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STEVE FANKUCHEN Publisher/Editor

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Last spring as a result of listening to a conversation one evening, instead of participating in it, I came to realize that discussions among progressives always seem to have an unstated assumption. It is assumed that each of us cares: about starving children in Chad, about who kills whom in El Salvador, about floods in Bangla Desh, about the “Disappeared” of Argentina. I began to wonder why this is so. Do we really care? If so, why? Should one care, and if so, why? Are there obligations entailed by caring (e.g. actions)? Is there a relationship between being a leftist and caring? The language of the left is almost invariably a language of caring. What does that mean? Do we feel smug and self-righteous by assuming “we” care and “they” do not? Do we consider people who care “better” than those who do not? Why? Most fundamentally I was concerned with why we care about the plight of others far removed from us, people whose problems would, if we did not choose to pay attention to them, never affect us.

I decided to approach the subject as I had the question of Jewish Identity in Issue #8, with a multiplicity of individual statements rather than a few analytic pieces. The articles presented here are diverse. While my own interest in the subject tends toward the philosophical and psychological, most of the authors have couched their writing in a more broadly political context, often dealing with the implications of caring more than its nature. Readers’ thoughts on the subject will be most welcome.

When folks asked me what I intended to write about caring for this issue, I replied that I wasn’t going to say anything. After all, the reason the issue came about was precisely because I had some questions and I was hoping somebody else would come up with the answers. At some point I realized that wasn’t the truth. The real reason I had decided not to write was because there was nothing I cared about, except my son, of course. I told people the editorial page would be blank, possibly headlined, “I Don’t Care”. However, this morning, just two days before going to the printer, it dawned on me that there is something I care about: baseball!

In SMATE #4 I published the text of my address on “Baseball and Radicalism” given at the Swedish presentation of the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize. One of the implications of what I stated there was that I had come to view baseball in the same way I viewed the competition for gasoline sales between Mobil and Exxon. To wit: who cares?!! Rooting for the home team made about as much sense as rooting for the local refinery.

But this year things changed. I began going to A’s games with my son. I was on a league softball team and he was batboy. He was beginning to play the game with enthusiasm, discovering there could be joyful pursuits other than breakdancing. Suddenly it came to me that I was wrong about baseball, at least in terms of the present. There was much to care about For instance:

1. Where else in the city can you hang out for four hours for only $3? And without getting smoked out, mugged, or hassled every two minutes to buy a drink.
2. Fashion wardrobe. On a $2.50 ticket, my kid got, at various times, sweat pants, shorts, hat, back pack, and a 50% off coupon for shoes. Quality merchandise, too; no shmates!
3. I never joined a fraternity in college. Now I can go to night games (without my kid) and hang out with the bleacher creatures. Male camaraderie at its finest. A fraternity for those who think it’s a nice place to visit, but wouldn’t want to live there.
4. Role models for children. Carney Lansford, Rickey Henderson, Mike Heath, Joe Morgan, and Dave Kingman are not bad alternatives to Michael Jackson. Except when you’re trying to teach your kid how to swing a bat and none of those guys have anything close to a traditional swing.
5. Baseball is the last bastion of genuine free enterprise. Or, more precisely, it is the scalpers in the parking lot who are such. They are also paradigms of the ecologically-minded, as they recycle the products conspicuously purchased and discarded by others. Once I suggested to a couple of them they apply for a grant from the American Enterprise Institute. They also serve as agents of capital redistribution, since the wealthy invariably pay them more than the rest of us.

6. Howard Cosell. A loud, pushy Jew (amen!) who was the only announcer to have the decency to call Muhammed Ali by his rightful name when he refused to go into the army during the Viet Nam War.

7. Live television. When else on TV can you see people spit, chew tobacco, scratch their crotch, flip an occasional bird, and generally do what people do in real life? You can even sit there and hope that when the President calls the winning team in the locker room after the World Series, the manager will tell him to cram it in front of 30 million voters. (Oh Sparky, how could you let us down!)

8. How can you not love a sport one of whose teams, the early Mets, is singled out editorially by a major Salt Lake City newspaper (I forget if it was the Tribune or The Deseret News) as the symbol of all that is wrong with America? The fact that the worst team in baseball had the best attendance, that people actually rooted for losers, was too much for their pristine, virtuous sensibilities.

9. How can you not care for the National League, which refuses to go after the designated hitter, thereby keeping beanball artists down on the farm and allowing for the possibilities of a Don Newcomb?

10. How can you not care whether a team partly owned by Danny Kaye (the Mariners) wins?

11. How can you not root for teams that refuse to install Astroturf?

12. How can you not root for Detroit, a city that needs something to feel good about?

13. How can you not root against the Padres, a team owned (until his recent demise) by Ray Kroc, whose players include at least two members of the John Birch Society?

14. How can you not root against the Dodgers, the original class, ethnic, and community traitors?

15. And, how can you not care for the Cubs, a team that not only has real grass on the field and ivy on the outfield walls, but also refuses to install lights for night games, even when such is demanded by the T.V. networks?!!!

Yes it is through baseball that I have learned to throw off the shackles of cynicism, once again learning the joy of caring. And in the bargain I have achieved a goal that forever eluded me in my more activist political days: I have found a way to share the aspirations and daily concerns of the masses.

Why care? Because without caring there would be no baseball. And without baseball, there would be only football. And that is a fate too terrible to even think about.

STEVE FANKUCHEN
REALITY. Nothing is more mystified than the media. If it is in print and looks clean, or comes over the airwaves, most folks think it's together, knowledgeable, important, glamorous, and financially feasible. Hal To keep from promoting the myths I detest, I'll lay out a few things about *SHMATE*. Production: essentially, with the exceptions of typesetting and printing, if it's done, I do it. Thus the set-up is unreliable, because any magazine which depends on one person is unreliable. Facilities: the international headquarters of the *SHMATE* conglomerate is located with my son's toys in our living room. Thus this is a highly glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing glamorous operation. Finances: the subscriptions probably don't even pay the printing.
The article Israeli Arms Policy by Burton Levine in Issue #9 deserves special recognition for the insights and facts revealed.

Marilyn Baumkel Pontiac, Mich.

In Issue #9 I particularly liked the articles by Burton Levine (especially the one about Israeli arms policy) and loved your piece on French wall posters. Your analysis of Israel and the Left I found very thought-provoking, and after thinking about it I believe I have the answer to your two questions. Actually, you answer one of them yourself in your final paragraph when you write: "The degree to which the attitudes of the Left and the Jewish establishment mirror each other ..." And to your second question: if Israel is measured by the world community with a standard different from its neighbors and, indeed, of other theocracies which are all repressive to some degree, it is because only Isreal claims to be a democracy - and despite all that has been going on there for the past few years with some reason - still. Let's see how the elections on Monday turn out!

Ilse Sternberger San Francisco, Ca.

I very much enjoyed reading your magazine for the first time, when I picked up #9.

In response to your editorial on "Israel and the Left," I agree with your complaint about Left double standards vis-a-vis Israel, but there is an explanation. That is, that the Palestinians have succeeded, through a combination of conventional diplomacy and politically-motivated terrorism, to have their cause placed high on the agenda of the international anti-imperialist movement. This is the paramount success of Arafat and his predecessors, without which the Palestinian cause would be as unheralded as those of Czechoslovakia, Biafra, and Bangla Desh, as you mentioned. It is also the success of the Palestinian, Arab, and Soviet diplomacy which accounts for the anti-Israel and increasingly anti-Jewish character of U.N. activities and debates, and, I believe, of the Left here and abroad.

While we usually have a good appreciation for the skill of Zionist and Israeli diplomacy, particularly leading up to the Balfour Declaration and in the 1950's, we seem to be less insightful when it comes to the skills of our cousins, with whom we have spilled so much blood, and broken so little bread.

It seems to me that we need to be as aware of their successes and failures as we are of our own, before we can move forward, together.


I read Issue #8 including your article with interest. Re: "I am not convinced that the Bund, Yiddish theater, and the Forward present a coherent rationale, let alone explanation for the continued existence of the Jewish people." No one said they did all that. They do, however, provide a comfortable framework for a certain type of Jew. Take a Yiddish writer, for example. You have said yourself that belles lettres don't interest you particularly. For a great many people they are a raison d'être in themselves. Add a pinch of secular Jewish flavoring to that and what more do those guys need?

Mindy Rinkewich New York, N.Y.

Issue #9 was great. Editorials continue to be well-thought-out and superbly written.

Gerre Goodman Durham, North Carolina

The Post Office lies!

My address is not UNKNOWN. Neither a fugitive nor yet a deceased am I. All I did, all I ever did to deserve this is I filed a temporary summer address with them and lo! the visitations that befall me. My son's mail is forwarded to me; my Cambridge address gets threatening pink cards (not forwarded!) to pick up packages within 10 days Or Else. And now they deny me altogether.

But yet I do rejoice, for the handwriting is on the envelope, the forwarders will be rewarded, but those who stamp UNKNOWN shall themselves be stamped UNKNOWN and dwell in the Dead Letter Office forever. Those who return SHMATE to its sender shall themselves be returned to their Sender, and I will dance on their mailboxes.

But within misfortune is also a blessing. This matter gives me the opportunity to praise SHMATE. I appreciate the incredibly difficult task you have undertaken and enjoy the product. I value your recognition of how many different varieties we come in, all legitimate.

Dick Levins Cambridge, Mass.

I'm wondering if you heard the KPFA show that told of big U.S. business links to the Nazis during World War II? I was, and am, totally grossed out and upset by it. Maybe it wasn't news to you — it was to me. That Standard Oil sold fuel to the Nazis is the least of the outrages. That business (and government?) leaders benefitted financially, such as by having camp inmates gold fittings melted down and go directly into U.S.-owned multi-national banks was worse. I wonder if the U.S. didn't bomb the tracks into Auschwitz because of pressure from people with financial interests in the operation.

I'd like to know more about this and I'd like to see the information get as much publicity as possible. What about in SHMATE for a start?

Janine Baer Berkeley, Ca.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE
I thoroughly enjoyed your editorial on Israel And The Left. I found it lucid, and extremely relevant.

I was troubled by Burton Levine's article, Israeli Arms Policy. A great many allegations of major significance were made without any bibliography or sources cited. This was in contrast to the article Israel and Bolivia, apparently by the same author.

I am not challenging the author's integrity, or his facts; I should simply like to be able to check them out; or at the very least to inform myself further. I am also wondering whether you have fulfilled your own responsibilities in not requiring a bibliography.

Sy Aberle
Vallejo, Ca.

[SHMATE is not intended to be an academic journal. As such, the use of extensive bibliographical footnotes in Israel And Bolivia was an exception, provided by the author at my request. He offered to provide the same documentation for his article, Israeli Arms Policy.—ed.]

Why do you persist in insinuating that “much of the Left” is anti-Semitic? The SHMATE #9 article, Israel and the Left alleges that there is a “double standard” in the Left’s policy toward Israel (which may be true) and that the only possible explanation is anti-Semitism. This explanation is simplistic, misleading and deceiving.

