

Sweet Smell of Dissent

By Earl Raab

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(Jewish Bulletin Special Writer)

The Jewish community is getting pretty lively. The other day an elderly Jewish gentleman, whose name is not, Voltaire, rushed into the JCRC office, seized the total supply of a leaflet with whose contents he disagreed, and disappeared. It is not known whether he muttered "power to the people" as he left.

In a way, we were kind of glad that someone cared that much. A few years ago we were worried about apathy. Now, the levels of giving and complaining — sometimes by the same people — are on the rise. The sweet smell of dissent. And plenty of it.



Raab

All this has something to do with a question which is again sweeping the Jewish community: "What is an authentic Jew?" The National Council of Welfare Funds and Federations now has a special task force on Jewish identity. So has the American Jewish Committee. Other Jewish agencies are bending themselves to the same task. Several weeks ago, it was a central question raised by college students in a dialogue with leaders of the local Jewish Welfare Federation.

But maybe its the wrong question. Individual Jews are of infinite variety. Jews have the right to argue with each other on Jewish matters, but not to measure each other's Jewish authenticity. Otherwise, we would have long excommunicated ourselves out of existence, one by one. Many have suggested that the rock-bottom communality is each man's unique sense of identification with the history of the Jewish people. Golda Meir intimated this in her moving description of how, as a "non-observant Jew," she related during the High Holy Days to the Orthodox Jews of Russia.

But while that may be enough of an answer for any given individual — and his personal sense of authenticity — it is not enough of an answer for Jewish continuity. That is why the community has such a special place in Jewish life. Ahad Ha-Am said: "Judaism conceives its aim not as the salvation of the individual . . . the aim is always defined in terms of collectivity." That collectivity, the community must somehow find room and sustenance for the infinite variety of authentic Jews — while at the same time enabling them to find and act upon their communality.

So perhaps the question is not: "What is an authentic Jew?" — but, rather, "What is an authentic Jewish community?" In the next year, hopefully, the Jews of San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula will be engaged in a massive community-wide discussion of that question. We should all be hearing about it — if the announcement leaflets are not raided.

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