

A Radical Zionist's Critique of the Jewish Defense League

David Mandel

Jewish Defense League: The name alone conjures up various images in the mind; no doubt many have a strong reaction one way or the other. I would brashly say that just in its controversiality the J.D.L. has done some good, and has awakened many of our Jews from their ambivalence about themselves. It has seriously questioned in public and on a large scale the priorities and values of the Jewish Establishment and its institutions. We hear many praises and severe criticisms of the J.D.L. I would like to crystallize some of my feelings about them, from a socialist Zionist point of view.

J.D.L.'s analysis of the American Jewish community is almost completely the same as that of many radical Zionists. Recently in Brooklyn I heard Meir Kahane lead a discussion in which he presented a very accurate Marxist analysis of the economic position of America's Jews as a people-class—middlemen in the economic world, neither in control of major segments of the economy nor displaying potential for active participation in any socialist workers' movement; in short, marginal to the major processes of the society. And this role carries over into the political-social spheres. As James

David Mandel is national chairman of the Radical Zionist Alliance. This article was written especially for this book.

Sleeper of Boston has written: the American Jew is "a civil rights worker to southern whites, a slumlord to urban blacks, a capitalist to communist propagandists, and a communist to rednecks, a radical to Birchers, and an establishment businessman to the left." The answer, according to both the Radical Zionist Alliance and the J.D.L., is *aliyah*—immigration to Israel—in order to build a positive Jewish life where Jews as a people are liberated from their middleman role and freed from the even greater danger of assimilation. The pressure to conform is strong on any Jew in America, whether he conforms to the left, the right, the middle, or *anything* outside of a Jewish context.

J.D.L.'s attacks on the Jewish Establishment in America are almost totally valid. They can join other Jewish activist groups in demanding more money for education and the everyday needs of the Jewish communities from Jewish philanthropic organizations and less for non-Jewish hospitals and meaningless institutions that attempt to smooth the road to assimilation for American Jews rather than develop positive Jewish identity.

J.D.L.'s militancy has come under strenuous criticism as un-Jewish, racist, and fascistic. This isn't necessarily so. I do not believe that J.D.L.'s leadership is racist, although many of that type are attracted to the J.D.L. and little is done to discourage their participation. Militant defense of one's life and one's people is sometimes called for, and I am in favor of very drastic action against the Soviet Union's anti-Jewish policies.

I draw the line, however, before stupidity. Strong action in support of Soviet Jewry is taken for the dual purpose of harming the Russian government's prestige and getting favorable publicity for our struggle. Harassing families of Russians does neither. Verbal red-baiting does neither. In fact, the most effective protest against Russian treatment of Jews is that done from a leftist viewpoint, so that the protestors cannot be called "right-wing hooligans." Yes, militant protest is called for, but not stupidity.

This kind of stupidity, however, is only a symptom of the two basic problems I see in J.D.L.: one, placing "defense" before true Zionism, and two, a lack of political and ideological content.

As I said earlier, Kahane claims to be a true Zionist and I believe him, in private or with his own people. But a true Zionist organization must really put its Zionism "up front," and here the J.D.L. is almost as guilty as the Zionist Establishment (like the Zionist Organization of America, Hadassah, etc.), who rarely mention *aliyah*, and never *galut* (exile). Despite what Kahane might really believe, "defense," and not *aliyah*, has always been and still remains the main thrust of J.D.L. It is the image Jacob Feuerwerker's recent article in last April's *Hashofar* (newspaper of the Northern Ohio Union of Jewish Students) portrays when he says that "the Jewish Defense League stands for exactly what its name says—Jewish Defense"; and there is no mention of anything Zionist in the whole article! American Jews have always given high priority to "defense" organizations—the American Jewish Committee and the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League are notorious examples. J.D.L.'s only real difference from these groups is a tactical one. None of them recognize any answer beyond "defending" the *status quo*, and maintaining a false unity of all Jews. Even when the J.D.L. does occasionally encourage *aliyah*, it, too, is seen as a strengthening of Israel's present position, and not as a step towards a more socialist, democratic, or peaceful Israel.

I have nothing against intelligent militancy nor anything against intelligent self-defense. It should be a given for every human being and certainly for every Jew, that he will defend himself, his people, and his homeland. However, when defense becomes an ideology unto itself, it becomes self-defeating. It is a manifestation of the mentality of exile when one makes defense of that exile the highest priority. It is not only non-Zionist to encourage an ideology of exilic self-defense, but anti-Zionist. Kahane would criticize these words as ignoring the "here and now problems" of the Jews in New

York. But no, the best thing that could happen to American Jews, already under increasingly great Israeli cultural influence, would be the development of a stronger, more vital, and more progressive Jewish community in Israel. J.D.L. has fallen into the same trap as the Jewish Establishment, of trying to identify Jews' interests with America's rulers' interests, rather than a true spirit of moral, cultural, and political independence centered in Israel.

My second major objection to J.D.L. is one of politics, or rather J.D.L.'s stated lack of *any* politics, left or right. J.D.L. claims that their only yardstick in determining response to a given political issue is a judgment of "what is good for the Jews." This statement, though not intrinsically wrong, narrows one's vision so as to make impossible any larger utilitarian judgment. But setting utilitarianism aside, neither politics nor Jews can exist in that kind of self-enclosed vacuum. A principle basic to Judaism is the idea of moral reciprocity, the golden rule, recognizing as an equal right for others that which we demand for ourselves. Of course we demand self-determination for our people in our homeland, and will fight to defend it. However, moral reciprocity demands that we recognize the same right for the Palestinian people, and that we struggle for our own rights only if we are totally committed to peace, to coexistence, and to compromise with another right. Moral reciprocity demands that we lend active support, at the very least our verbal support, to the struggles of the many other oppressed peoples of the world, the Vietnamese and the American minorities most visible from here. There is no need for this to detract from our own people's struggles for liberation. Furthermore, our adherence to the principle of moral reciprocity and at the same time our demand for such recognition from others is what is really "good for the Jews." The vacuum I have been talking about is not only an ideological one that sounds uncomfortable for a veteran New Leftist like myself, but a real one: In our struggle for justice, we must be on the side of justice everywhere, or justice will turn and flee from us, too.

J.D.L., in its narrow-minded yardstick of Jewish defense, perpetuates an ideology of self-defeat and of exile. Though I do not doubt the motives of the leadership, the position is an irresponsible one that comes out sounding reactionary in tone and content. Even if Zionist, the J.D.L. has come closer and closer to identification with the goals and policies of Herut, Israel's right-wing expansionist, antilabor party.

Defense and militancy are acceptable, even necessary, but they should not be practiced for their own sake—rather as a portion of a comprehensive ideology of Jewish liberation, a radical Zionist ideology.