Anti-Zionism equalling anti-Semitism is just as unacceptable to most Progressives as Zionism equalling racism. Most of the progressive elements in this country from the DSA to CPUSA have made it perfectly clear that they don’t believe Israel is a “white colonial settler state” or that it should be replaced by a “democratic secular state.” Instead they call for some form of mutual recognition, self-determination, and negotiations so that all can live in peace, harmony and security. The John Brown Anti-Klan committee does not speak for “much of the Left” any more than the JDL speaks for American Jewry and Meir Kahane’s Kach party speaks for Israeli Jewry. Some segments of the Left have bad ideology and poor politics, but to automatically jump to the conclusion that it is widespread and anti-Semitic in nature requires more analysis and investigation rather than the simple quotations of a vocal and visible minority.

You are so obsessed with finding anti-Semitism “in much of the Left” that you insist on giving the impression that progressives spend most of their efforts in attacking Israel. As an American Jewish progressive, I’ve spent most of my time in trying to dump Reagan in ‘84, bringing about a nuclear freeze, ending U.S. intervention in Latin America, Women’s issues, improving the ecological environment, and voter registration. Sabra and Shatila are now only being brought up by Arik Sharon in his lawsuit against Time magazine.

In regard to “a double standard” the non-criticism of certain governments by the “Left” for barbaric and undemocratic actions does not make the criticism of Israel any less valid. The bourgeois press of this country gave the Lebanese invasion overwhelming coverage to the exclusion of all else. Does this mean that Dan Rather, Ted Koppel, the N.Y. Times, and Washington Post, UPI, AP, etc are anti-Semitic? I doubt it, but it does mean they are wrong. Perhaps progressives are wrong here also. They should voice their opposition to injustice wherever and whenever it occurs, but limited time, energies and funds must be placed in areas where we can affect directly and immediately. Israel is directly linked to the U.S. government and American Jewry for support. Cambodia, Libya, East Timor, Iran, and Iraq are not. We can change U.S. policy and American Jewish opinion, not to destroy Israel, but to bring about a Jewish state that is able to survive in peace and dignity. This is what I feel most progressives want. Our views should not force us to waste time pissing off allegations of anti-Semitism or self-hate. I guess we could all sign loyalty oaths pledging support for the existence of the state of Israel. This may satisfy you and I could sign it. But I definitely won’t.

This “even-handed policy” may be the result of your internalized guilt due to recent Israeli government actions. Or maybe you believe that attacks on progressives will increase your circulation with moderates. I doubt it. I for one, will not show my liberal friends copies of SHMATE and reinforce their prejudices that the “Left” is anti-Semitic. And I will not try to get my progressive friends to subscribe to SHMATE so they can be attacked and insulted. Anyone can read Commentary for that.

Lastly this letter would have been unnecessary if you were not so hopelessly pessimistic. You attack and condemn “much of the Left” but offer no solutions, alternatives, or hopes of conciliation. If the “Left” is prevalently anti-Semitic, there is no place for Jews in it. Should we all register as Republicans, vote for Reagan, and join the John Birch Society? I say no. Anti-Semitism may exist within certain elements of the “Left” and any evidence of it must be confronted. But anti-Semitism exists in much higher levels within all other groups in this country. Traditionally most progressives have been in the forefront of the fight against Nazism, Fascism, and anti-Semitism. I believe this is still basically true, though the current course of Israel has created much strain in this partnership. We must vocally work within the Left rather than standing outside condemning and attacking. A blanket smear campaign with no constructive solutions can serve no purpose except to polarize progressives from Jews. In the July-August ’84 issue of Jewish Currents (p.43) William Shneyer responds to a critical letter as follows: “Finally, if a difference of opinion on statements about a Black Leftist position is to be labelled racist, then all constructive dis—

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cussion is foreclosed.” Delete the word Black and substitute anti-Semitic for racist and the conclusion is the same.

Just as I would disassociate myself from any group that states that “much of American Jewry” is racist because “many Jewish organizations” are against affirmative action, I cannot accept your allegation that much of the Left is anti-Semitic. I am Jewish and am proud to be so. I am also proud to be a progressive. I can be both without guilt, shame or regret. I can’t have one without the other.

Henry Finkelstein
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Steve Fankuchen’s editorial in SHMATE #9 was both refreshing and perplexing. Although the line between apologetics and the legitimate defense of one’s position is often blurred, especially during propaganda wars, there is no doubt that the “Left”, (a nebulous term if every there was one) and the “Right,” (similarly nebulous), are equally guilty of this crime against logic. Selective memory and intellectual laziness exist within all groups, perhaps within all individuals.

On the other hand, as an American citizen, I believe that “my” government is doing a fine job of pointing out the ills of its enemies; e.g. the Soviet Union, Nicaragua, Libya, Iran, et al. Though I feel a leftist critique of these states is necessary, I don’t feel compelled to carry anti-Soviet placards at the Democratic Convention. Nor do I consider this lack of compulsion a crime of omission.

That some groups choose a particular focus of activity does not make them, necessarily, apologists for others, nor does it imply that they are happy with events outside their area of concentration. That CAFIOT is concerned with the conditions inside the occupied territories as its primary focus does not lead me to believe that its members are not aware, of, or opposed to, similar conditions elsewhere.

The double standard Fankuchen associates with the conservative Jewish establishment is, to be sure, existent within the Left. I would offer a different account, however. As the organized Left was generally tardy in acknowledging the atrocities of Stalinism, so has it refused to take issue with the dark side of Zionism. The few who now question Israeli policy tend to date the transition from “Good Israel” to “Bad Israel” at the most recent invasion of Lebanon. (The “really” progressive dare to go back as far as the 67 war.)

The notion of dating a transition from “Good” to “Evil” is as groundless as the notion of rarified “Good” and “Evil.” Yet even this minority within the mainstream of the left is reluctant to address the issue publicly for fear of divisiveness and the alienation from their constituency of those who are “progressive,” except when it comes to Israel. That Fankuchen sees a conspiracy by the American Left against Israel or in support of reactionary Arab regimes makes me question his faculties of observation.

This is not to deny his point that there do exist apologists for Arab regimes. You’ll find them in every Arab embassy and in America’s foreign affairs bureaucracies. That the Left also has a few is a forgone conclusion. That these few constitute even a significant minority among those concerned with the rights of Arab peoples is absurd. If you want a scaring critique of Arab regimes’ ills, ask a Palestinian American. If you want the same critique from a non-Arab, ask a non-Arab who has spent time living in the Middle East.

Since these two groups constitute a large part of Palestinian rights groups in America I have difficulty lending Fankuchen’s argument much sympathy. If he truly is concerned with oppression in Arab states perhaps he should contact the Organization for the Protection of Human Rights in the Arab World, which can be contacted through Naida, an organization focusing on women’s issues in the Middle East. As a rebuttal of each specific complaint raised by Fankuchen would take pages, let me address a few with an offer to continue if he so desires:

1) The only defense I’ve heard of the Syrian presence in Lebanon was from a Lebanese citizen who considers his home in Lebanon as rightfully falling under the rule of Syria. I have read that most Lebanese were glad to see the Syrians when they first came and it is my understanding that most would like to see them leave as soon as the Israelis have done so.

2) As to condemnation of Husseins’s massacre of Palestinians, certainly it was a horrific act. But whereas Black September ended in September, Begin’s genocide is ongoing. Hussein is now fighting for Palestinian rights. Begin is driving them into exile.

3) I’ve never heard a good word about Hafez Al-Assad except from Hafez Al-Assad or those directly dependent on his good will. Pick up any paper published outside of Damascus and you’ll see what I mean. Whether he would rather have Arafat as PLO Chairman or someone else is a minor point. A major point is that the PLO is willing to negotiate, now, with no preconditions. Neither Labor nor Likud are willing to negotiate, now or ever, under any circumstances. Since Syria is not occupying Palestinian land (or land that happens to have Palestinians living on it), I don’t equate Assad’s dispute with Arafat with Israel’s refusal to negotiate.

I would like to add that, though I found this issue of SHMATE informative, I don’t understand why, as an issue focusing on Israel it had no article on Israeli progressive thought. All the articles on Israel were devoted to Israel’s relations with the Western Hemisphere. Let’s see something by Israeli progressives, (please, no Shimon Peres!)

Paul Anderson
Berkeley, Ca.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE
First of all, allow me to congratulate you on your ever finer magazine. I hope it obtains the distribution it merits.

I am enclosing a letter to the editor for possible publication. My quarrel with you is not so much on the main premise — that the Left has different standards for Israel and the rest of the world; it is with the arguments you raise, which really prove you, too, have two such standards and that they differ.

Can anybody, ever, consider Jews dispassionately? The only occasion on which I perceived this happened was when my associate Marton went to Japan, where a tribunal was set up to judge Israeli war crimes in Lebanon. It turned out the Japanese had very little interest in Judaism, anti-Semitism, and so on: what they were getting at — or rather, where they were coming from — was both the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japan’s own war crimes in Korea during World War Two.

As a fan of your publication, since its inception, I cannot let go unanswered your editorial ISRAEL AND THE LEFT.

First, where I agree with you: the Left — and not just the American Left — has been doctrinal and patronizing about Israel and about the Jews. It also has adopted, consistently, a view in which the “majority” cultures — Arab in the Near East, Manchu in China, majoritarian in Nigeria — have been considered as the only valid ones, the only ones with a right to self-determination and independence.

Second, the left in America has an uneasy feeling about Jews, nowadays. Perhaps not anti-Semitic, but certainly a feeling that “they are not with us or part of us”.

But there are reasons for these distortions.

First, Israel is oppressive of its minority, and imperialist in its approach to other Arab territories (Golan, Southern Lebanon).

Second, upward economic mobility has caused the third Jewish generation in America to join forces with conservative, and even reactionary forces, and also to play socially negative roles, such as those of Jewish slum-lords in Black areas, or the refusal of Jewish official institutions to participate in Affirmative Action.

Thirdly, the Left, in a country which is not known for its liberal tendencies, has entrenched itself in a “pure and hard” stand which is far removed from reality, so as to oppose all those it knows who do play a negative social or international role.

Fifth, the waning of American liberalism and radicalism has caused many young Jews to adhere to Zionism without precondition — and as Zionism has moved more and more to the Right, under Begin, Shamir and so on, and with the coopting of fascists such as Yuval Neeman, Geula Cohen and Rabbi Levinger of Gush Emunim, the American Left sees its wrong theories about Jews vindicated by Israeli oppression of the Arabs.

So, while what you say about the Left is essentially right, you fail to analyze why this is possible in today’s America, after a whole two generations of Jewish liberals fought with and for leftwing causes; because the Jews and Israel, or rather the majority of both, have moved to more negative roles.

Which is why people such as you and me must remain leftwingers and yet analyze in depth what is happening and what is wrong on both sides, “theirs” and “ours.”

Also, dear Fankuchen, you let yourself get carried away by your anger and write things which you know are wrong.

First, the majority of the Jews in Israel did come from somewhere else — some of them even from the Catskills and Florida, in fact some of the most rabid JDL racists among them. Others from all over the world. This generation’s Sabras, or Israeli native Jews, are still a minority of all Israelis.

