It is not easy to summarize Tikkun's editorial views without some oversimplification; nevertheless, some clear patterns can be identified. On the issue of Intifada, Tikkun wants Israel to begin negotiations that would create an independent, demilitarized Palestinian state; it strongly criticized the writer of Iraq for testing obediently in the face of the Israeli government in support of Middle East policy.

In its overall politics, Tikkun wants to engage the political reality of the Right. Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikkun, and Christopher Lasch, a contributing editor, have been the chief exponents of this position. Currently, the Right has been able to gain momentum and unify the problems it touches a large majority of people. It is a Right that talks about family, spirituality, ethics and traditional values as a result they have found an appeal to a large part of the American Jewish community. Tikkun now wants to engage the Right's rhetorical thunder.

At the same time Tikkun is trying to dispel the idea that Jews have thrown in with the conservative forces. America continues to show an affinity for liberal and reformist causes. But this cannot be said about the leadership of Jewish organizations which Tikkun asserts is a conservative one with a vastly disproportionate influence over what is said on behalf of the Jewish community.

**The Conference**

It was party to counter the rhetoric of the Right and the influence of a highly conservative Jewish leadership. Tikkun was founded. In December 1985, the journal also launched their first issue, which dealt broadly with the situation of American Jewish liberalism.

For three days, Jews from all across United States and Canada met in New York City to discuss the relationship between the Left and the Right. This conference was the first of a series of dialogues that we initiated, the new PLO positions of the Left and Right, and the need for a new political strategy. The Jewish Left must begin to develop a coherent vision for the future.

With no sign of the Palestinian intifada abating, a growing number of North American Jewish groups have been calling for a political solution to the Palestinian problem. Included among them is a new periodical on politics, culture & society, *Tikkun*.

*Tikkun*, which in Hebrew means to mend, repair, and transform the world, is a bi-monthly journal that began publishing in 1986. Since this time the magazine has made a name for itself for its peculiar synthesis of liberal ideals, religion, feminism, and its critique of neo-conservativism. *Tikkun* advertises itself as the liberal alternative to the Jewish neo-conservative journal *Commentary*. The claim is not inaccurate but like other forms of self-advertising it warrants close scrutiny.
It is not easy to summarize Tikvah’s editorial views without some oversimplification: nevertheless, some clear principles can be identified. On the issue of the illegitimate, Tikvah insists that reforms that would create an independent and demilitarized Palestinian state and have strongly criticized the writers of Commentary for skirtsquid’s attempts at appeasing the satire of the Israeli government’s policies.

In its overall politics Tikvah wants to reverse the political territory ceded to the Right. Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikvah and Christopher Lasch, a contributing editor, have been the chief exponents of this position. Currently, they argue, the Right has been able to identify and then articulate the problems that touch a large majority of people. It is the Right who talk about the family, religion, spirituality, ethics, and traditional values, and as a result they have found an opening that allows them to manipulate the language of religion and community. Recognizing the appeal of conservative values in a large part of the American population, Tikvah now wants to seize the Right’s rhetorical thunder.

At the same time Tikvah is trying to adapt the idea that Jews have thrived in the U.S. in the face of conservative forces. Jews in America continue to share an affinity for liberal and reformist causes, Lerner says. But the same cannot be said about a number of prominent Jewish intellectuals and the leadership of Jewish organizations, which Lerner asserts is a conservative elite that has a vastly disproportionate influence over what gets said and on behalf of the Jewish community.

The Conference

It was part of the rhetoric of the Right and the influence of this highly organized Jewish conservative leadership that Tikvah was founded. In December 1998 the editors also launched their first conference, which dealt broadly with the reconsolidation of American Jewish identity. Conveniently, this was the time when the United States and Canada met in the Hotel Plaza in mid-Manhattan in order to be explicit about, argue, network, and work to build a coalition that would effectively challenge the political and cultural hegemony of the Right in the United States and, importantly, in Israel.

A three-day conference with over 40 sessions was almost impossible to cover in a systematic way, especially when the conference itself did not offer a clear and coherent focus, but only the space and the beginning for the beginning of new dialogues. There were sessions on the political situation in Black and Jews, the Cold War, Religion, Fundamentalism, and Judaism, the Internet, the new PLC position on Israel, secularism, feminism, and gay Jews, and the Political Strategies of the Left. Much of my time was spent going to sessions in which I had no personal interest, and speaking to other participants who, though unsure about their own position on Tikvah, felt that many old-line North American Jewish groups and publications no longer spoke for them.

For three days Jews from all across the United States and Canada met in the Hotel Plaza in mid-Manhattan in order to be explicit about the political situation in Black and Jews, the Cold War, Religion, Fundamentalism, and Judaism, the Internet, the new PLC position on Israel, secularism, feminism, and gay Jews, and the Political Strategies of the Left. Much of my time was spent going to sessions in which I had no personal interest, and speaking to other participants who, though unsure about their own position, felt that many old-line North American Jewish groups and publications no longer spoke for them.

