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Zionist Youth Movements In America

the American Jewish scene's partisan chalutz groups; sources and consequences of "youth movement" spirit

WERNER COHN

"Ladies and gentlemen..."

A sixteen or seventeen year old girl, dressed in a dark-blue work-shirt and holding a Jewish National Fund collection can in her hand, stands in the middle of the subway car. While we listen to her seriously delivered little collection talk, we are a bit embarrassed, bewildered, generally uncomfortable. But we are also impressed, for we are confronted with an echo—no matter how faint—of the European socialist movements whose young women have for generations fought in the streets and on barricades; we think, too, of the young Emma Goldman whose life was a tragedy because all the fiery idealism of the Russian revolutionary movement looked so ridiculous—or quaint, at best—when transported bodily to this country.

The young girl in the subway train belongs to Hashomer Hatzair or to Hashomer Hadati, or to one of the other Zionist pioneer youth groups. These groups are in incongruity not only in relation to the larger American culture, but also in relation to the American Jewish community; and yet, as we shall show, they could not have arisen from any other sector of American society; though perhaps not quite legitimate, they are, nevertheless, a very natural child of American Jewry. By learning more about them, a great deal can be learned of the nature of the contemporary American Jew.

The most extreme of the groups (disregarding a minor splinter) is Hashomer Hatzair, "The Young Guard." It has about 3000 members in branches in all the major American and Canadian cities. It is officially connected with Mapam, the Russian-oriented socialist-Zionist opposition party in Israel, and with Kibbutz Arzzi, Mapam's federation of collective settlements.

Focus on the Group

Hashomer Hatzair is one of the most self-contained groups in America. It aims not only to influence the thinking and the social activities of its members, but literally invades every single aspect of its members' lives. When Abe joins, say at the age of thirteen, he becomes Avraham, pronounced in the most exacting Sephardic accents. And this change of name symbolizes a most thorough-going change in his habits. From the time he gets through school on week days, and all day on Saturday and Sunday, he functions as part of the group. It is with the group that he goes on hikes, with the group that he plays ball, with the group that he reads his books. Above all, it is with the group that he sings and dances. And it is from the group leader that he learns about sex (as well as about Marx and Borochov and Gordon—all in Ma-
pam editions). And if the group hasn’t completely replaced the family as the primary social unit in Avraham’s life, it is only because the almost inevitably developing hostility at home invests the family relationship with a new significance. But more of that later.

Hashomer Hatzair goes out of its way to emphasize its separation from American life by a multitude of rites. The “shalom” which is used exclusively becomes much more than merely a substitute for hello and good-bye; it becomes a constant demonstration of group cohesion. There are certain words which are never spoken in English: there is no movement, there is only the ‘t’mua; the English word “farm” doesn’t exist in the HH universe—instead, one speaks of a cbava; the organization has no members, only chaverim (comrades). The total effect of this habit (and I have only given a very few examples) is an entirely new language. It isn’t English, and it certainly isn’t Hebrew either; but since it is spoken by all the Zionist youth groups, it can well be called Zionese.

The insistence on Hebrew names and the speaking of Zionese are probably the two most powerful separating factors of HH, but they symbolize, rather than exhaust, the repertory of rites. Some of these become especially conspicuous in the members who are in their late teens: girls wear no make-up, smoking is taboo, conventional dating is looked upon as a transgression of the group’s prerogatives.

We discussed Hashomer Hatzair first because the other relevant groups can be more easily understood as modifications of HH. Not all young Zionist groups, moreover, need concern us here: organizations like Young Judea and Junior Mizrachi are much too socially conformist in their practices to be considered together with Hashomer Hatzair. On the other hand, the religious Hashomer Hadati (recently re-organized into two separate age levels: B’nai Akiba for younger members and Bachad for the older) and the Labor Zionist Habonim do enter our discussion. These groups are similar to Hashomer Hatzair in the use of Zionese; in Habonim, there is considerably less emphasis on the all-inclusiveness of group living, nor are the more extreme of HH’s rites practiced. In general, Habonim is less separate from the “respectable” environment, being closely tied to its adult (Labor Zionist) organization. The old Hashomer Hadati, though incorporating all the orthodox religious doctrines of Judaism, probably represented as radical a break from the family and the traditional Jewish social mores as does Hashomer Hatzair. There are signs, however, that the two organizations that have now taken its place are more under adult control (i.e. controlled by Hafoel Hamizrachi, the Labor-Orthodox Party in Israel), and contain, therefore, fewer of the distinctive youth features that characterized Hashomer Hadati. The adult organizations that are connected with Hashomer Hatzair (Mapam in Israel and the insignificant "Progressive Zionist League" in this country) in no sense control it; they are outgrowths from it, and should be regarded as children,
rather than as parents. But, as is the case in many a family, the children's political thinking has profoundly affected that of the parents: the increasing Stalinization of Mapam has been followed by a somewhat slower though just as thorough Stalinization in Hashomer Hatzair.