The Palestinians, on the other hand, lived and live there for generations. Those who were chased off and those who ran away, but also those who remained — are natives of the place. While an Israeli nation is undoubtedly being created and three generations of Sabras exist, the creation of the state of Israel was the work of immigrants, not natives. That these immigrants believe their forefathers came from there — and may even be right — is certainly a fact; but they did come from somewhere else and did chase, oppress, and supplant the natives.

Second, while Syria certainly is an imperial power in the Near East, on cannot compare its relationship to the Palestinians ... and the Lebanese. Turn around things and imagine that a Black American writer starts telling the American Jews what exactly they should ask and not ask as their rights. He would be told off in no uncertain terms. Israel, for fig’s sake, is not Arab! It even refuses to be Near Eastern, and sees itself as the harbinger of western culture and American influence! Why do you wish the Left, under such conditions, to ask an Arab state (albeit an imperialist one) to be considered in the same light as the Jewish superiority state?

The difference is this: Israel wants to replace the Palestinians. Hussein and Assad want to oppress them. While Israel’s and Syria’s oppression of the Palestinians and opposition to the PLO are just now symmetrical, the aims are different: and as long as we Israelis shall not have as our main aim to integrate into the Near East, instead of to conquer a place in its heart, the ambiguity of Israel’s stand will remain — and with it the witless generalizations of what some of my South American friends call the “Folkloric Left.”
S
ome years back, when the Federal Narcotics Hospital was still in Lexington, Kentucky, as a chaplain there I led a group discussion on the topic, “If you knew that you were going to die tomorrow, what could you tell me today about yourself so that I might have something to say in your eulogy?” This was a shock question. Their response was telling. For most addicts there is so little to say, maybe fifteen seconds worth, from a life of thirty years or more. I then changed the question and gave them ten more years to live. The responses were different. They filled their ensuing years with meaningful activities in which they gave of themselves.

I
n a eulogy we speak about what the deceased person contributed to life, the good things that he or she did for others, how he or she cared for us. The addict is a taker, not a giver; he does not “care,” and so there is very little to talk about at his or her funeral.

Very much akin to the above idea — there is nothing quite as sad as a funeral for which no one shows up. The person who died apparently meant so little to other people that no one took note of his death. In his life he did not care for anyone and so no one cared when he died.

Death is the end of the final chapter of our lives. At a funeral we Jews say, nzehrono liv-rachah, may his memory be for a blessing. But if there is nothing worth remembering, then there can be no blessing. Caring, then, is really the yardstick by which we measure a person’s life.

At a recent Catholic-Jewish dialogue session in which I was involved, we talked about the passage in Genesis, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”, and how that passage can apply to life’s situations — from the most intimate of caring for loved ones to the most global concerns. It is a telling phrase, because it seems to imply a “yes” answer. But the content and extent of that answer is subject to human limitations. I can be my brother’s keeper — but who is he? What is my degree of relationship? How do I show I care? None of us will respond in the same way to these questions. The people in the dialogue had always applied the verse to social issues, but I directed their attention to personal, intimate caring, which they had somehow overlooked heretofore. The discussion was lively.

I accept the premise that I am my brother’s keeper, because of the interdependence of people that I see in human life. I constantly witness a reciprocity of caring. I see it on the personal level in the intimate sharing of love, of friendships, of compassion, of trust. I see it on a societal level through the countless people who are unknown to me, but upon whom I depend for my daily needs — for food, clothing, information, electricity, etc. Without the many levels of caring, life would be reduced to an animal existence. Thus, I am as much my brother’s keeper as he is mine.

If we accept this premise then my next problem is to deal with my own personal limitations — of energy, time, interest, money, ability — my human situation. I cannot care in the same way for all of my “brothers.” I cannot “keep” them all equally. I have to make choices, as distressing and painful as I may find them to be. I have to learn to live with what I am not able to do. Even though I may care, my personal limitations do not permit me to act upon every issue I encounter and still retain my sanity. As much as I would like to be able to wait on every table in the restaurant of “caring,” it is imperative that I train myself to be able to say, “I’m sorry, that is not my table. I have all I can handle.”

I come now to my own caring. On a personal level — for my family, and for my friends. Time is a factor. As much as I may try, I know that I cannot always be there when I am needed. I know, also, that I cannot live their lives for them. Living my own life is a fulltime task. But since I care, I can give of myself to them — within the limits of my ability. I can offer advice, money, love, my presence — whatever is appropriate for me to do at any given moment.

My horizon also needs to include people beyond those whom I know. I receive benefits from many people I don’t know — from the daily newspaper I receive on my doorstep, to the banana I eat for breakfast, to the wide variety of merchandise I can buy in the store. My scope of caring has to include people far beyond my own personal world. What happens to them affects me in some way — my quality of life, my sense of justice, my ideas of freedom, my awareness that all of humanity, not only those people whom I know and like, are my “brothers.” They are all created in God’s image. And so, somehow, I also need to care for them to the best of my limitations. I have to make my choices out of the myriad of human needs that beg for my attention.

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The question of caring and the Left has been very much on my mind for the last year or two. From about 1965, when I became involved in anti-draft and anti-Vietnam war work, until the spring of 1983 when I quit my job as co-director of a national organization for progressive artists, I lived and breathed activism. The language of the Left was my language. Its preoccupations were mine. It lent clarity and meaning to my life. It gave me a sense of direction and a big goal to work toward.

I spent most of those 18 years as a full-time organizer, with the pre-Industrial Revolution working conditions typical of the field. When I was finally forced to face the fact that the last four years' losing battle had exhausted my resources, I felt I was in a state of emotional anorexia. It seemed like time for a change. The months since have been full of disillusionment, of regret, and lately, glimmerings of recovery.

I want to approach the issue of caring through my own experience, by examining the contradiction between the Left's caring for the exploited and its own self-exploitation. Over the years I've worked with dozens of progressive groups. All of them have held concern for workers dear to their hearts: dealing with unionized printers and suppliers, respecting strikes and picket lines, supporting every drive to extend unionization or raise organized workers' wages.

But none of these progressive, labor-loving groups was unionized, had a medical plan, paid decent wages and overtime, or even restricted its demands on workers for uncompensated overtime. While I have read about a couple of big nonprofits that instituted more humane working conditions and wages, I have never come across such an organization myself. I have, however, heard stories about movement organizations' resistance to attempts at unionization, either on the grounds that "we're all one big family here," or more forthrightly, that "we can't afford it."

Most such organizations cultivate an atmosphere of collective self-sacrifice. They depend on understaffing and voluntary overtime to get work done—not just during periodic speed-ups (as we might be horrified to read in a factory expose), but every day, all year round. There is a powerful, seductive culture of deprivation. The worklife and economic conditions, which might move us to tears had the oppressed workers in question been secretaries or agricultural workers, are, when undertaken voluntarily in the name of the movement, badges of honor and commitment. When I said I left my last organizing job in a state of emotional anorexia, I meant that like an anorexic, my response to an overwhelming political climate, and my own drastically depleted energy, was to cannibalize the only resource within my control in order to sustain myself. With an anorexic, the obsession is to control one's body, to submit to an unending trial by deprivation of food. With an emotional anorexic of the Left, the obsession is to test the power of one's will, and the medium is not the body, but the work itself.

A classic of New Left thinking is the idea of "prefigurative behavior." Instead of waiting for society to change, this line of thinking goes, we can change ourselves to live in a way that prefigures the new society, that can provide an example and inspiration to others. This is a lovely idea, but in practice it has more often been a case of "do as I say, not as I do." If the typical experience of a long-time worker on the Left is as I have described it—if this is how the Left practices prefiguration—we have a nightmare future in store, peopled by dedicated, self-cannibalizing workers perversely proud of their ill-health and shredded relationships, terrified of the future but seemingly unable to build anything that lasts, as out of touch with the preoccupations and aspirations of most of their neighbors as if they had just arrived on a spaceship from Mars.

Caring is the religion of the Left. Some are observant and active, . . . [some have] a vague, reassuring sense of belonging and, perhaps, a few nagging doubts. But the largest group comprises those whose commitment is purely formal, . . .

To go from the contradiction of the Left's internal exploitation to look at caring and the Left in terms of social action: here, too, although the rhetoric of caring is very broad and generous in the abstract, in practice the Left's caring has been narrow and prescriptive. Obviously, I was not the only progressive activist to encounter strong opposition during the last few years. All of us know that with the turn to the Right in the late 70s, money and encouragement in all forms became generally less available. In response there was much discussion of coalition-building, or organizing among...
new constituencies. The cultural organization I worked for was hopeful that there would be a chance to build working alliances and extend our impact.

Many of us saw the Left as our “community.” We wanted to conscientize the Left in order to help ourselves by gaining allies, and to help the more traditional left broaden its alliances and effectiveness in turn. We were critical of the Left’s lingering economism. We wanted to make inroads into the orthodoxy of approved issues and tactics which seemed, in large part, to be nostalgic and ineffective. We wanted to persuade other movement organizations that developing a cultural critique and a commitment to cultural democracy would lead to a more well-rounded and attractive program; it would enable the Left to respond to the widespread cultural concerns the Right had so successfully exploited.

When I was doing this work, I believed that art could provide an arena for self-examination within the Left, and that it could also provide a forum for dialogue within the larger society. I thought that the tried and true methods of the Left — the speeches, leaflets, demonstrations, and petitions — were tired and through. I thought creative people, whose work was to give fresh form to ideas and perceptions, could help the movement to refresh itself.

These efforts had no effect. Instead, I learned a lot about the Left’s reluctance to enlarge caring. While the stated aim is always expansion, the Left’s penchant for unpopular methods, exclusionist jargon, arcane debate and teapot tempests bespeaks a very different objective.

The culture of the Left is paradoxically one of narrowing: paring away until we have the purest line, the most correct position, the most refined consensus, the most orthodox belief and practice. The publications of the Left offer the clearest demonstrations of this resistance to expansion. Their message is always a variation on “Stay Away” (unless you know the rules, the jargon, the orthodoxies). The Left wants people to care, but to care about the problems that have been officially legitimated, and to offer solutions that have been designated as acceptable. The Left believes in the idea of care more than in the practice of care, and this is the crux of my critique.

We must distinguish caring in the abstract from caring in a concrete and particular way. Caring is the religion of the Left. Some are observant and active; for others, the “religious” identification brings a vague, reassuring sense of belonging and, perhaps, a few nagging doubts. But the largest group comprises those whose commitment is purely formal, and who practice the magic thinking of formalists everywhere: the language, forms, and rituals of caring stand in for care itself.

Much has been written about the professionalization of caring in our society. Critics have pointed out how successfully the idea of “services” has been substituted for the more human and direct concept of care; this must surely be plain to anyone who has been processed by one of our “helping” bureaucracies. This magic thinking is potent. Well-meaning people are tricked into believing that “servicing” the poor through these deeply humiliating and inadequate agencies is giving form to care.

It is obvious that the medical services system is shaped for profit and convenience of the providers, but somehow most liberals and leftists have come to see the expansion of this system as the expansion of care.

The worklife and economic conditions which might move us to tears had the oppressed workers in question been secretaries or agricultural workers are, when undertaken voluntarily in the name of the movement, badges of honor and commitment.

