

On being a Jewish revolutionary

by Carol (Crow) Cohen

I

I emigrated to Israel in 1981 skeptical about the creation of a "Jewish homeland," feeling guilty about the displaced and mistreated Palestinians, worried about the rampant sexism, and ready to come back to Vermont in six months if I found myself still struggling to adjust to an alien and "inferior" culture. Three and a half years later I did finally decide to return to Vermont, but I came back as a passionate, self-affirming Jew -- in touch with pride and compassion for Jews from all over the world. I also became aware that anti-Semitism still has a firm grip all over this violent, racist planet even in my beloved women's movement mostly in the form of virulent anti-Zionism and a reluctance to radicalize around the issue of being Jewish. I came back with the shocking realization that the establishment and continued existence of Israel is nothing short of a desperately needed, legitimate Jewish revolution!

I realize that I would never have had the "chutzpah" to suggest Israel is indeed a Jewish revolution if I hadn't lived in a Jewish "separatist" environment, just as I never would have come out as a radical lesbian if I hadn't withdrawn from the dominant heterosexist culture and turned my back on most men for several years.

As far as I know, no Jewish-American radicals (lefties, straight feminists, dykes, gay men or anarchists) that abound in Vermont go around proclaiming Israel a Jewish revolution. They vocally and visibly support the South and Central American, South African, Native American and Palestinian revolutions; but Israel seems to be condemned as one of the worst offenders of human rights in the whole world which is patent nonsense and proof once again that the Jews are internationally scapegoated.

I can't help regarding the Holocaust as the most sadistic crime perpetrated on a people in human history. Germany's official government plan on the books to use modern technology to eradicate the Jewish race was not based on a fight for territory (the Jews weren't allowed to own land!), or for political or economic hegemony (the vast majority of Jews had virtually no money or power). The "final solution" of the "Jewish question" was not just the result of one raving maniac (Hitler) but gained worldwide support as Jews were deported from all over, as most countries turned their back on Jewish suffering when "rumors" about the concentration camps became available to government leaders, and Jewish refugees were denied entry into several countries including

Palestine after the war.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Holocaust was the "logical" culmination of five thousand years of Jewish oppression, and that nothing short of Jewish revolution could have established the unlikely state of Israel. Why in tarnation would Brazilian, French, Yemenite, Moroccan, Egyptian, Canadian, Russian, German, Ethiopian, English, American, Argentinian, Swiss and Scottish folks come together and try to run a country if they hadn't been pushed by the rest of the world?!

Admittedly, Israel is a violent, patriarchal revolution no worse and no better than the other revolutionary movements afoot in this world of nation-states about to erupt into nuclear holocaust. As a Jew I support the Jewish revolution with a great deal of criticism and reservation due to its violent nature. As a woman (specifically a dyke) I declare myself a Revolutionary with a capital "R" because my concept of Women's Revolution is non-violent using mostly psychic power and energy. That kind of Revolution has obviously not yet occurred in history. (A girl can dream!)

II

It's ironic that sex between men is prohibited in the Bible, but there is no mention of the "sin" of sex between women. It probably never crossed their minds back then that women might "live it up" in those harems; or maybe it did, but nobody seemed uptight about it. Anyway, the "law of return" which is Israel's way of calling back to the homeland the Jews scattered all over specifically doesn't apply to hardened criminals or homosexuals. However, they obviously don't make a fuss as long as you don't declare yourself a queer when you're making out your papers.

I immigrated through the Jewish Agency in Montreal (because it was closest to Burlington), and they could have found out in a minute if I were a dyke just by picking up a few back issues of Commonwoman (may she rest in peace). Obviously, they didn't check all that closely -- probably because I had a daughter and an ex-husband who had already been over there a couple of years. That they knew. Once I was there, I could dress as "dykey" as I wanted (tanktop t-shirts, cut-off jeans, political buttons, hairy legs and underarms, headbands) because they thought I looked like a hippie. However, if you called yourself a "feminist" they automatically assumed you were a lesbian. That's probably due to the "scandal" back in the mid '70's when Marcia Freedman who was a member of the "Knesset" (parliament) ran on a woman's party ticket, and later left her husband and came out at the age of 40 which the Israeli media picked up on.

When I got there in 1981, a woman's center (Kol Ha-Isha -- A Woman's Voice) had been operating right in downtown Jerusalem for four or five years. Unfortunately, it closed down due to burnout in 1983. There were a couple of battered women's shelters in the country, a rape crisis hotline, and an annual feminist conference which drew two to three hundred women, but allowed for one lesbian workshop despite the fact that the dykes often kept the feminist movement active as they do all over the world. There was also a tiny gay men's coffee shop in Jerusalem run by political men which lasted about a year. The gay male movement, however, was responsible for the law saying that you cannot get kicked out of the Israeli army for being homosexual. Is there any other army in the world that has such a policy?!

There were a couple of gay bars in Tel Aviv -- one of them featured a women-only dance once a month. This year there was a women's music festival in Beersheba (predominantly straight, however). Gay and feminist cultural events are very rare.

On a personal level I often felt "philosophically lonely" around such issues as non-monogamy, classist attitudes and communal childcare which women in Burlington had been debating for years. In general, though, the Jerusalem women's community felt more intimate, more grassroots, and more like family than what I've experienced in America. The meetings tend to be more chaotic (less polite) where feeling and especially opinions are passionately expressed. There were frequent lively parties since the Israelis love holidays and celebrations. There was also a strong justifiably anti-religious feeling in the community since Orthodox Jewry (which is very misogynist) has a lot of political power in Israel and there is no "separation of church and state." On my first Passover, my Israeli lover said with shock, "What?! You don't eat bread on Pesach?" I said, "No, I eat only matzoh. It's a fine American tradition."

It's actually a wonderful luxury to feel so connected to Judaism culturally and not have to grapple with fitting the religious tradition into my radical feminism. Despite our cultural gaps in the women's community there was definitely a recognition of struggling to live in one of the most unpopular countries in the world, and of us immigrants trying to learn a new language (Hebrew, of course) which can have a tremendous bonding effect. Also, many of the radical women were very active in anti-war politics and confronting anti-Arab racism.

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