

Charles S. Liebman

Dr. Charles Liebman, a member of our Editorial Board and a frequent contributor, takes issue with the views advanced in Professor Wyschogrod's provocative article "The Jewish Interest in Vietnam" which appeared in our Winter issue. Professor Liebman teaches Political Science at Yeshiva University.

JUDAISM AND VIETNAM

A Reply to Dr. Wyschogrod

As a fellow member with Professor Wyschogrod of TRADITION's Editorial Board I would like to register my profound disagreement with the logic and conclusions of his article, "The Jewish Interest in Vietnam," which appeared in the last issue.

Wyschogrod poses the alternatives of Communist victory or American victory in Vietnam and suggests that the Jewish interest is in an American victory. He is critical of Jewish liberals who protest the American effort because they fail to see the Jewish interest which is at stake. According to Wyschogrod, Jewish interest lies in opposing Communism in general, since Jews do not fare well under Communist rule; presumably a victory for Communism in Vietnam will strengthen the Soviet Union, and this is bad for Jews. Secondly, a Vietcong victory would call into question the credibility of American support for small nations, thus encouraging Arab groups such as Shukairy's Palestine Liberation Organization who would no longer fear American intervention on the side of Israel.

I think Wyschogrod is mistaken. In the first place, Jewish and other liberals who have opposed the American effort in Vietnam do not see the issue as victory for one side or another. Wyschogrod himself says: "The U.S. should be ever ready to negotiate with the enemy and come to reasonable terms, even well short of total victory." But this is exactly what most of the peace movement is all about. Certainly, the majority of those who are active in the peace movement object to American intervention pre-

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cisely because they believe that America is not honestly pursuing a policy of readiness to negotiate short of total victory. The major slogan of the peace movement is "stop the bombing," not "pull out of Vietnam." And the impetus behind "stop the bombing" is both a moral one, and the belief shared by most leaders of Europe, based upon an explicit statement by Kosygin, that with cessation of the bombing North Vietnam would be prepared to negotiate. The liberals' suspicion of America's good faith and honesty in the matter of negotiations is further strengthened by the fact that it has been the United States rather than North Vietnam that has escalated the war in the past few years, that President Johnson has been less than candid with the American people on the nature of American involvement and on prospects for peace, and that continued escalation increases the possibility of a world war for which we as Americans will bear the responsibility.

Now Wyschogrod may feel that the liberals are naive, that they are hyper-critical of Johnson, Rusk, and McNamara in charging them with bad faith by blocking meaningful steps toward negotiation, that a cessation of bombing would not lead to negotiations, and that there is no real danger of world war. Perhaps Wyschogrod is right; but that is not the burden of his attack against the Jewish liberals. He is charging them with recommending that which few of them advocate, namely, American withdrawal and surrender. If Wyschogrod believes, as implied in the quote from his article, that the Jewish interest in Vietnam can be served through negotiation "well short of total victory," then the differences between himself and the liberals are over means, not ends; strategies and interpretations, not group interests. Consequently, Wyschogrod's entire piece is really without substance.

I do believe that his basic charge against Jewish liberals is quite correct. They do "lack the almost instinctual reflexes that come into play when vital interests of a group are threatened." Jewish liberals have largely lost a sense of visceral identification as Jews and concern for the Jewish interest. This is a phenomenon worthy of exploration and study. But the Vietnam example is a particularly inappropriate one.

Let us turn now to the Jewish interest involved, assuming, as

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Wyschogrod does, that the issue is a Communist victory versus an American victory. First, says Wyschogrod, this is bad since Communism will be strengthened, and even though this is likely to be Chinese rather than Soviet Communism, "all forms of Communism are detrimental to Jewish existence. . . ." Wyschogrod himself does not seem to be too pleased with this aspect of the argument. He raises some objections, and we could raise more. In any event, it is not, as he puts it, "the crux of our argument." The crux is the analogy between Vietnam and Israel. But this analogy is quite far-fetched. In the first place, Israel is not threatened by internal revolution or by the Palestine Liberation Front. It is threatened by foreign countries. Secondly, and more significant, neither Shukairy nor Nasser nor Hussein are restrained from attacking Israel by America's guarantees. They are restrained by the strength of Israel's armed forces. It is hard to believe that Israel seriously counts on the intervention of American armies in the event of a Jewish-Arab war, even if the Arab countries attacked, much less if the indigenous Arab population revolted. Thirdly, American intervention or support in Israel as in Vietnam will be dictated by American national interests, which have never been in the past and are not likely to be in the future a function of what happens in some other country.

Finally, we come to consideration of the general moral issue of the war in Vietnam. The relevant passage reads:

If the war in Vietnam were inherently immoral, it would be proper for American Jews to condemn that war whatever the consequences of such a condemnation for the Israeli national interest may be. But such is not the case. Because the Vietnamese situation has been so thoroughly debated so many times from so many different points of view, there is no point in going over that territory here except in regard to the parallel with the Israeli situation. From the moral point of view, it is the question of the reunification of divided states by force that is the issue.