The Left has become saturated with direct-mail campaigns rehearsing tales of oppression and injustice that can be conquered through contributions of money. That these campaigns continue is evidence of their success in raising money: people slip their checks into the mail knowing their dollars will buy more services — which is to say more care. The industrialization of caring, which has swept through the larger society, has by no means skipped the Left.

The irony is that the formal, abstract religion of caring is based on authentic feeling and understanding. Though the creation of subsistence jobs is a powerful incentive to keep nonprofit organizations operating, the desire to do good work is hardly based on greed. People are motivated by the desire to help alleviate pain and build a better world. But habit keeps thinking in line, compromises pile up, decisions are made for expediency then last, seemingly forever. The idea of care replaces caring; the kernel shrivels inside its empty shell.

I’m not sure where to go from here. Sometimes I wish there were a stronger movement to reform the Left. But mostly I am practicing to see things as they really are after living so long in the realm where ideas are more real than acts. I miss my identification with the Left, though I miss it less as time goes by. I once read of a lapsed Catholic asked to speak of his regrets. He said the loss of faith wasn’t so intolerable in itself; but he could barely stand the double loss of the faith and the church. I miss the structure of hope and ideas that is the “church” of the Left more than I miss my illusions — but not enough to rush to find another box to jump into.

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I can't bear to see a child cry from hunger.
And I can't bear to see anyone eat alone. Myself, I rather enjoy eating alone, but I always have a book with me. Even when I eat in a restaurant, I have a book with me.

I care very much that people should have enough to eat. But I do not give to C.A.R.E. C.A.R.E. is a giant computer. I once tried to write to the people at C.A.R.E. - a person, anyone - and all I got was a form letter with a request for more money. The form had nothing to do with my letter. I was, in fact, offering them more money, but the computer was too dumb to know. So I quit C.A.R.E. and I just pay my taxes, which go for mining harbors in Nicaragua. I used to give to the United Crusades, too, until the bums began to advise me how much I should deduct from my paycheck to give to their executives. I believe people who do charitable work should not get paid for it. The venal and gluttonous Ford Motor Executives and others of their glut should get paid and then go out to work part time as volunteers for the United Crusades or other charity. They can keep their salaries and their bonuses, but donate their time and their loose change. Paid executives for agencies like C.A.R.E and CANCER RESEARCH and CARDIAC and now AIDS are unconscionable. Subsistence wages to take care of carfare and postage and stuff like that, but nothing more. Like teachers.

Which brings me to starvation and why I can't stand it. Food, as you know, is very big in Jewish homes. Food to Jews is like cars to Black people. And clothing. A Jew in the ghetto needed only pickled herring or Schmaltz to get high. A Black in the ghetto had nowhere really to sleep, so he needed a car. But food should always come first. Deprive a child of food and his brain goes dry. He can't discover the magic bullet or the Salk vaccine, or even drive a Cadillac.

But why do I really care? Why do I care if children cry from hunger. It's my father, you see. He was a wandering Yeshiva bacher in Grodno, when Grodno was Polish like the Pope. He used to "eat days." And it was ugly. Once he ate at the house of Tante who gave him a bowl of soup with a piece of meat stuck to it. He asked his aunt if she truly intended the meat for him. She said she did. My father gulped it down. He was often hungry in this gulping fashion! Once he was even accused by his grandfather of being a renegade thief because he had gulped down a crust of bread while his grandfather was davening, a story no doubt exaggerated in the telling, but my father wasn't crazy for nothing. He used to sing to himself a sad little song about "Essen Tag und Schlingen Treren", and indeed shlinging treren was the story of his life. I never observed him to taste anything, just swallow it. He was not a freiser — a freiser likes to eat, but a schlager has to eat in a hurry, lest a brother or a grandfather grab his food away. I never saw my father enjoy anything until my brothers became successful and left their bankbooks open for him to inspect. That he enjoyed tasting. Later he came to like soft boiled eggs out of the shells.

But every time I see a child cry for food, the boy that was my father cries inside me and eats my heart out for all the lonely and hungry kids everywhere. Mostly they have to be Jewish. My tears are only crocodiles; I am largely sentimental. Sentimentality is not generosity. Once I met a generous man. He was an Irishman living in Glasgow.

Food to Jews is like cars to Black people.

In Dublin he would not be generous. He would be surrounded by his own kin, all of them drunk and carrying on like Barry Fitzgerald. Outside of Glasgow, he could go fishing and hunting instead of drinking and swearing. This dear man helped my husband and me find lodging in Glasgow. We thought he was Jewish because he was building shelves in a Jewish Center. The Jews in Glasgow would have nothing to do with us, and they certainly didn't build shelves on the Sabbath, when we entered their meeting place to ask for assistance. They thought we were freaky; but not this man. He would help anyone. He put the case to us this way. "The good Lord gave me all that I need, and I'll not deny what I have to another." He meant starving children, whatever they looked like. He wouldn't ask their politics or their parents' politics or their lack of politics or whether they would one day come up from starvation and murder his grandchildren. Not him. Not like me. Politics mixes me up. Sometimes I want to renew my A.C.L.U. membership, but not after Skokie. .too much like "Jews for Reverend Jesse." I have even thought of joining the Socialist Labor Party, but not after Riley, Ace of Spies. I need something to hate, not love.

Once when I was a young teacher, I went to sit with a boy who was eating alone in the school cafeteria. I tried to make conversation with him. He told me to get lost. He had reminded me of my father. He wasn't my father. Besides, he hated teachers.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE
LEWIS: continued

I'll tell you... If we were citizens of one world, then everybody would have a place. I think we will get there one day, a thousand light years from now. In the meantime I have little charity. It's a world that has become, for me, a place that yanks or tears off the hands that feed. It is a world where, often, the hands that feed get paid nicely, thank you, or else they wouldn't do it. It is a world where people cry passionately for justice, but because they are powerless to take action or the real perpetrators of the injustice are indifferent to their cries, they take hostages or blow-up busses. It is a world where Jews act like Christians. I'm pissed at Israel. I am also pissed at the C.I.A. Is there an organization to undermine the C.I.A.? I've already sent my check to Amnesty International. But I can't stand the B'nai Brith.

Everytime I see a child cry for food, the boy that was my father cries inside me and eats my heart out for all the lonely and hungry kids everywhere.

O yes! Before I forget. Nobody in Berkeley is hungry. The other day I offered to give my Yogurt to a kid who asked me for loose change. He looked as if he could use some nourishment. I hadn't touched the Yogurt. His reply to my offer of food was the following: "I asked you for change, not junk food."

See?

Florence Lewis, who teaches at Lowell High School in San Francisco, is co-author (with Bernie Gadd) of Who Wants To Be Lillian Plotnick's Mother. Her passion for George Orwell antedated the fashion of our current year. She is the only American to win the prestigious Prix De Chabad for her recipe for making conch kosher with great quantities of salt.

LEFFLER: continued

I met a woman from Iowa this past winter. A most delightful and amazing person! We now correspond. She is always doing things for people, caring. She sent me a clipping from her local newspaper describing some of her activities. In part the headline read, "Woman's special gift of work, time for the community." I quote a sentence from the article, "My father... thought you should return what you get from life." And then her personal note to me at the end, "The reward of a job well done is the joy of the job well done." I believe we care for others for a variety of reasons, no one of which is adequate alone. We care because of the satisfaction we receive for caring. We care because we accept it as our responsibility in life.

Even though I may care, my personal limitations do not permit me to act upon every issue I encounter and still retain my sanity.

We care because we expect others to reciprocate. We care because we want to avoid the consequences of not caring, if at all possible. We care because we accept the premise that we are our brothers' keepers — as vague or as specific as that statement may appear.

My understanding of Judaism is to worship God by sanctifying life — to bring the presence of God’s holiness into our existence. To accomplish this we have to do. In a Jewish sense this requires fulfilling mitzvot (religious obligations) of both a ritual and ethical nature. Such mitzvot get us out of ourselves and teach us to care — to share in the simcha of a wedding as well as comfort a mourner, to be part of a minyan and to give tzedakah, to visit the sick and feed the stranger, to free the captive and to defend the poor. These and countless other mitzvot reflect our caring, our concern for our "brother" — how we "keep" him as we would want him to "keep" us.

We write the script of our lives by how we care — on a personal as well as a global level. However, we effect our caring on a personal level by doing, from such intimate examples as supporting a loved one in a moment of anguish, or sharing the exhilaration of success, to writing letters to Moscow in support of dissidents, or collecting funds for starving children in a distant corner of the world. Caring is giving of oneself. It can occur in many ways. It is the raw material out of which we construct lives and from which eulogies are written.

Rabbi William Leffler is the Rabbi of Temple Adath Israel in Lexington, Kentucky. He serves as Contract Jewish Chaplain for the Federal Prison in Lexington, Trustee of the Lexington Public Library, President of the Friends of Kentucky Libraries, and member of the Religious Advisors Staff at the University of Kentucky. At present he is working to develop an increased awareness in the Jewish community of the needs of Jewish prisoners.

GOLDBARD: continued

It seems increasingly clear that at the center of my disillusionment is the problem of caring. I have had to admit that no political group has a monopoly on genuine caring; that the word is not the deed; and that the test of authentic caring must be in practice, from the smallest, most mundane issues of work to the most generous and expansive understanding of social responsibility. My feeling now is that the search for a practice of care must be conducted without orthodoxyes of the Left, the Right, or the Word.

Arlene Goldbard, who lives in San Francisco, is a writer, speaker, and organizer for cultural democracy. She was co-director of the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee (NAPNOC) and co-editor of its journal, Cultural Democracy.
ast winter I was walking down Fifth Avenue in New York. In front of B. Dalton's I saw a tall skinny teen-
ager coming towards me. His long coat drooped to the left. His shirt hung half out of his pants. He darted
up to people sideways, not straight on or with the preliminary eye contact of a practiced street hustler. In a
high-pitched voice just short of tears he whimpered, “Help me.” Please, will somebody help me.” Few would. Not
many more even stopped for him.

It was Sunday in one of the most affluent districts in New York. Yet none of the wealthy strollers had time for the
kid. None had a few minutes to find out that he had lost his money and train ticket on the way home from a special
school for the mentally retarded. The only people who even stopped to listen to him were young or looked almost as
bedraggled as he did. Eventually two students and a man, who many of the affluent Fifth Avenue regulars would
dismiss as a bum, guided him to help at the train station.

he three cared enough to stop and help because
they felt a kinship to the kid. Caring is an ex-
pression of community. We care about those
who are part of our community, real or imaginary. It is
an acknowledgment of something, however epe-
meral, that binds us. We all know the anthropological
cliche that most cultures have the same word for a
human being and for a member of their culture. But
we reserve the cliche for the quaint behavior of “the
natives,” not for ourselves. Yet how different was the
Fifth Avenue crowd from an isolated tribe in the
Brazilian jungle? Most people passed by the penniless,
scruffy, confused kid because he was so different from
them that they hardly recognized him as human. He
was just another nuisance, scarcely distinguishable
from the construction debris that blocked their path.
Only those who were similar — young, dishevelled, or
confused themselves — recognized him.

