

THE ANTI-CHOICE MOVEMENT: BAD NEWS FOR JEWS

by Susan Weidman Schneider

FBI Probes Hate
Newton representatives among
receive anti-Semitic post cards

By Beth Fertig
The FBI is investigating several anti-Semitic post cards that were mailed to local Jewish pro-choice leaders and politicians.

The latest round

received cards.

The post cards from state Legislature last received

There are at least three things to fear if Right-wing forces in the United States and Canada have their way in opposing women's rights to — and access to — safe, legal abortion. First is a return to the horrors of “back alley” abortions, with women's lives and health at risk once again. Second is the restriction of our own religious teachings about abortion, affecting Jews and other religious groups as well.

These two factors we've come to understand. The third cause for alarm has been less obvious until now: anti-Semitism.

Opposition to abortion has become the latest conduit for public statements against Jews. Anti-Semitism suffuses the anti-choice movement. Some of it is quite overt (like postcards reading “This country needs another Nazi Holocaust”), some of it is more subtle, but all of it is threatening.

Here are a few recent examples from the proclamations of the anti-abortion movement's rhetoric which should alarm us both as Jews and as women:

- Ray Jeske, an anti-choice activist in Ohio who was videotaped recently by Planned Parenthood, calls opposition to abortion a “watershed issue. It tells us who is Christian and who isn't.” On the same tape we see Senator Jesse Helms (D-N.C.) raising his finger and announcing that the anti-abortion movement is “a major cause of Christian reunification.”

- In Tampa, Florida, in June 1989, 153 evangelical Christians (including preachers) were convicted of blockading an abortion clinic. Their defense was that they heeded the call of an authority higher than U.S. law. “The sovereign of this nation is not the Supreme Court,” as one defendant phrased it. “It is Jesus Christ. . . I'm under God's law. . . this is a Christian nation.” Defendants in a similar case in Texas declared that their attack on an abortion clinic was “a Christmas present for Jesus.”

- Robert Cooley, the articulate, conventional-looking leader of the anti-choice group called P.L.A.N. (Pro-Life Action Network), revealed to an interviewer on television (WVIT's “Connecticut Newsmakers” program, July 16, 1989) that, in his opinion, “affluence and comfort lead to abortion” and that “the majority of abortionists are Jewish.”

- Randall Terry, the founder of the militant

and sometimes violent anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, based in Binghamton, New York, characterizes his work as a “peaceful, Christian movement.” He not only wants to ban abortion, but contraceptives, as well. He also believes that religion should be taught in the schools, and he's committed to trying to establish a genuine Christian theocracy in the United States. One of its main tenets would be opposition to abortion.

It's not very far from these sentiments to the quantities of hate mail (some of which even includes return post office box numbers) arriving in mailboxes across the continent. For example, abortion clinics and Planned Parenthood offices in Massachusetts have received vicious anti-abortion postcards from an organization called Lifesavers Legal Defense in Portland, Oregon.

The cards say, “Rich murdering Jewish doctors are dedicated to baby butchering” and “We need another Jewish Holocaust here in America!” Hate mail bearing postmarks from Cheyenne, Wyoming, talks about “the conspiracy of Jew lawyers” who oppose the “defenders of life.” Spurred by the New England office of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL) and the FBI, a federal grand jury last February indicted a Newton, Massachusetts man for mailing anti-Semitic postcards to a Brookline abortion clinic, a local rabbi and the offices of the ADL. Sally Greenberg, civil rights counsel for the ADL in Boston, says that the man indicted, Francis C. Ober, “is using the movement to vent anti-Semitism,” but that the actions of one individual should not reflect on the entire anti-abortion movement.

While the organized anti-choice movement does not appear to be directly responsible for some of the most vicious slurs against Jews, it has certainly set the stage for this bigotry with its frequent reference to the United States as a “Christian nation” and its cries from abortion clinic picket lines for “more Christians out here defending the rights of the unborn.” The movement appears willing to tolerate anti-Semitism in order to add numbers to its ranks. As a result, anti-choice factions have become a magnet not only for seemingly moderate types like Robert Cooley,

but also for bigots and the unstable who often rally to extremist causes.

The anti-choice position is the keystone of Right-wing movements in America today, from conservative Republicans to irresponsible fringe groups. The issue of abortion rights gets directly to the heart of important questions about American pluralism. The interests of Jews are threatened now because abortion rights has become the bellwether for this country's tolerance for diversity. Jews in particular have a great deal to lose if the wall separating church and state develops any fractures.

Jewish law on abortion posits that the life of the mother takes precedence over that of the unborn child. According to *halacha* (Jewish law), the fetus is *potential* life only, and its claims are secondary to those of the woman. *Halacha* regards a fetus as having no independent life of its own; life does not begin until birth, and aborting a pregnancy, while a serious matter, is not considered murder. [For a detailed exploration of Jewish law, see LILITH's 1981 cover story by the late Annette Daum on "The Jewish Stake in Abortion Rights?"]