What does Wyschogrod mean? Either there is a moral question or there is not; he cannot have it both ways. If the moral question is "reunification of divided states by force," and that is indeed the issue in Vietnam, then American intervention is

morally right. In that case it is wrong to oppose American intervention. The only problem would arise if Jewish self-interests were opposed to the American position. This would present a conflict which would be of great theoretical interest. There are such cases in our society where the Jewish self-interest may possibly be opposed to a general moral interest — freedom of speech for Rockwell and certain aspects of the separation of church and state come to mind. But we all agree that Vietnam is not one of them. If the war in Vietnam is morally right, then why raise the problem of Jewish self-interest at all? But Wyschogrod wants to hedge his moral bets. In the same passage he also seems to say: If the war in Vietnam is immoral, the Jewish interest would have to give way. This bears separate investigation; the question is not so easily resolved. One would have to look more closely at both sides of the question. If Wyschogrod really believed that the lives of two million Jews in Israel were at stake, would he still feel obliged to oppose America in Vietnam, assuming he also thought the war morally wrong? Would not Jewish “instinctual reflexes” dictate a different response?

But really, according to Wyschogrod, the war is not immoral. The evidence for this is that the question has been thoroughly debated many times and from many different points of view and, by implication, no one has satisfactorily demonstrated that any side is morally right. At least this is how I understand Wyschogrod and in this case he is not quite fair. The fact that the issue has been thoroughly debated does not mean that one side is right and the other wrong. If Wyschogrod does not want to enter into the merits of the debate, he can just count the number of morally-concerned people on both sides. In that case, the anti-American policy position would win by sheer weight of numbers. Over the last few decades there have been a few outstanding scholarly and spiritual individuals, non-Jews in particular, who have gained a reputation for speaking out courageously and sensitively on crucial moral and ethical issues. The overwhelming majority of these people have been critical of the mode of American intervention in Vietnam, and particularly of the bombing which has inflicted so many casualties upon civilians. (For example, a journal such as *Christianity and Crisis*

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deserves the special attention of Jews. Founded by Reinhold Niebuhr, it adopted a strong interventionist and anti-Fascist position before World War II when many Christian leaders preached pacifism. It has been consistently anti-Communist since the end of the war. Although basically liberal in orientation, its contributors have included political conservatives. One of the few editorial positions which *Christianity and Crisis* has taken in recent years is in opposition to the nature of American intervention in Vietnam.) There is a remarkable and growing consensus among religious and intellectual leaders, whom at least the Christian world considers to be of high ethical sensitivity, in their opposition to the present conduct of the war. Of course, I do not expect Wyschogrod automatically to accept the moral judgment of others, but how can he dismiss the moral implications of the war as something which has been "thoroughly debated" and therefore need not be discussed, when most morally sensitive people have resolved the question against the official American position? The burden of proof today rests on anyone who claims that the war in Vietnam is not inherently immoral. Wyschogrod may be right. But he certainly has got to make his point more convincingly.

There is a final item which also merits attention. Wyschogrod states, and I agree, that one may arrive at a notion of group self-interest independently of moral principle. I question, however, whether the interests of Orthodox Judaism are served by Wyschogrod submitting his article to TRADITION. Wyschogrod is as sensitive as we are to the charges against Orthodoxy which are current among non-Orthodox Jews as well as non-Jews. We are accused of being concerned only with the letter of the law and not its spirit, with ignoring moral issues of a universal nature, and of being entirely self-serving. Doesn't Wyschogrod's article in TRADITION give substance to these charges? Bad enough that the first article which TRADITION publishes on Vietnam is a defense of American policy, but even worse, this defense is based on the narrowest grounds of group self-interest rather than on any moral, halakhic, or philosophical position. There would be far less objection to such a piece appearing in *Congress Bi-Weekly*. The American Jewish Congress

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people could use a touch of Jewish leavening in the self-righteous moral eclairs they are always baking. But in TRADITION? Most Orthodox groups have not heretofore been conspicuous in disinterestedly espousing any universal moral value. Now Agudath Israel and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations wrap themselves in the American flag and wallow in self-righteousness, and this precisely at a time when a sense of genuine moral revulsion has gripped the most sensitive personalities throughout the world in protest against American intervention in Vietnam.

There was a time when we felt that the situation was too complicated, and the facts too little known, for non-specialists to make moral pronouncements on the war, when the liberal position was mere moralizing. But there comes a time when complexity and unavailability of *all* the facts no longer excuse people of conscience from crying out in indignation against the escalation, the bombing, and the push to the brink.

I find it particularly deplorable, therefore, that when Orthodox groups finally have taken a stand, it has been on the wrong side; that when TRADITION finally has published an article on Vietnam, it should have been the one by Wyschogrod; and that when as fine a thinker as Dr. Wyschogrod does speak out, it should be for all the wrong reasons.

These lines were written before the current crisis in Israel. Events of the past few weeks only strengthen the argument against Wyschogrod. But advocates of peace in Vietnam also stand before a test. Will they demand American support of Israel in the current crisis, thus demonstrating that their concern in both the Middle East and Vietnam is a moral one? Or will they retreat to isolationism and indifference thereby suggesting that their stance in Vietnam was motivated by cowardice rather than morality?