The request to write for this issue of SHMATE
asked about the relationship between Leftists and
caring, and “What of the too-common inconsistency
found among leftists who are deeply caring of the well-
being of and struggle against oppression by others, but
who seem to fail badly when it comes to caring treat-
ment of family and friends.” Why pick on the left? Why
not people who say Kaddish everyday for a dead person
for whom they had little respect when alive? They rad-
cially change their daily lives to fulfill some abstract
obligation, although previously they scarcely had time
for periodic visits to comfort a sick person. They often
seem to care for the dead more than for the living,
indeed to respond only to the dead. Or why not people
who have time for U.J.A. or Hadassah but not their
own families?

Neither our politics nor our religious beliefs deter-
mine our personal behavior. Leftists are not more
caring and do not have any special obligations to be so.
Anybody who has worked in politics soon realizes that
at least some allies will always be insensitive, thought-
less, stupid, and selfish. At the same time, some
opponents will always be kind, thoughtful, selfless
people with apparently endless time to help others. But

so what? Some nice people will always be wrong and
some jerks will always be correct.

Our government misappropriated the word “totali-
tarian.” Now is the time to take it back. Demanding
complete consistency in our lives is not just boring. It is
totalitarian.

Finally, why must all caring be personal? Caring
about an individual is a mitzvah. It is the only
kind of caring most of us do and it makes the
world a better place. But caring about groups or
causes also makes the world a better place. Few of us
are extraordinary enough to care about everybody. We
are not lesser if we choose the unconventional path of
caring about strangers rather than family and friends.
People who devote themselves to a cause rather than
kith and kin have the courage to sever the bonds and re-
strictions of their community. They dare to seek and
even invent new communities. They are no less selfless
in their devotion to their cause and their new com-

munity than the person who cares for a sick relative or
raises an orphaned child. Often if they are successful
they help thousands of those doing daily, personal
caring. The anti-war crusader who ignores his family
while struggling to end a war is as selfless and as
selfish as the nurse who voluntarily cares for the
wounded without questioning war policy. The nurse
helps the immediate personal pain. The anti-war

crusader tries to eliminate the cause of the pain.

Of course, those few who care about causes or groups
terrify the rest of us. While we try to make the world
better in a corner of our little community, they change
the world. They have the power to envision new com-
nunities and the will to alter the universe. But leaving
their family, friends, and community can distort their
vision of the future. They can be Hitler as easily as
Ghandi, Mussolini as easily as Danilo Dolci. The task
for those of us who choose to care for individuals and to
maintain communities is to provide the bearings for
the visionary pathfinders.

Burton Levine is a writer living in Hamden,
Connecticut.
The Jewish High Holidays have come and gone. For weeks I have been struggling to answer the question: Why do I care? Through the solemnity of Rosh Hashana, the introspection of Yom Kippur, and now into the season of rejoicing at Sukkot, I have engaged in dialogue with friends and associates. Most of the discussions end in a morass of circular argument and reductionist dead-end. Briefly, I care because I cannot not care.

The framework that sustains this attitude was constructed many years ago. It is based on an early childhood discovery that life was filled with injustice, and that certain people seemed to get the short end of the stick most of the time. “It’s not fair,” I would wail to my mother. Her reply was inevitably, “This is not a question to which fairness applies.” That made no sense at all to me, since it was very clear that certain things were right and just and correct, and that other things were not. This refusal of the adults around me to administer justice in an even-handed fashion led me to believe that they either did not care about injustice or that they could not change the situation. Neither possibility made any sense to me from a child’s point of view, since everyone knew that grown-ups were omnipotent. As I grew older, and as my perceptions of injustice broadened from the personal to an understanding of local, national and global concerns, my sense of confusion grew as well. Didn’t anyone care? How could the adults sit back and allow the suffering that I saw everywhere? Perhaps it was in reaction to the perceived callousness of others that I began to care passionately about people and causes far removed from my own immediate circle.

With the idealism of youth I believed that I could change the world. With a little help from my friends we would soon correct all the suffering and injustice. I developed contempt and disdain for the people of my parents’ generation who seemed to have given up on social change. Their attitude of hopelessness, combined with the conviction that no one can fight city hall, called forth rage and righteous indignation, and an intolerance that was less than kind. As time passed, I became more aware of the struggle for survival that erodes idealism in so many, and I became more gentle with people who were too tired and too worried about paying the bills to care about the problems of people far away. During this maturation process, something peculiar happen. The “idealism of youth” which was supposed to disappear, or at least transform itself into concern for home, spouse, and family, kept reappearing in the most embarrassing fashion. I would be visiting old friends from college, people who had walked picket lines or done guerilla theater, had gone to jail to protest the war, or who had been radical feminists. I would gaze around at their new homes, listen to their children’s exploits, and admire their new cars. Then they would say, “And what have you been doing?” As I described my work, the expressions would change from interest to polite incredulity. “You mean you’re still active with that political stuff? But what do you do for a living?” That caring for the world might be my living and what I do to support that merely secondary had never occurred to these people.

My continuing to care has evoked ridicule as well. It is not fashionable to continue to be a sixties radical into the eighties. As one friend says, it’s not very practical, and it just gets one into trouble with the I.R.S. The current nostalgia craze has not incorporated either political radicalism or the fervor for social change that has permanently infected me. On the contrary, today’s campuses seem to be full of students who care passionately only for themselves and their own well-being. Even those students who do become activists tend to express their regret that they were born fifteen years too late, as if political activism were really an out-dated concept.

So what happened to me, that I go on beating my head against the wall of indifference? There are two reasons. First, my religious and spiritual beliefs demand that I act in a loving and responsible fashion toward all of creation. In the first book of the Torah, the Almighty requires Cain to be his brother’s keeper, and in doing so, sets the precedent for the behavior of all human beings. How am I to do otherwise? The second reason is less theological, but no less compelling. As a thinking, reasoning person, it is clear to me that all of the “causes” are interconnected. Peace issues, womens’ rights, gay rights, environmental concerns, combatting anit-Semitism, racism, ageism, sexism: all are a part of a vast web of human struggle for a better world. I cannot be a part of any of it without being a part of the whole. I must logically pick and
choose where to put my time, energy, and limited financial resources, but that necessity does not lessen the feeling of global involvement that I have developed.

I am fortunate to have retained some of the sense of being able to change the world. What I do in my life does have an affect on others. I have seen enough examples of this "ripple affect" to keep on with the struggle and not give up, despite periods of disillusionment and burn-out. I remember a beloved friend and teacher from my college days. It was early 1972 and Nixon had done something dreadful in Vietnam or Cambodia. The colleges went out on strike again, as they had two years before after the Kent State shootings. "How long will we have to struggle for peace?" cried a fellow student. My mentor leaned on her protest sign and said softly but firmly, "Well, I've been at it for about thirty years now." At that moment, I realized that I was taking on a lifetime commitment. Fighting injustice was not something to be done between semesters or as part of an independent study on Third World issues. "Peace is not a season, it is a way of life." Based on this belief, I continue to question myself. What can I do to incorporate my political and spiritual beliefs into my work in the world? How can I, as a Jewish feminist artist, continue to express my caring in concrete ways? These are the ongoing challenges that anyone who cares must face if their caring is to have an effect.

Rabbi Hillel said, "In a place where there is no humanity, you must strive to be human." In a world where so many are fighting to stay alive, and many others are numbed by the seemingly hopeless enormity of the task, it is incumbent upon those of us who can to care. I know someone who attends Friday night services regularly, not for himself, but for the thousands of Jews in Russia who are not allowed to do so. I care, in the same way, for those who cannot. The bell tolls for all of us.

Gerre Goodman is a freelance artist, papercutter, and calligrapher living in Durham, North Carolina. She is involved in local women's politics, the Reconstructionist Havurah, and the East Coast Jewish Feminist Conference.
To what extent and why do I “care” about the tsuris of other people, and which other people. First, which other people: I'm not listing my family and close friends, not because I don’t “care” about them, but because I don’t consider them “other people”. If that constitutes begging the question, too bad. The list, more or less in order of my practical priorities, includes people getting messed over by the military, and women; then, other people getting messed over by government or by some equally powerful (from the victim’s point of view) private agency, such as an employer. I'm not at all prepared to venture an explanation for the particular people on the list, or the order in which they appear—I think that really is a matter of individual temperament.

Secondly, following, are all the reasons I can think of for “caring” about the plight of these various people, not necessarily in order of importance:

1. I have a low threshold of tolerance for arbitrary and capricious bullshit, and those who practice it, especially when it is inflicted on relatively powerless people. My shrink (name and address on request) says this has something to do with various episodes in my childhood when I felt particularly helpless in the face of adult arbitrariness. But even she doesn’t think that’s the whole answer.

2. I find the victims of injustice, and the people working against it, much more likeable people than the richies, generally speaking (there are, of course, notable exceptions on both sides.)

3. “Caring” is, to some extent, a vocation in which the hours, though often long, are flexible, the work-uniform casual and comfortable (except in court), and the possibilities for advancement (there being so little competition) and for the development of advanced skills, considerable.

4. We were strangers in Egypt. This is actually two answers:
   a. Those of us who have known, or been close to people who have known, hard times, are likely to be both more able and more willing to help people having their own troubles—we are likely to have a better sense of what does help, from our own experience, and to want to provide for others what was (or what we wish had been) made available to us.
   b. I take seriously the command to aid and protect the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (in modern economic terms, anyone with no independent link to the means of production), which I see as central to the Jewish (and the Judaeo-Christian) tradition. The G-d who has made the Jewish people what we are today is, we are reliably informed, on the side of the people with no battalions (Stalin, to the contrary, notwithstanding.) Even with G-d on their side, they still have an uphill fight, in which we are commanded to assist.

But I think the fact that one asks these questions at all (i.e., that the answers aren’t self-evident), and that people have such trouble answering, tells us something much more significant, which can be best summed up in the fact that “do-gooder” is not, in our culture, a compliment. Either we don't believe that it is possible to act from wholly unselfish motives (so that anybody who claims to is fooling others or h'self), or we believe that, even if it is possible, it's a bad idea on the practical level, and usually results in more harm than good. Or both.

The admonition to “grow-up” is generally a command to give up either practicing altruistic behavior or expecting it from others.

There are, of course, subcultures in which self-sacrifice is still considered a genuine and useful mode of action—most notably various Christian groups such as the Catholic pacifist movement. And there are even some groups of people within our own subculture who are expected to act from completely or mostly unselfish motives. The most notable of these is mothers (and, to a lesser extent, fathers). Industrialization and the child labor laws have removed all the economic incentives for parenthood, and inflicted fairly severe disincentives. But, until recently, it was still okay for a parent to expect at least some emotional recompense from raising children—love and deference from the child, and vicarious esteem for the child's achievements from the community. Nowadays, of course, we view such expectations as “laying trips” on the kid. The result seems to be that an increasing number of people are choosing not to have children, an increasing number of parents (especially fathers) are abandoning the children they have, and most of those who have children and raise them feel obliged to lie to themselves and everybody else about what they expect to get out of it.

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The fact that altruism is an occupational qualification for motherhood probably has a great deal to do with the low esteem in which mothers and their character traits are now held. They are, after all, expected not only to practice, but to try to inculcate into their children a value system held in utter contempt by the rest of society. The admonition to “grow up” is generally a command to give up either practicing alturistic behavior or expecting it from others. Conscience is generally viewed as a childhood disease, which one can be reliably expected to outgrow after adolescence, and which is especially virulent and dangerous on the rare occasions when it is first contracted in adulthood (viz., Daniel Ellsberg.)

