, nor an excuse to talk about one or the other. It is the recognition of two major problems that demand solution and it is the recognition that the two are quite complementary if not inseparable. Women are not going to fight for Jewish national liberation at the expense of their own interest and struggle. Nor can women fight for freedom from sexual oppression while ignoring their own national oppression. The course for the Socialist-Zionist-feminist (a rather rare species) is to build antimale supremacist Socialist-Zionist organizations in the Diaspora and to work for socialism and women's liberation in the homeland, never losing sight of either goal.

If I may quote the great French intellectual and feminist Simone de Beauvoir:

Simply from the fact that liberty in women is still abstract and empty she can exercise it only in revolt, which is the only road open to those who have no opportunity of doing any-

thing constructive. They must reject the limitations of their situation and seek to open the road of the future. Resignation is only abdication and flight. There is no other way out for a woman than to work for her liberation.

(*The Second Sex*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1953)

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