Youth Movement and Adult Society

The Zionist youth groups are the only genuine "youth movement" elements in this country, when "youth movement" is defined by the standards set by the German Wandervogel. The essential elements of this definition hinge around the factor of group mythology and a set of mores opposed to, and self-consciously offensive to, "bourgeois" (i.e. adult) society. The groups are, to be sure, Zionist in their orientation; but it is interesting to note that their definition of Zionism is radically different from that employed by the adult groups. To the latter, Zionism means a political point of view, an ideological approach to the question of Jewishness. To the youth movement, Zionism means a set of mores, a way, rather than a view of life. Together with their Wandervogel predecessors, the Zionist youth are generally suspicious of political or ideological contemplation. The most consistent and heated controversy between youth and adult Zionism, characteristically enough, revolves around the issue of chalutzit, pioneering on the collective farms. To the youth, chalutzit expresses all of Zionism; to the adults, it is but one aspect of a rounded program. And it is from their character as a youth movement that we can learn most from these groups about the soil from which they spring: the American Jewish community. For youth movement groups do not exist in every social environment; the general American culture has no youth movement in which we use the term here: the Boy Scouts are completely dominated by adults, having no mores other than those set by such "community leaders" as clergymen, social workers, and business sponsors. In no way do they constitute a revolutionary force—in no way do they challenge the authority of adult leadership.

The Wandervogel

The prototype of all modern youth movements, the German Wandervogel, arose in the last decade of the nineteenth century in the midst of a belated, sudden, almost cataclysmic industrialization, involving, as Howard Becker, a historian of the German youth movement, has pointed out, severe shock to the family structure. The young generation was up in arms against the archaic and stuffy codes of its elders; and it seems that underneath this Wandervogel revolt against routine in the name of nature, fellowship, group life and spiritualization, there was a basic need for a family-substitute. The home, victim of an over-rapid social change, seemed incapable of giving the growing adolescent the security and support needed to grow into adulthood. At the end of the first World War, general social insecurity reached new heights in Germany; this was especially true for adolescents: there were no jobs, no real hope for a trade or profession, and the parents, reared in a different age, were less able than ever to offer guidance. And it was at this period that youth movement organizations had a truly

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1. "Hashomer Hatzair was not a student organization which met to hash ideological problems of Jewry and the world over a cup of tea in the evening... The Shomer was to be cultured, informed, politically aware and active, but not an esoteric snob." Youth and Nation, October 1950, pp. 7-8.
phenomenal membership: the total figure was over three million.

I wish to offer the thesis that whenever a youth movement arises, it is a symptom of the kind of social insecurity that expresses itself prominently in a weakening of the family structure. The Wandervogel mythology was exceptionally well fitted to provide a buffer against this social insecurity: what did it matter that there was no security at home, no jobs, no hopes for a career, when there was the beauty of the cosmos? And the Zionist youth movement has its own mythology to provide a buffer against the chronic insecurity of American Jews. In addition to having taken over most of the Wandervogel mythology (which may be understood as a spiritual withdrawal from the larger culture), its kibbutz orientation adds the element of geographic withdrawal.

Tension in the Family

There are several cultural factors which tend to make the American Jewish family a relatively weak institution. First, there is the cultural difference between the generations, the older one having largely been brought up in Europe. Further, the tradition in Jewish families of attaching a great deal of anxious importance to children often tends to make for an environment which has smothering effects and is chronically tense. The all too often compulsive push toward formal education and professional orientation causes the feeling on the part of the children that somehow they have to prove themselves, that love and affection might be denied unless it is earned through academic success. The latter factors, of course, are typical of Jewish communities in all countries, and arise from a fundamental insecurity of the Jew in Western society.

The Student Zionist

We observed earlier that the Zionist youth groups are not only incongruous in respect to America as a whole, but also in respect to the Jewish community. This latter incongruity arises not only from the fact that in their capacity as a youth movement they naturally arouse the hostility of the adult pacesetters of the community’s mores; it is also true that membership in these groups has never included more than a small minority of the community’s adolescents. For the social factors we mentioned above are no more than prerequisites for the existence of a youth movement; the final factors determining membership are psychological, and are of such a nature that they do not usually affect more than a minority.