There are still, I suppose, people who put a great deal of energy into convincing themselves or others that their selfishly-motivated actions are altruistic (probably most of them are parents); but most of us—including, I suspect, most of those who contribute to this issue of SHMATE—are busily trying to fool ourselves and the rest of the world into believing that we are the creeps we think we should be.

...a schmuck who occasionally acts like a mensch will get a lot better publicity than a mensch who occasionally acts like a schmuck.

I'm not going to attempt to explain how goodness got such a bad name (one of my particular do-gooder compulsions is meticulous observances of deadlines and word-counts), other than to say that it may have something to do with a weird twist on Calvinist Christianity (details available on request—write to me c/o SHMATE). But I think it is time we looked at this situation as the psychological oppression it is. Why should alcoholics and ax-murderers be encouraged to accept themselves as they are and to let it all hang out, while social workers, nurses, legal aid lawyers, and leftists feel obliged to be closeted even from themselves? If we cannot, even among ourselves, say with Mammy Yokum “Good is better than evil because it’s nicer”, we are robbing ourselves of the rewards of both anti-social and pro-social behavior. Whether the urge to “care” is hereditary or environmental, an inherent trait of character or a lifestyle choice, those of us who live with it have the same rights anybody else has, to respect and to self-esteem.

Marian Neudel went to school a lot, including a convent boarding school in Miami full of Latin American dictators’ daughters and almost five years of divinity school doing Islamic studies. After subsequent careers teaching college English and “smashing the militarist machine” under the auspices of several organizations, she became a lawyer.
Aabout the age of four or five I discovered that the semi-blue collar neighborhood I lived in was a lot tougher than I; at age twelve I also realized that I was destined to be an outsider, more or less, from the reigning middle-class culture. Other outsiders drew my interest and sympathy: friendly hoodlums-to-be, farm kids and, increasingly, blacks, all of whom shared a sense of alienation. But commitment to change requires activation, and the Civil Rights movement, which touched down briefly in Champaign, Illinois, in 1960, permitted me a first fragmentary view of an alternative identity.

One wonders about the Judeo-Christian tradition: if I drew upon it, then why were so many others around me so evidently unaffected beyond the usual pieties? Likewise family influence seems hardly relevant, even if a dose of vague liberalism and a general permissiveness helps. I'd like to think that my great-great-grandfather, the abolitionist, speaks through me, or that my mother's nineteenth-centuryish female opposition to war had some strengthening effect. I can't prove it. Socialist idealism created some abstract categories of unity with others ("the workers") who I hardly knew in real life; like many teenagers in the later 'sixties, I found in radicalism a rationale for rebellion and an all-sufficient solution to throw in the faces of ROTC instructors, history professors, and relatives. Looking back decades and many experiences later, I think that Civil Rights and socialist ideology provided a mediation for a deeper, intuitional link with the condition of all that had been conquered, manipulated, or left to die by the triumph of western civilization: ordinary workers, oppressed nationalities, the flora and fauna of the planet.

I find this view expressed well in the Protestant mystic, Jakob Bohme, who (according to Gershom Sholem) learned his philosophical Aleph-Beys-Gimel from the Kabbalists. I see it in the Hassidic mysticism passed over into revolutionary Yiddishkayt of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before being crushed by feckless Marxist secularism and authoritarian or chauvinist (as opposed to anarcho-) Zionism. I see it most recently in the lines of Nicaragua's Ernesto Cardenal who says,

In September by San Ubando more coyotes were seen
Soon after the triumph, more lizards
in the rivers by San Ubaldo
on the highways more rabbits, mountain cats...

The bird population has tripled, they tell us, especially that of snipes.
Noisy snipes come down to swim where they see the water sparkling.
The Somocistas also destroyed lakes, river, and mountains.

The Armadillos are very happy with this government.
We are going to reclaim the forests, rivers, lagoons.
We shall decontaminate the lake of Managua.
Not only humans desired liberation.
The whole ecology wanted it. The revolution is also of lakes, trees, animals.
Translation: Alejandro Murgia

This "socialism" is the most archaic and most modern view of cooperation among the species. Religions have flourished by drawing upon it, articulating and exploiting the thirst for a return to harmony and by adding their own corrupt and vicious rules of group superiority. We are now trying to reach back, over all that pollution to the essence. To reach that shore means to understand why we care about others: because we care about ourselves not only in terms of immediate survival but also in the cosmic sense.

Why do radicals (including myself) sometimes or often act in an anti-revolutionary way toward those around them and toward the world at large? The answer is not as different as we might think from the reason mercenaries, trained in the old Somoza Army by Israelis, armed now by Americans, and supported by Evangelical Christians (including my born-again, midwestern blue-collar sister) seek to destroy the progress in Nicaragua and open the land to poison again. In the short run, it is a matter of privilege: ego-advantage over some real or symbolic adversary, blood-soaked imperial dollars, blind-eyed submission to a satisfying authority. The rich—and, if we are unlucky, the rich nations also—will pull the world down rather than see these advantages lost. In the long run, it is a matter of worldview. Our own incompleteness allows us to see some refraction of
baby dies in a fire and it makes the local headlines; in a distant country 300,000 people die in an earthquake and it’s filler on page 16. This is a commonplace observation and it’s striking precisely because it is commonplace. It has attained a grip on people’s imaginations that makes them refer to it under different circumstances: when the irresponsibility of newspaper journalism comes up, or the nature of tragedy, or the subject of caring.

It is also striking that the comparison is always cited as shocking, as if the speaker assumes that it is wrong that the baby should take up more attention than the 300,000. A numerical equation is implicitly made: 300,000 deaths are 300,000 (or some amount) times worse than one death. Yet if pressed, most people would have difficulty figuring out the relative amount they actually care about the two kinds of death. Should the baby be moved back to page 16 and the 300,000 brought forward? Would it make a difference if the 300,000 were women, or soldiers, or also babies? Suppose there’s a photo of one event but not the other—does this change the way you feel about it?

The point is not how newsworthy the stories are relative to each other. Newsworthiness entails factors that are not under discussion here, like timeliness and nationalism. Newspapers are not laid out solely on the basis of how much readers are judged to care about any given item. Yet people do care; moreover, they spend time trying to figure out how to go about caring. Attempts to quantify the problem (how many deaths; how much evil) show how elusive it is. We are trying to measure the intangible and make decisions based on that evaluation, and we do not want the choice to be an irrational one.

This illustration, then, is really a kind of shorthand for a number of underlying problems created by the nature of caring. For one thing, it demonstrates that caring operates differently at a distance. It would be too simplistic to argue that it falls off linearly with distance, that the less connected you are physically, emotionally, or consequentially to an event, the less you actually care about it. But it does suggest that connectedness is an important basis of caring and that caring is an activity that must have an object. The verb ‘to care’ is really the verb ‘to care about’.

I say that distance reduces caring; perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it changes caring. It is not the same thing to say that you care less about 300,000 distant deaths as it is to say that you care differently about them. The former applies that caring is a single activity, changeable only in degree. People tend to say, “I know I ought to care more about this,” but they seldom mean just that. The latter implies that caring is not a homogeneous activity and may differ in the way it applies because of the differing factors involved in caring. When you look at the components of caring, it becomes evident that caring is far from being homogeneous.

The most readily identifiable component of caring is emotional involvement. “I know I ought to care more about this” is an expression of helplessness at being unable to regulate that emotional component. It is also a statement of guilt over the way the caring, such as it is, is acted on.

In the personal realm, caring is a matter of caring what happens to yourself and others. You can care what becomes of someone because you love them, hate them, or fear them, or because you are dependent on them, or they on you. Caring, in other words, is a kind of code word for different kinds of attachment. The child cares for its parents out of need and, it has been argued, love is little more than this. The need is itself a complicated relationship: the child both differentiates itself from the parents and joins itself to them by the way it cares. Caring blurs the distinction between the self and the other.

As the child grows up, this relationship shifts and the child begins to take on attributes of the parent, one of which is a sense of responsibility (toward the parents). This responsibility is shaped by emotional needs. In my family, it was shaped by my mother’s alcoholism which, though completely unacknowledged, dominated the ways we behaved toward one another. I recall the feeling that my love for her was inadequate, that it could not stop her hurting herself, could not make her want to live, could not make her happy, could not stop her hurting all of us. But though I suffered, I did not respond by not caring for her; I merely assumed that I was at fault. The need that is a basis of caring makes it possible to view all human relationships as an implicit bargain—you give love to get something back. It is only a small step from being unable to help someone (failing in the bargain) to feeling guilty for it.

The relationship between need and responsibility underlines the degree to which behavior is predicated on self-interest. The golden rule, Mill’s utilitarian formulae, the socio-biologist’s deterministic altruism all point to the idea that human activity is based on the belief that one way to stave off pain is not to inflict it on
others, or to ease its affects. The simplest examples of this take place in the physical realm—making sure there is enough to eat, a place to sleep, clothing for yourself and those you are most attached to.

A major difficulty with the analysis based on self-interest is that it breaks down outside the personal level. Even on the personal level, it does not account well for the pleasure and passions of caring, or for the fact that not all actions can be termed self-interested, except by stretching the concept unrecognizably thin. Many times, several possible choices could well pass as in one’s own interest.

Caring changes as it pertains to objects further removed from survival. I care about my work as a painter, but not in the same sense I care about myself and my family. Emotionally, there is some carryover; my paintings feel also like an extension of myself. Some have made me laugh and some have made me cry. But caring about my work also means being interested in doing it well, paying attention to it, doing it thoroughly (not ‘carelessly’), and making certain sacrifices to get it done. Some of my actions—working another job to buy myself time and privacy, for example—are analogous to the way other people care about their families. But what I have found to be the central experience of my work is without parallel in other parts of my life. There is a sense in which my work is not mine; it is something I am called to do. I feel like the conduit for something over which I have only partial control, and that whatever this is attaches me to an unseen realm. At its clearest, it is an experience of humility and awe that frightens me.

Others have cared in similar ways about a cause, an idea, a science, a car, a hobby. One thing that is striking about such activities is that their objects are, as often as not, banal. Even when someone admits there are more important things they could care about, they will still focus on having the top beer can collection in the country. An exaggerated case of this is the people who set themselves to break curious, self-defined records solely for the object of getting into the Guinness Book of World Records—longest distance traveled on a pogo stick, say, or greatest number of hotdogs eaten underwater. This urge, which I admit I share, for a kind of immortality, is characteristic of the way we engage ourselves in the world. A hidden agenda of caring is beating death.

Clearly, there is a discrepancy, beyond a certain point, between what people care about enough to participate in and what they think is important. Again, this shows how closely ethical systems (what I ought to care about) and emotional systems (what I do care about) are linked in people’s minds, and that divergence between the two is troubling. It is the commonest thing in the world to pay lip service to an ideal yet to bend one’s energy to something admittedly more trivial. The discrepancy is covered over with rationalization. I have a dozen good reasons why it is all right for me to devote myself to my work: I do it well; it makes me happy; I learn from it; art is important. All of these are indirect ways of asserting that my work is not really trivial, even if it appears so to others. Yet, if everyone were to agree that, in fact, nothing is more important, I would be slightly surprised. Equally, were I to turn my life now to other things, I would be plagued by exactly the same doubts.

