The Movement and the Middle East: How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left by Michael R. Fischbach (review)

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illness. According to this line of argument, no healthy person would doubt the Torah or stop wearing tefillin, and since these people were doing just that, they must be mentally or spiritually ill. The second line of defense is to encourage the doubters to consult Orthodox therapists who triangulate care with a referring rabbi, often violating the confidentiality of the patient; these therapists pathologize religious doubt and often overmedicate those in their care.

Double lifers engage in internal moral compromises as they balance their newfound morals and values—heavily influenced by the liberal ideas of pluralism and autonomy widespread in American culture—with those of rabbinic authority and Orthodox tradition accepted within their Hasidic communities. In one particularly extreme case, a married female double lifer, who was having an affair with another married double lifer, would go to the mikvah—the ritual bath for purification after menstruation—before having sex with her husband, notwithstanding the fact that she was, during the same time, being unfaithful to her husband. She felt that since her husband would be outraged to have sex with her if he knew she had not gone to the mikva, it was the right thing for her to do, regardless of the sexual activities she was engaged in on the side.

Fader’s book explores, with great insight and sensitivity, the complex existence of double lifers and the conditions under which they live. Her engaging style makes this fascinating work appeal both to scholars of contemporary Orthodox Judaism and those who study the relationship between technology and society, as well as to the general reader interested in gleaning an understanding of an inaccessible but intriguing facet of current Orthodox reality.

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University trends come and go, but spirited, regularly agonized, discussion of Israel, Zionism and Palestine abides. Recent years in particular have seen waves of activism on a number of campuses under the banner of the movement urging Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. While the BDS Movement has, for now, singularly failed to achieve
its larger political and economic goals, it has succeeded in, depending on one’s point of view, galvanizing, or traumatizing, any number of campuses. Of course, we cannot know whether today’s activists will carry their experiences beyond university to their professional and civic lives. Yet they, and their teachers, would do well to remember that today’s controversies have a history. Especially now, when, owing to Bernie Sanders’s impressive, if ultimately unsuccessful, bid for the Democratic presidential nomination and the growing prominence of younger activists and politicians has breathed new life into the American Left.

Thus, *The Movement and the Middle East*, by Michael R. Fischbach, Professor of History at Virginia’s Randolph-Macon College, comes at an opportune time. The book’s chief argument is in the subtitle, which Fischbach well proves through ample documentation. Looking at the many, many sources in the book’s footnotes left this reader thinking that in addition to their value as historical evidence, they are a cornucopia of teaching materials, especially for undergraduates engaged in their own explorations of the confluences and strains of their own political, religious, class and ethnic identities.

It is helpful to see what this book is and is not. Fischbach’s scholarly intervention is in the history of the American Left, which has often passed over the internal battles over Israel/Palestine he documents at length. One of his lengthy footnotes, for instance, lists all the works about the antiwar movement that omit the issue (230, note 3). He amply demonstrates the extent and intensity of arguments about Israel coursing through the American Left from the 1960s to the 1980s, when his chronicle reaches its terminus.

The book is, for better or worse, much less an intervention in American Jewish history. He presents no historical context for the rich history of pre-1960s American Jewish Leftism from which many of his protagonists emerged, chronicled so well by Tony Michels, the late Ezra Mendelsohn and others, or for the history of American Jewish Anti-Zionism (amazingly, the American Council for Judaism nowhere appears). Nor does he set the Jewish Left activism of the period in the context of all the other fronts of Jewish political activism of those years. Crucially, Fischbach hardly mentions the Soviet Jewry movement. This omission matters not only for its being a different front of Jewish political activism, but also for its centrality to the Cold War politics that so decisively affected the story Fischbach aims to tell. The tapestry of countercultural activists described in works like Gal Beckerman’s *When They Come for Us We’ll Be Gone* (2010), and Yossi Klein Halevi’s essential *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist* (2014, first published in 1995), is nowhere to be found. These were also the years of Jewish countercultural spiritual revival, of the
rise of the Havurot, and of groups like Yavneh, chronicled by the late Benny Kraut in *The Greening of Orthodox Judaism* (2011). These, too, go unmentioned, even though some of the participants in Fischbach’s story, like Michael Lerner and Arthur Waskow, were involved in both. And Meir Kahane was then offering his own sort of radical challenge to bourgeois Jewish liberalism. Another key omission is the parallel reversal in those years on the other side of the political spectrum, to wit, how after 1967, Israel, once a liberal cause, became identified with the right, and evangelical and other traditionalist Christians who had formerly disdained Zionism came to embrace it.

Above all, Fischbach throughout largely records but scarcely engages or analyzes the different arguments he chronicles. Left disapproval of Zionism and Israel is taken as self-evident and residual Jewish Leftist attachments to them understood in terms of lingering ethnic attachments. Neither stance gives the ideas at work their due, in what were, after all, battles of intellectuals. In this regard the book most comes alive in Chapter 6, titled “Ghost of Revolutions Past,” detailing the arguments of the Communist Party USA, whose members, whatever else one may think of them, took ideas seriously. (In many ways more seriously than their ostensible patrons in Moscow.)

Finally, histories of the Left leave readers no choice but to make their way through a blizzard of acronyms, splinter groups, factions of factions, conference communiques, and editorials in long-vanished publications. This book is, understandably, no exception. Some passages are unintentionally comical: “After three years of intra-party discussions about what the party’s stance toward the Arab-Israel conflict should be, the SWP (Socialist Workers Party) adopted a major resolution on the topic at its national convention in Cleveland, in August 8–12, 1972” (85). This does provide its own ironic pleasures for readers who entertain a nostalgic fondness for these factional politics, as fierce in their time as they are forgotten now (such as this reviewer, who cut his own literary teeth at *The New Leader*, a journal whose history of internal editorial politicking led it to be known as “the only place the Mensheviks ever won a revolution.”)

With all its limitations, Professor Fischbach has done a service by gathering a wealth of information that future researchers of the American Left cannot ignore and that will enrich the analyses of works to come.

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