Clearly, though, adherence to Jewish law is not the only reason that Jews have been overwhelmingly in favor of a woman's right to choose. Jews favor retaining the right to abortion as set out in *Roe v. Wade* because we have an investment in protecting religious freedoms and in promulgating social justice. We have a very clear understanding that when these freedoms are abridged in one area — in this case, reproductive rights — they may soon be restricted in other areas, too.

Organizations that monitor Right-wing activity, like Political Research Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, note that anti-Semitism is permeating the anti-abortion movement. "The background noise in the anti-abortion movement is anti-Semitism. It's perfectly acceptable to state smears against Jews for the 'greater good' — that is, 'saving' the unborn," says Chip Berlet of PRA.

Why has anti-Semitism surfaced in such a potent form in connection with the

abortion rights issue? It's no accident. Bigots are always looking for opportunities to express their prejudices. Jews have proudly been associated with the reproductive rights movement since its inception. In addition, the fact that Jewish names appear in the ranks of those doctors willing to perform abortions triggers people's latent anti-Semitism.

Here are some of the forms the anti-Semitism takes: the use of Holocaust imagery, the pitting of Jews against Blacks and other groups, the association of Jews with wealth, and a broader thrust toward Christian hegemony in this country.

Many opponents of reproductive choice equate abortion with Nazi genocide. Here's Robert Cooley again, in a TV interview. "It is interesting to me that many abortionists are Jewish... as an ethnic group something like 81 percent of all Jews want abortion legal under all circumstances. It seems so incongruous, from my point of view, because they suffered at the hands of the Nazis. They know what it's like to be a class of people without rights."

A target for such comments has been Dr. Henry Morgentaler, the Canadian physician and Holocaust survivor who, over a twenty year period, singlehandedly opened abortion clinics across Canada in defiance of a law overturned only last year by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Ironically, Morgentaler has said that it was his very experience of the concentration camps, with forced childbearing *and* forced abortions, that caused him ever afterwards to be an activist for women having control over when and if they will have children. Morgentaler has been greeted at abortion clinics with placards saying, "Jewish abortionist killing our babies" and "Another Hitler."

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, last October, Operation Rescue — Randall Terry's group, which attempts to block access to abortion clinics — picketed a synagogue Yom Kippur eve, apparently because the rabbi, a member of the interdenominational Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, had testified at the trial of people charged with blockading the local abortion clinic. (The director of the clinic is also Jewish, and a member of this congrega-

tion.) In this case the signs read, "Abortion is the American Holocaust." One of the protesters told a reporter for the *Albuquerque Tribune* that Jews "don't believe that other people killed in the world are as important as their people being killed."

Robert Cooley and others in the anti-abortion movement have cited specious figures about a decline in Black population growth in the United States since *Roe v. Wade* was passed in 1973, with the implication that "Jewish abortionists" are killing Black "babies." (In the 70's, some Black men were visible in anti-abortion camps, arguing for Black population growth — but Black women have overwhelmingly supported pro-choice.)

In an imaginative variation on this theme, a piece of hate mail received at the LILITH office describes abortions as "a kike and nigger conspiracy." Postcards addressed to an abortion clinic in Brookline, Massachusetts, claim that "so far the Jewish doctors have murdered eight million defenseless babies — mostly Christians. This calls for war — eliminate the American Jew!"

Jews are being accused not only of "murder" but also of getting rich from their "crimes." Once again, the convenient old cabal — the blood libel that has surfaced since medieval times — rears its head. Jews "take the lives of innocent Christian babies," this time not for arcane religious rites, but for profit. This is a powerful theme in the anti-choice chorus. The Jew as money-lender is now the Jew as profiteer.

Dr. Morgentaler in Canada is accused of profiting from abortions. Postcards sent anonymously proclaim "Jew Doctors Abortion Holocaust! \$500 per fetus." Similarly vulgar literature suggests that money, leisure and/or selfishness are the motives for abortions.

There are those who say that the "correct" Christian view is that life begins at conception. Based on this premise, they want to pass a Constitutional amendment outlawing abortion. Since Jewish law takes a different view, and since Jews

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adamantly defend separation of church and state, this argument is disturbing to us.

This same attempt to limit all people's choices to those acceptable to only a few is behind the successful drive to ban fetal tissue research and to boycott U.S. pharmaceutical firms which might market the new abortion pill now widely available in France. This view argues for a fetus being delivered even if it endangers the mother's life.

Misogyny is clearly a strong force behind the anti-choice movement. Women are being blamed for getting pregnant; childbirth is viewed as appropriate punishment for their sins. Children's birth defects

are the fault only of their mothers. And some judges have jailed women for drug use during pregnancy. The president of the American Life League is quoted as saying: "We must return to a respect for chastity." There is a continuum from "pro-life" to the proposal that all contraception be banned and to the belief that family planning clinics be shut down.

The abortion issue has become — as, in another way the "JAP" issue was — a pernicious amalgam of anti-Semitism and misogyny. Interfering with reproductive freedoms is a way of keeping all women down and, now, a way of expressing anti-Jewish feelings at the same time. Thus it's a very appealing and a very useful issue for the political Right. As Jewish women we must be alert to this and make every effort to speak out for abortion rights, while at the same time recognizing and naming this new wave of anti-Semitic expression in the anti-choice movement. □

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