The way I devote myself to my work suggests that a component of caring in the public as in the private realm is assertion of the ego or will. It is even possible that this is the primary object to which all others are subordinate. This would mean that all actions, no matter what moral weight we give them, are inherently equal. Those who appear to care more or not so selfishly in fact only have a more formidable system of self-justification than the beer can collectors. More formidable, and also less honest.

Even when someone admits there are more important things to care about, they will still focus on having the top beer can collection in the country.

Beer can collectors lead retired lives compared to revolutionaries. The revolutionary, in achieving his objective, will often make it impossible for the beer can collector to achieve his. He will also have other effects, twenty or one hundred years on, that may be judged to have caused more harm than good. If we are to make our choice it may be as simple as making someone unhappy by the way you love them, or as complicated as writing a law. Deciding what factors to take into account alters the nature of caring by altering the actions taken, or not taken. The commonest response to the difficulty of choosing is not to choose at all (the choice based in inertia).

A common perception is that the more you care about something, the more extreme your sacrifices will (and should) be for that end. Martyrdom is universally honored and as universally feared. However, caring to a great degree must also entail not caring about other things—not just being indifferent to them, but willing that some things give way to others.

One extreme of caring that embraces not caring is fanaticism. Hatred is the form of extreme caring that takes no caring itself as the object of care. It usually pretends to spring from moral outrage and thus to be objective (because not self-directed). In practice, it is another way the ego justifies itself.

It is curious that the usual sense people have is that they don’t care enough about things. A glance at history shows, arguably, the opposite—that people could stand to care less, or differently, than they do. It’s difficult to imagine just what this would entail, though utopians of all stripes have tried hard enough. Much
misery has been caused by war, a product of aspirations (encouraged by most societies) for property, status, money, and power. Can these kinds of caring be regulated sufficiently or turned to benign ends? Even if it came about that no human ever killed another, would that be such an improvement? A world without fights, aggression, hostility, or accidents is scarcely imaginable.

The problems of extreme caring are exemplified by sacrifice and martyrdom. Voluntary martyrdom suggest the concentration caring can involve. Individual energy is limited and must be parceled out among the many things you can care to do. The choices of caring are hemmed in by this fact. Physically, we can’t care about everything, and we can seldom act fully even on those in which we are interested. Yet some part of ourselves wants to do it all, to reform the world. We are all little gods.

The subversion of one kind of energy to another activity is a characteristic sacrifice. It is part of the charade of caring. Sexual energy, for example, is easily diverted into other activities. If you are unaware of what is happening, you will interpret what is still in some sense a sexual activity as something entirely different, another mode of caring. I cannot always tell when the energy that goes into painting is sexual and when not, so I sometimes confuse it with caring for the painting itself.

Involuntary sacrifice demonstrates how convoluted caring can be. It often happens that one person will die, or nearly so, to save another. In the latter case, they will usually be surprised by their own actions. They are surprised to discover that they cared so much about someone else; surprised, in other words, to discover how their system of caring really works. In effect this means that under normal circumstances, people are uncertain of their caring and about the relation between caring and actions.

Once I had such an experience. Coming unscathed through an accident, I went back to help someone who seemed badly injured, though I was absolutely convinced I would die doing so. In the event, I don’t have much to congratulate myself on, for I didn’t do anything very useful and managed to hurt myself slightly in the process. But afterwards I spent a long time trying to unravel why I acted contrary to how I had always assumed I would act under such circumstances. I had assumed I would simply run away under conditions of extreme peril; in fact, I still think this could well happen if I were ever in such a position again. What struck me most in retrospect was that I did not stop thinking of myself at that moment. I was simultaneously putting myself in the other person’s place and seeing how other people would think of me if I did nothing; this all in an instant. Even under extreme conditions, caring operated as an attachment between myself and others, and as a kind of egotism.

The opposite extreme of caring is indifference. Habit acts to condition caring and conceal indifference. As Proust showed, habit is a gradual replacement of perception and response with preconception. For perception to be accurate, it must renew itself every instant; if it does not do so, then something must stand in its place. As much as habit is a place marker, it connects you to your past, but it is not a good gauge of the immediate. Certain tests that come along—often, catastrophes—show up starkly how caring is gradually replaced by its shadow.

As a child, I was accustomed to consider that I loved my parents in fairly simple, straightforward ways. In part, the style of my caring was something imitated from them. The terms of living with my mother were carefully ordered to keep up illusions of closeness and warmth among us. The alcoholic family system has a characteristic pattern of need, dependence, denial, guilt, rage, and responsibility that is submerged in an aura of normal existence. It is self-sustaining, largely because a kind of paranoia emerges that closes it off and protects it from outside influences that might disturb it.

Eventually, my family’s habit of existence couldn’t stand its own weight. As far as I was concerned, it crashed the day my mother went into the hospital for the first time, seriously ill. I realized with complete certainty that I could not go on: the gulf between my true relation to her and how I had been pretending to feel had become too great.

The consequences of this were twofold. On the one hand I had to confront what the nature of my care for her really was; on the other, I had to learn to care for her anew. I saw that I was not completely responsible for her, as I had tended to assume when younger, and I also saw that caring for her was not precisely the same thing as helping her. The aloneness of each individual sets up certain barriers that others can’t cross. It is a freedom from the care of others.

My anger toward my mother was partly a transmutation of the sorrow I felt at her condition (empathy) and at my own impotence to help her (self-pity). Even my need to help her looked different when I saw that I had misjudged what would be most helpful. I had, in evading the issue, actually cared less than I had given myself credit for.

To say this much gives me pause. If I misjudged how to help her, if it would have been better to get her into a hospital earlier, what then of the fact that it eventually took a much nearer brush with death for her to turn her life around? If it was inevitable that she must at some point nearly die, did it matter that we and she concealed her sickness so long? Hindsight is a yardstick that gives different measures at different distances; at one point I look back and think I cared as well as I could considering how young and vulnerable I was; at another I think that I cared in the wrong ways and should have known better. It is hard not to be too
easy or too harsh on oneself. This is partly because in retrospect we forget how little we really control events. Hindsight does underline something habit conceals: that care dies. In passing through the end of caring (and this applies to a cause or work as much as to a person), we pass through a period where it feels as though we have betrayed the object. This can last a long time, and it is to protect ourselves from this that the habit of caring takes over and prolongs the process. It is based in fear of our own destruction and a concomitant resistance to the idea that decay is inevitable. As each generation grows up and changes its objects of caring, the common charge is of selling out. It is a charge that never loses its bite.

A hidden agenda of caring is beating death.

Our response to the accusation cannot be just the fear of being left out and its obverse, the pleasure (and safety) of sharing with others. No one actually wants everyone to be exactly like themselves in what they care for. The world would be a much duller place if everyone cared as little about dress as I happen to. The world is a different place because of the way the Holocaust has become a symbol of caring; yet it is also important that there be someone to care about the twenty million who died under Stalin, and all the other things there are.

Accusations of selling out are a way to resist the struggle to accommodate a new king of caring. Habit is welcome because it gives the illusion of certainty. Lapses occur in caring and they are intimations of loss. One marker of such lapses is the phrase “I don’t care.” It never means you don’t care; usually it means something more like, “I don’t want to care” or “I’m tired of caring, leave me alone.”

In learning to care again for my mother, I don’t know how much was really new, and how much a revival of something that never quite died. I had already turned much of my care to other objects—primarily my painting—but it seemed possible to find a way to care for her that would fit into my whole life. My objective was to find a kind of balance between the competing strains of different demands. Everything demands attention; everything is a potential object of care. I dreamt once of San Francisco as it would be like in a universe where every photograph that was taken literally took away part of the substance of what was photographed. Some of the famous landmarks had completely disappeared and many other things were becoming transparent, but there was still a vast number of odd objects—pebbles, weeds, water purification plants—that were quite solid. Yet every thing, except the very newest objects, was a little less itself.

The sadness and sense of loss was very acute in this dream. Speeded-up films of desert flowers blooming are similarly sad in the way they flaunt the brevity of existence. Films and photographs are both troubling because they show us ourselves separated from ourselves and also separated from others, just another object in their eye. It is not surprising that certain societies have resisted allowing their picture to be taken on the grounds that to do so is to steal a piece of the soul.

The way I devote myself to my work suggests that a component of caring... is assertion of the ego or will

It is one thing to consider the nature of caring and its objects. Together these make the ‘Why’ of ‘Why (do we) care?’ We care for reasons that begin in the needs of the self and extend from there. But subsumed in the empirical question (Why do we care?) is an ethical imperative that is often taken to be the same question: Ought we to care and what ought we care about? This is both a practical inquiry, a matter of making or missing the decisions of a lifetime, and an idealistic one, a matter of seeking to become something in particular by making not just any decision, but one instead of another. Even if we accept that caring differently is appropriate to different objects, we are generally concerned by the idea of a certain rightness in our caring.

Arguments with oneself on grounds of right or good can have several outcomes. There is the possibility that the difficulty of carrying the argument through will lead you to short-circuit the process and find a way to a decision that the argument does not support. This is the heart of rationalization. There is the possibility that this same difficulty will lead to despair (a refusal to choose at all) or madness (a randomized choosing). It may lead to a reevaluation of ethics as an appropriate CONTINUED NEXT PAGE
ground for decisions based in caring. This is evident in the position many people come to, that prescribing for other people is presumptuous. Prescribing is a frequent outcome of arguments that take the form ‘if I care about this, then I must do this’ (see to it that others do this). Its usual style is self-righteousness.

...we can't care about everything...yet some part of ourselves wants to do it all, to reform the world. We are all little god's.

Everyone suffers from each of these, sometimes so much so that it may be difficult to see how much rational, controlled choice is involved in the decisions of caring. There is an element of the irrational, the random, the intuitive, and the unconscious in caring and its manifestations that is underestimated -- and feared. Societies exist to regulate the sources of fear. But the essence of life cannot be regulated; it is not even discoverable. Mysteries abound; we are seekers without knowing why. The question ‘Why care?’ is itself presumptuous, as presumptive as ‘Why me?’, ‘Why blue?’, ‘Why failure?’ If the question is ridiculous, the answer is hopeless: As Augustine suggested, the struggle of wanting to believe in God can be more productive than the achievement of belief. Similarly, the struggle of wanting to understand the inescapable act of caring is, possibly, more important than any achieved understanding.

This is not to suggest that caring is futile. I want others to care about some of the things I care about, whether humanity or magic, beauty or beer cans, so they can share in my joy and awe of these things. I don’t know why I want this except in a general way; explanations based on need and utility and the other possibilities I have explored seem inadequate. I paint, in part, so others will notice certain things; it is a way I know of saying: This is how it seems to me. Does it make any sense to you? At best, it is a clumsy kind of pointing.

The astonishing thing about the question ‘Why care?’ is not that it is so elusive; it is that we should care at all. We identify it with our humanity, allowing it in a very limited, deterministic form to only a few other animals, like dogs. We anthropomorphize even our activities; how often is it said, “That sonata (car, revolution) is his child?” It keeps us alive against those things that drive us towards death, and maybe that is all it is for. It can make both life and death tenable. It feels like activity, but there is much to suggest that it is more like an organizing principle. Perhaps it is that ‘Why?’ is the question and ‘care’ is the answer.

