

What's A Jewish Issue?

The liveliest column in the *San Francisco Jewish Bulletin* is undoubtedly the "Letters to the Editor" column. It's as close to direct dialogue as the press can usually muster. And, in the case of the *Bulletin*, the writers sharply and valuably raise the thorny questions.

For example, Helmut Erlanger, one of the city's more distinguished Jewish citizens, raises the question as to whether Jewish agencies don't go far afield when they get involved in "matters of general political, social or welfare considerations." He complains about "vague" definitions of what constitutes a "Jewish issue".

Erlanger makes an important point: Presumably we absorb certain "Jewish values" as a result of our religious heritage. But these values, while they may provide certain guidelines and constraints, cannot always be directly translated into specific political and social positions. As Erlanger points out, "Jews have differed and will differ regarding them, depending upon the individual Jew's personal, political and social interest and position." And intelligence. Jewish values don't necessarily guarantee a high level of political intelligence.



Raab

Erlanger's point is illustrated by the recent stand of a national rabbinical body supporting unqualified amnesty for those draft-eligibles who fled the country during the Vietnam debacle. There are many Jews whose analysis leads them to believe that a qualified amnesty, or less, would better serve the Jewish values of social justice, domestic and world peace. Similarly Jewish values cannot measure the soundness of a given plan for Guaranteed Annual Income, or even for the abolition of capital punishment.

As a matter of fact, Rabbi Emil Fackenheim, a theologian of considerable reputation, has warned about the use of "Jewish values" to justify Jewish existence or activity:

"In these days of strong Jewish feeling, much is heard about 'Jewish values' created by the 'religious genius' of our forefathers; to these, it is asserted, modern Jews have a unique obligation. This is no doubt an attempt to save Jewish religious particularism on non-supernatural grounds; but it succeeds only at the cost of moral and religious ruin. There are no more 'Jewish' than German or Russian values, or for that matter, Communist or capitalist. Values are universal and are either valid or invalid, and their source is significant only to the historian...If we Jews have produced such values we have given them long ago to the world...To assert a special Jewish obligation to special Jewish values is to subscribe...to a perversion of classical Jewish doctrine: The substitution, for the worship of God, of the worship of the 'Jewish vision' of God."

Just as Rabbi Fackenheim is arguing for more *particularity* with respect to Jewish religious identity (rather than leaning on "values" which are now universal), so Erlanger argues for more particularity in the way in which Jewish agencies become involved in public affairs. He points out that anti-Semitism is one such particular issue.

Ah, but there's the rub. We can't fight anti-Semitism by waiting for someone to call someone else a dirty Jew, or to refuse her a job because she's a Jew. That would be like the doctors treating malaria only by issuing quinine pills to those already afflicted. Draining stagnant pools is a legitimate "malaria issue".

And there are certain conditions in society which breed and activate anti-Semitism just as surely as stagnant pools breed malarial mosquitoes. Then it's too late. Some of those conditions have to do with violating freedom for everybody, and may not mention the Jews at all. But the *particular* history of the Jews gives them a *particular* insight into the likelihood that these conditions are going to end up by *particularly* skewering the Jews. That's why suggesting anti-Semitism as a definition of one Jewish issue may just be substituting one vague definition for another. Maybe some others would like to try their hands at a clear definition of what, in public affairs, constitutes a "Jewish issue"