

WHO ARE OUR FRIENDS?

Our trouble is that we have two sets of natural friends who don't always mix very well. That's always awkward.

One set comprises those who share with Jews some vision of the American society, and some domestic needs which must be served by that society. Those common needs revolve around such matters as political freedom, civil liberties, equal opportunity, social and economic mobility, and government intervention on behalf of the desperate. It is debatable whether Jews are more compassionate than other people, but we at least know the political consequences -- to us -- of a closed and callous society. Those who share these concerns are certainly political friends.

The other set of natural friends are those who share with Jews the vision of and need for a free world with diminishing oppression, and especially with the diminishing force of the ultimate totalitarian oppression.

Those two sets of friends were once largely the same, in the Roosevelt era and somewhat beyond, as Blacks, Jews, labor and the big city Catholics who needed uplift marched together as close political friends and allies in common combat against oppression and disadvantage at home, and (belatedly) against fascism abroad.

Now that old gang of ours has broken up into several possible friendship groups, some of which are incompatible. Jesse Jackson personally epitomizes the problem. He espouses a vision of domestic America which Jews must still share, if only as a matter of self-interest. The mechanics of getting there are separately debatable, but there must be a coalition of forces pushing for that vision, or it will get lost, callously and divisively, in the debate about mechanics. Blacks, Jews and labor unions are still the natural friends and allies on that front, whether they act that way or not.

But Jesse Jackson also espouses a blurred vision of American foreign policy which is inimical to world freedom, to global human rights and to the best interests of American Jews. He is more tolerant of deep, systemic oppression in the world than it is

safe to be; and his course would allow for the diminution of the free world, and of America's role in it. He and many in his circles -- not predominantly Black -- are not political friends to the Jews on this front.

Perhaps the fatal flaw in the "Jacksonian" syndrome is that it cannot handle the adversarial drive to improve the American society without becoming anti-American in foreign policy. The natural friends of the Jews, on this front, are those who recognize that contemporary America is the hard core of freedom in the world.

It would have been easy to establish as a third set of friends those Americans who are supportive of Israel. But for most Americans, that is a derivative inclination, related to the vision of America's role in the world which the Jacksonian circles do not accept.

In short, we find ourselves in a perilous period when many of our political friends are part-time friends. We must make coalition with so-called liberal forces on certain domestic issues -- without acceding to, and while attempting to influence the unfriendly attitudes of some of them on foreign policy. And we must make coalition with so-called neo-conservative forces on certain foreign policy issues -- without acceding to, and while attempting to influence the careless attitudes of some of them on domestic policy.

That will be a tricky enterprise. But, as some Yiddish writer once said: "If we are looking for friends without flaws, we will end up with only enemies."