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## Solidarity and Self-Respect: Coming out Jewish at the Socialist Feminist Conference

During the Fourth of July weekend in 1975, close to two thousand women spent three days in discussion, argument, song, play and struggle—hashing out what socialist-feminism is, what issues are central to revolutionary struggle for us, what our priorities are, where we are united and where we have what seem to be unreconcilable differences. The conference had its roots in months of planning and preparation by a unique coalition of nine socialist-feminist organizations around the country. Committees of the nine groups shared responsibilities for preparing different parts of the program. In Chicago, at least, there were study groups set up to help women prepare for the conference, as well as a city-wide briefing session by the Chicago Women's Liberation Union the week before.

However, this organization broke down at the conference itself because of the number of women who attended. Originally planned for 600 to 800 women, between 1,500 and 2,000 actually participated. To get this many women to scheduled events on time, end on time so the next program could start, and break into small enough groups so that dialogue and discussion could occur—proved *impossible*.

A few days before the conference, Maralee and I were asked to convene a small workshop on organizing women in the Jewish community. After some discussion, we felt that our primary concern at the conference was not the Jewish community but rather the leftist community and the problems we encountered in defining ourselves as socialist-feminists and as Jews. We proposed to the conference planning committee that our workshop be entitled, "Dilemmas in being Socialist Feminist and Jewish." Basically, we wanted Jewish women around the country to share their experiences and gain support from each other at the workshop.

When we arrived at the conference, our workshop was not listed with the other small group meetings. We were told that our description never arrived from Chicago and that a new listing would appear. At times I thought the omission was deliberate and perhaps

anti-semitic. For the most part, however, I felt that the omission was a result of general conference disorganization and Chicago ineptitude.

We recognized that the only way to convene a group and get it announced publicly was to call it a caucus; the Jewish Women's Caucus met Saturday evening.

Approximately twenty women participated. We began by sharing why we attended the caucus. A number of common concerns emerged: the fear that affirming a Jewish identity tainted our credibility with the Left; our concern for Israel and a sense that any pro-Israeli sentiment would be attacked as "racist-zionist-imperialist"; our disappointments within the organized Jewish community and with the Left.

A tremendous excitement grew as we shared our thoughts. We found that as Jews and as socialist-feminists we were struggling with many of the same issues and some of our sense of isolation broke down. For some, the caucus was the first time they "came out Jewish", finding a place to affirm their Jewish identity, their radical politics, and feeling that both of these parts of themselves were accepted.

We decided that it was important that we make a statement to the whole conference. Other caucuses (i.e. Lesbian, Third World Women, Marxist-Leninist) had been issuing statements throughout the weekend.

The responses to the announcement of a Jewish women's caucus had been varied. One woman heard someone say "how ridiculous." Another woman told us that she had heard, "I think I'll go to that caucus just to get a good laugh." We knew that there had to be other Jewish women at the conference who felt intimidated and isolated, and we also felt that it was time to affirm our Jewish identity and force the Left to recognize our existence.

We realized that in the short time the caucus met together we would never agree on specific political positions. We did agree, however, to write about the spirit of our meeting and to list the issues that we felt needed further clarification. The process of deciding

what to include in the statement was exciting and noisy. Finally, we included only those points that received group consensus. After two hours of struggle a small group volunteered to write the following statement:

In a spirit of sisterhood and solidarity the women who attended yesterday's meeting of Jewish women would like to share the more important aspects of our discussion with the conference as a whole.

We feel that at this time in history there is a pressing need for Jewish socialist-feminists to develop a clear understanding of those issues of specific concern to Jewish people; and to affirm a positive identity which has been difficult to express in the context of the women's and socialist movements.

We would like to convey the sense of excitement we all felt at being able to engage in this discussion with Jews who were also socialist-feminists.

Our oppression as Jews has often made it difficult for us to openly acknowledge our identity and has therefore prevented us from undertaking the important task of political analysis.

Our history of oppression and resistance deepens our concrete understanding of minority and national oppression and has strengthened our commitment to fighting anti-semitism and all forms of racist domination.

The following are some of the important issues we feel must be addressed:

1. The class position of Jews in American society and the implication of this for us as Jewish socialist-feminists.

2. The historical role of the Jewish family is analogous to that of working-class and third-world families, in that it has functioned as a survival unit while it has simultaneously oppressed women.

3. The rights of the Palestinian people, and of Israeli Jews to self-determination.

4. The extent to which anti-semitism poses a continued threat to the Jewish community, and the identification of those segments of American society from which active anti-semitism is most likely to emerge.

This statement represents an expression of our commitment to the Jewish people, to the struggle for political clarity, and to building a revolutionary movement to fight for the liberation of ALL oppressed people.

We intended to read this statement to the conference Sunday morning. As we gathered for an early breakfast, I waited anxiously for the reading. I was impressed by its accurate description of what I had experienced in the caucus. Everyone in the group had shared an enormous sense of solidarity, accomplishment, and excitement. While eating I fantasized about the response we might receive. I sensed that everyone was scared. Thoughts of being hissed at for affirming Israel's right to exist or laughed at for "making a big deal over being Jewish" made me tremendously uncomfortable.

Because of time and logistical problems, ours and other statements were not read. We did, however, leaflet at lunch with copies of our statement. Most of us were surprised and encouraged by the positive responses we received. Jews and non-Jews indicated their support for what we had done. Many Jewish women commented that they wished they had known about the caucus or that they had attended other workshops at the same time the caucus met but would have liked to come. Overall, the leaflet was received with respectful interest.

For me the Jewish women's caucus was the most joyous gathering in which I participated. Writing our statement produced a sense of sisterhood sprinkled with heavy doses of creativity and humor. I fondly remember the women in the group and the closeness we shared for a few hours. I feel proud to have participated, and know I gained strength from the women I met. I also feel excited that I took a stand as a Jew and perhaps helped others to take such a stand.

Today, I feel more self-assured in talking about Jewish issues within the women's movement. I still feel defensive and fearful, but now, instead of withdrawing, I keep talking.