A. D. LaFarge is a painter.
PORTRAIT OF CARING

It would be foolish, if not presumptuous, to try to articulate an analysis or description of the essence of "caring" from the articles in SHMATE. However, a collection of brief quotes from those articles can, I believe, help to give one a handle, an overview of what has gone on in these pages.

[The] refusal of the adults around me to administer justice in an even-handed fashion led me to believe that they either did not care about injustice or that they could not change the situation.

Perhaps it was in reaction to the perceived callousness of others that I began to care passionately about people and causes far removed.

I accept the premise that I am my brother's keeper, because of the interdependence of people that I see in human life.

Even though I may care, my personal limitations do not permit me to act upon every issue I encounter and still retain my sanity.

I believe we care for others for a variety of reasons... because of the satisfaction we receive for caring... because we accept it as our responsibility in life... because we expect others to reciprocate... because we want to avoid the consequences of not caring... because we accept the premise that we are our brother's keepers.

Caring is an expression of community... real or imaginary. It is an acknowledgement of something, however ephemeral, that binds us.

Neither our political nor our religious beliefs determine our behavior. Leftists are not more caring and do not have any special obligations to be so.

...some allies will always be insensitive, thoughtless, stupid, and selfish... [while] some opponents will always be kind, thoughtful, selfless people... But so what? Some nice people will always be wrong and some jerks will always be correct.

We are not lesser if we choose the unconventional path of caring about strangers rather than family and friends.

People who devote themselves to a cause rather than kith and kin have the courage to sever the bonds and restrictions of their community... The anti-war crusader who ignores his family... is as selfless and selfish as the nurse who voluntarily cares for the wounded without questioning war policy.

...those few who care about causes... have the power to envision new communities and the will to alter the universe. But leaving their family, friends and community can distort their vision... They can be Hitler as easily as Gandhi... The task for those of us who choose to care for individuals and maintain communities is to provide the bearings for the visionary pathfinders.

"Caring" is to some extent a vocation in which the hours... are flexible, the work uniform causal... and the possibilities for advancement... considerable.

I take seriously the command to aid and protect the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (in modern economic terms, anyone with no independent link to the means of production)... "do-gooder" is not, in our culture, a compliment. The admonition to "grow-up" is generally a command to give up either practicing altruistic behavior or expecting it from others.

...a schmuck who occasionally acts like a mensch will get a lot better publicity than a mensch who occasionally acts like a schmuck.

Caring is the religion of the Left. Some are observant and active... [some have] a vague, reassuring sense of belonging and, perhaps, a few nagging doubts. But the largest group comprises those whose commitment is purely formal.

Much has been written about the professionalization of caring in our society... how successfully the idea of "services" has been substituted for the more human and direct concept of care.

In a eulogy we speak about what the deceased person contributed to life, the good things that he or she did for others, how he or she cared for us... Caring, then, is really the yardstick by which we measure a person's life.

...the old anarchist in the "Free Voice of Labor" [was] correct when he answered the interviewer's question, "Do you still believe in your ideals?" with the instant response, "If I didn't, I'd pick up a gun and blow my brains out."

Everytime I see a child cry for food, the boy that was my father cries inside me and eats my heart out for all the lonely and hungry kids everywhere.

It is a world that has become, for me, a place that yanks or tears off the hands that feed. It is a world where, often, the hands that feed get paid nicely, thank you, or else they wouldn't do it.

The worklife and economic conditions which might move us to tears had the oppressed workers in question been secretaries or agricultural workers are, when undertaken voluntarily in the name of the movement, badges of honor and commitment.
Legally and practically, adoption seems to be an ideal solution to an age-old problem: one set of parents can’t raise their child, so another, who can, takes over that role, and everyone lives happily ever after. Or so the story goes.

Today an organized adoptees’ liberation movement is over ten years old. The people for whom adoption was supposed to be an ideal arrangement have organized to lobby for their rights. Adoptees in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere want the right to know how they fit into the chain of human existence, to know their inherited nationalities and ethnic groups as well as the particular individuals whom they resemble physically, medically and, according to some geneticists, temperamentally. They want this right for themselves and for other adoptees, including today’s children, who will want to obtain this information about themselves in the future.

Most non-adopted people would find it hard to imagine what it is like to go through life not knowing what ethnic group they belong to. Yet adoptees may face even that void when they look in the mirror.

If the adoptee had been left on a doorstep as an infant and no information was known about his or her background, then not much can be done by legal reform to satisfy the adoptee’s curiosity about her or his origins. But more frequently, an adoptee’s background information is kept in the files of private or state adoption agencies or offices. The files are based on information the birthmother gave at the time of her child’s birth. The birthparents’ names are not listed on the adoptee’s birth certificate, but are on the secret “original” birth certificate, which is sealed, usually forever, unless a judge decides it can be opened. Much of the “non-identifying information,” which tells about the adoptee’s birthparents (but not their names) is available to the adoptee on request, in California (laws vary from state to state), though this accessibility is not widely publicized. What other group of people have to prove that they have a right to know their own genealogy?

Yet when people are driven to know the truth, they find ingenious ways around, over, or through the wall of secrecy. They may successfully petition the courts; they may look through birth records and make a lot of phone calls to names in phone books; their adoptive parents may have the birthparents’ names on the adoption papers; they may figure out a way to see their files when an agency worker leaves the room. Or they may find their birthparents (or their relinquished child, in the case of birthparents who search) through an intermediary system such as exists in the state of Washington. With that system a person unrelated to either party acts as a legal intermediary between the birthparent and the adoptee to find out whether they both desire contact. This intermediary system is a step in the right direction, as it provides a legal mechanism for reunion.

In California, all three parties — the “adoptive triangle” of adoptee, birthparent and adoptive parent—must send unsolicited “waivers of confidentiality” to the state in order for records to be unsealed and a reunion to become possible. This recent law is an improvement; yet it means that an adult adoptee, whether eighteen, thirty, or sixty years old, needs his or her living adoptive parent’s permission to gain access to the birthparents. Legally, the adopted adult remains a child.

An adoptee myself, I am still learning about the emotional impact of adoption. Having broken the silence and isolation of adoption by finding my birth family, and by connecting with others in the adoption triangle to talk, share, and learn from each other, I have learned that adoption is not something that ends with the transfer of a child from one family to another. Instead, its impact reverberates for years, probably forever, sending shockwaves through both families, as everyone related to the adoptee learns to adjust to the “blended family” situation.

Adoptees.. .want the right to know how they fit into the chain of human existence, to know their inherited... ethnic as well as the particular individuals whom they resemble physically, medically and, according to some geneticists, temperamentally.

My birth family members previously might as well have been dead. Their resurrection has an odd and miraculous quality to it: these nebulous, ghostly figments of my imagination are actual, living people whom I can see and touch. They write letters. They tell me I have the same medical conditions and allergies as they have or that my grandparents had. They send pictures, and suddenly I look like someone; I have my mother’s eyes, my father’s hair; maybe my brother’s...
sensitivity. Suddenly I have what everyone else has, a biological connection to a particular part of the human species—adoptive sometimes feel as if we were dropped here from a spaceship, or sprung magically from a hospital nurse. I have begun to learn the stories of my birth-grandparents' emigrations from Romania and Russia to Canada. The stories are analogous to the ones I've known for years about my adoptive grandparents' emigrations from Poland to New York City. My own life continues the stories of both families. On some level, in spite of my middle-class upbringing, I have felt deprived. I have been deprived of the basic facts of my identity and of knowing the family that has only been legally dead, but otherwise very much alive. Has this been a punishment for the "sin" of being born to an unmarried woman and man in a judgmental society? Is there, in the 1980s, still a social stigma to being a bastard? Is the bigger stigma of having been an unwed parent? Or does the law mainly protect an illusion? While "unwed mothers" in Catholic institutions await the birth of their children amidst statues of the Virgin, my Jewish birthmother had been told by her Jewish male obstetrician in 1950 that her "sins" were now cleansed when I was born and relinquished—my birthday, symbolically enough, being Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Closed-record adoptions, as they exist today, carry with them a stigmatization of secrecy and ensure an adoptee's sense of loss. No matter how loving adoptive parents are, they cannot prevent these feelings in their adopted child; only a lifting of the veil of secrecy, a society that allows adoptees access to their original birth certificates, can liberate the adoptee. Only an openness that replaces secrecy can liberate the adoptive family from its closet of denial.

With openness, adoption can reclaim its status as a reasonable arrangement in which a child is raised by people who are more willing or able to be parents than are the birthparents. Whether this ability stems largely from the economic privileges of a sexist, class society, in which a married couple with a male paycheck is better able to raise a child than a single woman with a lower income, is another issue, and no less important to address in a political analysis of adoption. Nevertheless, if we accept that some people are not willing or able to raise their children and adoption seems a reasonable alternative, there is still a way to salvage the humanistic essence of adoption from the bitter morass of sin, guilt, loss, secrecy, punishment, and denial in which it so often has gotten stuck.

Open adoption may be the trend of the future. It is a process of ongoing contact between the birthparents and the adoptive parents, either in person or by letters and photographs sent between the two sets of parents. This openness allows the adoptee to satisfy his or her curiosity about who her birthparents are. It allows the birthparents to know about the progress and well-being of their child; and it frees the adoptive parents from fears that unknown, jealous birthparents will take their child back. (Legal relinquishment of parental rights and responsibilities still takes place in open adoptions, but ongoing contact is also specified.)

The known is a less formidable enemy than the unknown; in fact, the adversarial position of adoptive parents and birthparents fades away when they begin to see themselves as partners in their child's growth, playing distinct but important roles. Open adoption and the increasing openness that results from searches and family reunifications, gives power back to the people involved.

Problems of tomorrow will look different than problems of today. For example, use of donor insemination to have children can result in the children never being able to know their donor fathers, if records on these men are not kept. And among both conventional doctors, and women's clinics that do donor insemination, there tends to be secrecy to the point of paranoia about protecting the donors' anonymity. For male doctors, it is sometimes their own anonymity they are protecting. Unmarried women and lesbians may be protecting themselves from custody suits by strangers who decide to claim paternity rights.

Use of donor insemination to have children can result in the children never being able to know their donor fathers if records on these men aren't kept.

These are problems that need legal—and immediate—solutions, as donor anonymity will mean that the child will find it all but impossible to find the missing pieces to her or his heritage, or ever to be able to know the donor/father. Possible solutions include legislative reform that would provide for relinquishment forms to be filled out by the sperm donors, specifying that they are giving up their parental rights and responsibilities, just as birthmothers have done for decades. At the same time, records should be kept on the donor, including his name, so that the child has a chance of finding this information as an adult, if she or he is interested in doing so. These reforms could protect the child from the frustration, which adoptees know too well, of not having access to all the pieces of their identity puzzle.

Janine Baer is a proofreader living in Berkeley. She is a member of the Post Adoption Center for Education and Research and an adoptee who has five Jewish parents.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:
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Washington, D.C. 20026-0040
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