Tikvah’s editorial offices are in Oakland, California. “Being in the West is in many ways useful. It makes us more conservative,” said associate editor Peter Gabel, but he added “if the magazine is to grow we need to do better in eastern cities.” By having the conference in New York City Tikvah was trying to strengthen its eastern ties. And adding variety and fresh perspectives to the conference were many speakers from the academic community and the business world, especially from the editorial board of the Jewish Journal, one of the bastions of the New York Jewish Left.

The urgent need for alternatives, the selection of the conference, and the excellent advertising drew over 100 people to the gathering: more than three times the number that the organizers had expected. The participants included academics, activists, artists, writers, politicians, media, and union leaders. The number of women in the audience was significantly large. There was no day care provided, but a group of children helped disburse refreshments. The intellectual vitality found at the sessions was notably high: at some points heated disagreements were heated. Since the conference was designed to reduce tensions and bring a wide range of liberal-leaning Jews together, the organizers were particularly concerned not to steal the focus from the Left.

Sixth-day of the Conference

New York City was the logical choice for another reason as it is the home of Commentary. For a little more than a decade we have all watched the rise of the political fortunes of its editor, Norman Podhoretz. The most notable among them is the rise of his son, Michael Lerner, who has profited from the neo-conservative movement, which has put the contrasting among them to the test of the Jewish community. Podhoretz, professor in history and political science, began his career as a commentator in the early sixties, when he was a student at the University of Pennsylvania. He was a philosophical and political force in American Jewish life. Podhoretz was a key figure in the neo-conservative movement, which had replaced the liberal ideology of the 1960s with a new, more conservative one. Podhoretz, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has been a key figure in the neo-conservative movement, which had replaced the liberal ideology of the 1960s with a new, more conservative one.

Jews in America were looking for a new home, but they found it not in the 60s with many Jews left comfortable within the mainstream American politics and society and that until the edge of Jewish education. In the first volume of his highly publicized memoir, Making It, Podhoretz vividly remembers the personal and cultural undertakings of Jewish assimilation in the 40s and 50s. Assimilation had been a “brutal bargain” where much of the immigration had to be given up in return for the economic and cultural opportunities which many Jews of Podhoretz’s generation quickly embraced. What started out as a Jewish immigration law that lasted for 60 years, which “had replaced sexual freedom... especially for the writers, artists, and intellectuals among whom I lived and worked.”

If Podhoretz grew up in his own culture, “making it,” Tikvah’s editor Michael Lerner, connections against the false security of believing that one was having “made it,” Jews no longer need to feel connected to the Jewish world and its moral tradition of justice and community. Podhoretz’s love of Jewish spiritual identity with universalism values, liberalism, and progressive ideas. This was the prevailing theme of the conference, and especially at the conclusion of the down-to-earth discussions.
the banquet honoring Irving Howe and novelists Grace Paley and Alfred Kazin, all of whom continued to be outspoken critics during the chill of the cold war.

Jews & Palestinians

Irving Howe is the editor of Dissent magazine and has been a cinch player in the Left community since the early 1950s. An urban liberal, a literary stylist and a cosmopolitan in his concerns, Howe is the essence of the New York intellectual. He is also a more critic of the Israeli handling of the intifada and in his banquet speech, he focused on the double cross faced by Jews: the moral isolation of Israel and the moral erosion by American Jews. Howe's speech acutely reflects the sentiments of many of the Tikvah writers.

The leaders of the Jewish community, said Howe, have organized too narrowly for the defense of Israel and consequently they are distanced by a mood of inhibition and preservation. They have made Israel the religion of American Jews because in a sense Israel represents the last shred of Jewishness the American Jews have left. The worldly success of the American Jews has had its price and now the community is dominated by its ground of being. American Jews have all sustained effort at self-reformation because if they took action they fear finding nothing. As a consequence, more and more, Israel has come to provide a rationale for their own subjective experience to the extent that they are now psychologically dependent on Israel for their identity. Howe ended his speech by focusing on the problem ahead. The American Jewish organizations are trying to freeze a deepening split within the Jewish world. In the next few years, Howe prophesied, there will be a war within the Jewish community because of what is happening to the Palestinians. It will be a heated and divisive war that will force some people to pull out. But if Jews still hold firm to universalist values, they need to be prepared for a long and difficult fight.