The family conflict which almost invariably arises when a young adolescent joins a youth group cannot therefore be regarded as merely the effect of joining. It has existed before in an incipient form in the psychological factors operating towards youth movement membership; either the family has been weak because one or both of the parents are absent, or the guidance, love, and affection at home is defective for other reasons: over-protectiveness, neglect, or over-discipline. I do not say that these are the only psychological factors making for youth group membership, or that when they exist such membership necessarily follows. But an unusual weakness of the family structure is strikingly characteristic of the members in the American Zionist youth groups. Joining one of the groups seems to have the meaning of striking back at the inadequacy of the parents. It goes without saying, of course, that this meaning is only rarely conscious in the adolescent; but the (in some cases, at least) furious nature of the parents’ opposition shows that
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they, for their part, are grasping some of the significance of their offspring's newly-found independence.

The Adolescent Finds Status

And it is a newly-found independence indeed. Despite the tightly-knit group life, the adolescent experiences a wonderful new freedom; for the first time, his desires and hopes and vague dreams are mirrored in the aspirations of the group in which he functions; and for the first time, too, through the security of group membership, and through the threat which this membership represents to the parents' authority, he is being recognized as having status and importance at home. And more and more the group becomes a satisfying and enriching world away from the family. The fact that the Zionist youth groups seek to lead the adolescents to another land increases the anxiety and the opposition of the family. But there are a number of factors which make the parents respect the group too, and outright prohibitions of membership are rare. The (at least nominal) Zionist nature of the groups' ideology enjoys a great prestige value, and appeals to all the Jewishness, to all the feelings in the parents of alienation from society.

When the members reach their later teens—seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—a severe crisis marks their relationship with the group. In the "normal" course of events, they become leaders of younger groups, then go on "hachshara" (farm training), and finally leave the country and join a collective in Israel. But this "normal" course of events is not at all normal because only a minority of members stay long enough to see it through.

The reasons for these defections are numerous and complex. First of all, there is the constant pressure of the American environment. Once in college, the possibilities of American society look much brighter than they did before, and the choice between entering a profession in America and a life of manual agricultural labor on a kibbutz can no longer be solved so easily by that overflowing zeal that marked the earlier years of adolescence. And then there are additional reasons that make a continued life in the movement undesirable. The group-centered existence of the organizations tends to discourage a heterosexual adjustment in many ways. Social adjustment is mainly in the group; boy-girl relationships are rarely on an individual level. Under the Weimar republic the Wandervögel became a mighty center of attraction for a certain type of homosexual—the perpetual adolescent who found the movement a support and a rationalization for his inability to adjust to adult responsibilities. The Zionist youth movement today, while serving the younger adolescent in his fight for liberation from his family, is poorly equipped to deal with the needs of most young adults in their late teens and early twenties.

For those of their older members who find conventional heterosexual adjustments difficult or distasteful, however, the Zionist youth groups hold attractions entirely unmatched by the Wandervögel or any other youth movement. For on hachshara and later on the kibbutz, it is quite possible to enjoy a fairly stable emotional security (socially sanctioned!) without the necessity of falling into the conventional heterosexual pattern. Marriage on a

2. The relationship between the young man and woman was to be one of equality, mutual respect, responsibility, honesty, and not the exaggerated sophistication and sensuality so characteristic of the general culture of our generation. Youth and Nation, October 1940, p. 8.
kibbutz is an institution altogether different from what it is on the outside; it does not involve any of the responsibilities that it involves in American society: oneself, one's wife, even one's children are "all taken care of" by the settlement's institutions. This care is not merely financial; many of the educational and emotional responsibilities which are borne by parents in our society are shouldered collectively on the kibbutzim. Thus, for instance, infant do not live in the same quarters with the parents—they are fed and cared for by nurses in separate houses.

For those persons for whom early family experiences have been unsatisfying, the search for more adequate group relations will continue long into their adult lives. Their unpleasant experiences at home have made them (unconsciously) distrustful of all family relations. In addition, the lack of a secure and warm home make it more difficult for them to function as secure and self-confident human beings later; the relatively restricted and institutionalized environment of the kibbutz makes it easier for them to function there than under the more exposed conditions of an individual and competitive existence.