One of the more exciting sessions in the Tikvah conference and certainly one that drew the most media attention, was a Palestinian/American Jewish Roundtable. Not only was this the opening session of the conference, it was politically timely as well. A week earlier, Yasser Arafat reiterated his message in Geneva before delegates of the UN that the PLO renounced terrorism and recognized Israel's right to exist alongside a Palestinian state. Now, in a room filled to capacity, Edward Said and Benjamin Abbes-Lagundi, both members of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), were outlining the importance of this step. A critical threshold had been crossed, said Said. "The coalescence of a political view within the PLO is clear and an important political fact. The foundation of a Palestinian state must be the result of negotiations between the two parties directly involved."

Judging from the response, this was a view which found a broad support from the majority of the audience. During the question period many were pressing Said for political assurance that the PNC would accept a demilitarized Palestinian state. Said was often irritated by such questions because, he said, they could only be answered at the negotiation table. At a subsequent session Michael Lerner added rhetorical banter to the idea of negotiation. What American Jews need to do, insisted Lerner, is to make their voices heard. "We are not advocating support for the PLO but the start of a peace initiative,"

Abba Dan

and if Israel insists on its intransigence they should be shaken from their self-deception: "Wake up, Israel, you do not have forever. We American Jews are calling out from the Palestinians"

Feminism

Tikvah's position on a negotiated peace is widely supported by its readers, yet in other political and social issues there is no clear consensus. This was particularly evident in the feminist sessions where there was a sharp contrast between cultural feminists whose link to Jewishness is essential, and feminists who owe their allegiance to secular political values and rights. On the one side are women like Phyllis Chesler, who chaired the Feminist and Judaism session, and who along with a group of other women took part in an action in Israel that involved praying on the West Bank, where women are not allowed. They talked mainly of the resistance and totalization they had to face, and their struggle to broaden women's role within Judaism. On the other side are women like Ayelet Shabtai, in the Feminist Perspective session, whose political consciousness as a feminist is linked, she said, more with secularization than it is with Judaism, and so felt that her concerns as a secular feminist were being marginalized in this conference. Salient speak of the importance of stepping outside women's socially constructed roles and of being critical of any link between ethnicity and feminism. The women's issues crystallize some of the obvious difficulties of having a religious orientation to political action. As a liberal Jewish magazine, Tikvah has often taken the view that cultural meaning (Jewishness) should be given a priority over a position that argues solely on behalf of secular political rights. For many women and men, however, it is the struggle for rights that transforms their values and politics.

From Max Nordau to postmodernism

It was inevitable that somewhere in this conference there would be a session that addressed the vicious attacks on higher education by Allan Bloom (see BorderLines # 12). One of the more engaging speakers in this session was Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, who called Bloom the "Max Nordau of the 20th century."

The analogy between Max Nordau and Allan Bloom went a long way in explaining why Bloom could so effortlessly become the willing gadfly of a white, male Western culture. Max Nordau was a German Jew of the last century who wrote a highly popular book in 1892 called Degeneration which maintained that the moderns in art and literature lacked clarity and self-discipline and were incapable of upholding bourgeois moral standards. The idea of degeneration provided the soil for the conservative concept of clannish tradition and values. Bloom's lament for the decline of today's students once again sets public discussion firmly on conservative grounds. But more importantly, what both Max Nordau and Allan Bloom have in common as Jews, says Botstein, is a deep anxiety of losing the "visibility" and privileges they had gained through assimilation. Like many other American Jews, Bloom was able to gain access to American "high culture" through the benefits of an open public school system. Now fearing a threat to his status, he has become a warrior in the Kulturkampf and his defense of "excellence" becomes an argument against equal access to schooling. The transient of Allan Bloom drew a considerable audience and so did the session on modernism, which, logically, turned out to deal more with postmodernism. Here Todd Gitlin, another contributing editor to Tikvah, made a McLuhanesque distinction between hot and cool postmodernism. Cool postmodernism, Gitlin wrote, is a "Goya" since it is the kind of work which simply transcends the impoverished experience of our current culture and densens us with our fears and anxieties. Hot postmodernism, on the contrary, suggests that something has been created by our obsession with mass culture. Going underneath the image and the surface of everyday banality, hot postmodernism hints at real emotions and feelings. Hot postmodernism, Gitlin continued, extends the ideals of High modernism and is linked with a movement with which Jews have always been associated. So characterised, hot postmodernism soon became as expression of a Jewish aesthetic sensibility and something of a salving point and battle cry for
Tikun enthusiasts. I’m not sure of the validity of the distinction or the association of postmodernism with Jewishness; a more fruitful way of viewing postmodernism is to study it as a disorienting minority in the session argued, as a holding action in a time when we are unsure as to what comes next.

Tikun’s Liberalism and the Democratic Left

This is not an easy time to be a left in America, and none know that better than Michael Harrington. Harrington is America’s leading socialist, whom, as William F. Buckley Jr. once quipped, “is like being the tallest building in Topeka, Kansas.” The political struggle to which Harrington has dedicated his life requires endurance, and gives the current American reality, the proper political alliances with a broad coalition within the Democratic Party. This was the substance of his talk at the strategy session on American politics, a session which highlighted some crucial differences between Tikun’s Jewish liberalism and the political practices of the democratic left.

Harrington reminded his audience that Jews can be critical of Jesse Jackson and how he ran his campaign — in fact one of Tikun’s regular contributors Paul Herran wrote a scathing critique of Jackson’s “HymnTone-Fractional affair” — but they should not remove themselves from his programme because it is the only realistic one available to deal with unemployment, homelessness, racism, and improvements in education. It is, however, a programme that needs to be complemented with bold ideas and new visions, particularly new definitions of work life, the possibility of a 30 to 32 hour work week, and the democratization of the workplace. As against the religious overtones of the Tikun conference, Harrington declared that serious atheists, like himself, are just as concerned with values as religious people, but values are empty unless one distributes the wealth of the world and takes a critical view of the power distribution within the global economy.

The political strategy outlined by Harrington was set against a stark backdrop of American realities. During the past eight years, American organized labour has been savaged by Reagan to the point where only 14 percent of the workforce is now unionized. There are some postures as well as Frances Fox Piven, author of Why America’s Don’t Vote, pointed out some of the more glaring difficulties of American democracy. In the 1988 election just slightly more than 50 percent of the American electorate voted, one of the lowest turnout in any democracy in the world. The U.S. is also the only country in the world where there are sharp differences between those who vote and those who don’t. As a consequence, the unrepresented in politics are also the unrepresented in economic terms. The poor and the minorities are increasingly disengaged.

One of the key reasons why conservatives like electors in America is that the electoral base is so narrow that the two opposing parties struggle mightily to use the same symbols and value: the changes symbolized by fascism, racism, and jingoism. If the left is to make headway in American politics, says Piven, then it must work to change one of the most restrictive voter registration laws in the free world and continue to build a grass-roots infrastructure in order to increase voter registration and turnout.

Yet it is the emphasis on the structural inequalities of the global economy and the building of grass-roots political action that Peter Gabel, Tikun’s associate editor, finds compelling. He is more concerned with the political and psychological grounding of politics and criticism Harrington and Piven for being economistic and technocratic. In a nutshell this is Tikun’s orientation: its basis is ethical and religious. Ultimately it is fails to have a clear critique of both the larger structural issues and the smaller community practices, and its concern for its lack of experience relies on pious notion of community and politics. Clearly, ideas about the family, religion and community should be assimilated into a Left politics, but with caution, with a mind open to pleasure and danger, and brimming with doubt. Often in Tikun skepticism and caution yield to sentimental ideas of “community,” “Jewishness,” and “family.” And there are the most flagrant saws I found in the magazine and with some aspects of the conference.

What’s left in America?

But such criticism is easy to make. With the current trend in the West towards the political Right, all alliances within the Left must do some serious strategic thinking about how to turn the political tide. Within this debate a magazine like Tikun, and the conference that it sponsored which the planners are hoping to make an annual event, can play a constructive role. Tikun’s self-proclaimed goal is to enlarge the liberal vision of society and, more specifically, reaffirm a socially conscious role for Judaism in North America. It is a reasonable objective and one wishes them well. Nevertheless, Tikun is in need of honest critics that can point to its idealistic excesses and its ill-founded optimism that intellectuals, and especially Jewish intellectuals, can transform the current political climate. Intellectuals are only part of the equation of political change and sometimes not a significant part at all.

Russell Jacoby, who was present at the conference, reiterated a key point that he made in his recent book, The Lost Intellectuals (see RodenRice #14). “If the Tikun conference,” said Jacoby, “can prove to me that the spirit of the activist, left-leaning Jewish intellectual is not dead, then I would withdraw the book and renumber it for $1.25.” To Jacoby the long-term political record of the radical Jewish intellectual in America is not particularly remarkable. Despite some of the difficulties I have with the whole enterprise — its emphasis on ethnic meaning over political rights, and its polyvalent reliance on terms like ‘community’ and ‘religion,’ which is a sense yields the political discourse to the reactionary right — Tikun has shown that it has the energetic individuals, organizational skills, the political commitment and the dedication to bring together a vast array of people who have an interest in progressive politics, however tenuous one defines that term. They have also shown that they can ask some tough questions about how North American Jews should respond to the new PLO initiative. This is where Tikun has been most successful. They have been able to clarify the difference between traditional/normative Jewish values and brutal and unattractive Israeli policies. And it is mainly because of this distinction that many American Jews are turning their backs and closing their wallets to the Americas Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Americas Jewish Committee, and Commentary.

Edward Said with Brazilian journalist Sylvia Rand

For Galanter, a member of the cultural collective of Kibbutzimim Lehaiv, Cultural History and Popular Culture at York University.