Revolution and Totalitarianism

No discussion of the Zionist youth movement can be complete without a consideration of certain additional social and political aspects. The youth movement utilizes an extremely explosive force: all the revolutionary energy of the adolescent, all of his hostility which the many idiocies of our culture so well deserve. But when it taps these sources of energy, it doesn't really quite know what to do with them. Too often, the energies have been just dissipated; too often, they have become hitched to a totalitarian bandwagon.

It is well to remember here that in Hitler's rise to power, the Hitler Youth appeal to Wandervogel sentiments was of great importance. Taken by itself, there is nothing totalitarian about the Wandervogel tradition; however, a number of factors have made it exceptionally easy for the totalitarians to cash in. The Wandervogel gospel has always been one of discontent, of an adolescent discontent that was too vague to find expression in political or intellectual terms. The Wandervogel revolt has relied on the same kind of social mysticism that the Nazi plebeian orators have used so successfully to capture the imagination of all the middle class, and declassed discontents. Above all, the Wandervogel tradition has taught a distrust for intellectual analysis; consequently, those brought up in it flocked early and in great numbers to the Nazi demagogic appeals for social change, appeals to Blood, Brotherhood, and Work.

Given the similarity of Zionist Youth mythology to that of the Wandervogel (and, by the way, to that of the Hitler Youth), it would have been surprising indeed if the totalitarians hadn't cashed in here too. It is no accident that the most extreme of the youth organizations, Hashomer Hatzair, is closely tied with Stalinism.

3) Official anthem of the Hitler Youth organization:

"... Jugend, Jugend Jugend kennt keine Gefahren;

ist das Ziel auch noch so hoch
jugend zwingt es doch!" (Youth, Youth, Youth knows no danger. No matter how high the goal, Youth will conquer!

Hashomer Hatzair: "The movement's faith in Youth, and its infinite horizons, have conquered the barriers of the past and will, with greater strength of purpose, overcome those of the future." Youth and Nation, October 1930, p. 9.
And Kibbutz Artzi, HHI's kibbutz federation, requires "ideological collectivism," i.e. a one-party society on the settlements.4

The organizations we have discussed all call themselves socialist. But the intellectual component of their socialism is very meager. The vague yearning of adolescence for a better world is being expressed in a kind of word-magic that can accept verbal labels without any need for analysis. Thus, Russia is usually accepted as some kind of a "socialist" force, even by those who think of themselves as non-Communist. And in Habonim and Hashomer Hatzair (as well as, of course, in Hashomer Hatzair) there were a phenomenal number of older members who voted for or supported Wallace in 1948; nothing in their training had enabled them to separate the real from the verbal content of the "Progressive" program.

In general, there is a flattening of intellectual awareness. An interesting symptom in this connection is the appearance of an article in a recent issue of "Alot," a Habonim periodical, that called for the artist to become more closely tied to the immediate experiences of "the people," to give up, in effect, all the more complicated, more individual, or more abstract forms of expression. And in the July 1950 issue of Commentary, J. I. Teller commented upon some of the more alarming effects the youth movement upbringing has had on at least one sector of Israeli youth: a frightening shallowness, a separation from the analytic traditions of the Jewish people.

The problem of a democratic or humanist orientation for the youth movement is linked, of course, with the more general problem of the capacity of democratic values to command the kind of devotion, inspiration, self-sacrifice and enthusiasm which the totalitarians seem to have monopolized in recent history. For the bubbling energies of the adolescent movement require a dynamic ideology.

Zeal and Democratic Values

This question—the linking of a rational intelligence with a dynamic enthusiasm—is too broad to be discussed within the limitations of the present article. One might point out, however, that those who stand for the democratization of our society demand what the youth movement has always demanded: a systematic, thorough-going, and never-ending revision of all the mores and institutions of society. The traditional difference between the two movements, of course, is that the democrats insist that the revision be undertaken only in connection with the most rigorous intellectual analysis to make sure that we won't exchange what we have at present for something worse. But is this a difference that cannot be overcome?

There is no doubt that in addition to all we have considered, there is a very genuine attempt by the Zionist youth movements to find a continuity with Jewish history. The special conditions under which the Jews have existed in Western society have often enabled them to make disproportionately large contributions to the Enlightenment and to the continuing democratic revolution—the names of Marx, Freud, and Einstein are symbols of this capacity. By allying itself with a democratic movement the Zionist youth may yet find itself in the same tradition.

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4] See also the program for the HHI group in this country: "Here is the laboratory of ideas and views in which a common opinion is reached—be it the character of the Jewish people, a way of dressing, the state of international political affairs or the latest motion picture." Youth and Nation, November 1950, p. 17 (italics ours).