

An Interview With Abbie Hoffman

Benny Avni

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Abbie Hoffman, the sixties icon who died recently of a huge overdose of sleeping pills, was, in his own eyes, the ultimate Jewish rebel. I met him some three years ago when I was doing a profile on him for a Tel Aviv weekly. One of the first things he said was that the name he and cofounder Jerry Rubin gave to their famed movement, “Yippies”—long believed to be an acronym for Youth International Party—actually came from “Yiddisher Hippies.”

The setting for our conversation was perfect, the kind only a media wiz like Hoffman could so effortlessly stage. I said I wanted to interview him about his Jewish roots, so he took me to a New York neighborhood delicatessen on East 34th Street, where the pleasant waitress asked in a Yiddish accent, “Should I pack the rest of the salad for you, Abbie?” He made a point, almost ceremoniously, of having me pick up the check. I was The System.

The music that poured quietly out of aging speakers was a soft version of John Lennon’s “Jealous Guy,” and Hoffman closed his eyes and sang along a verse. “Let’s pray,” he said. Then he noted that Lennon, an old friend, was much more radical than his public image indicated, and that he, Hoffman, had always tried to help Lennon become more political.

So everything was set for the two main themes of the interview: New York delicatessen Judaism and sixties radicalism. But, of course, it was the late eighties. Lennon’s hit sounded relaxed, Muzak-like. Even I, who as a long-haired teenager watched the American sixties revolution from afar, felt nostalgic and sad.

It should be noted, though, that in that era, when Abbie’s road was much more taken, nostalgia was a four-letter word. It was something grown-ups with gray hair did, and we all knew, as Hoffman once said, that you shouldn’t listen to anyone over thirty.

We talked about his parents. When his father died, Hoffman was a fugitive. At the funeral there were FBI agents all over the place, waiting under their yarmulkes for the famous son to show up. He never did. He was down in Latin America and learned about his father’s death months later. I asked if his father was disappointed in him.

“He was ambiguous,” Abbie said. “He wanted me to be a successful businessman. He was a national president of a Jewish organization. And sure, notoriety is a certain kind of success, but he was ambiguous about that. Then came Watergate, and all that was happening to the antiwar leaders was made known to the public. So my relatives apologized, but not my father.”

And his mother, he said, never opposed him, no matter how outrageous his ideas were, “except for when I would yell at Israel.” The interview took place before the awakening of some mainstream American Jews to the Palestinian grievances and before the intifada. I asked why he would yell at Israel.

“Lots of things about Israel make me mad,” he said. “Its militarism; its ties with South Africa and other regimes, like Chile; some questions about them supplying funds for the contras in Central America; certainly supporting the government in Guatemala; supplying the right-wing regimes around the world.

“The only justification seems to be that Israel should be a whore to the world, because only in this way can it survive. And I feel the last four decades have proved me right. Israel lives like a fortress state, isolated from most countries, considered an outlaw nation by the vast majority of the nations.

“I am also critical of Israel because it is a religious state. I believe in a separation of church and state, and the movement growing now in Israel that frightens me is a movement that emphasizes the Jewish state. That is different than a Jewish home. Of course, I am for the survival of the State of Israel, and I believe in a Jewish homeland, but that is different than a state.”

Hoffman never made it to Israel. He asked me if something could be organized through some student organization. He said, “I’d be interested to go to Israel, because there is more discussion out there, in the Knesset, in the press, in the universities, in the streets, in restaurants.

“In the American Jewish community there is no discussion. There is no diversity of opinion. And that is the heart of the problem, because they can’t get Jews on the American football teams—go and beat up the goyim—they have to get their stiff erections through the Israeli army and all its macho show-offing in Lebanon and other places.

“So Israel has a Law of Return for Jews. When I was a fugitive, from ’73 to ’80, a lawyer by the name of Ben Weinglass, one of my many lawyers, went to see if Israel would let Abbie Hoffman in, and the answer was en-oh. In other words, the Law of Return was for some Jews, not for others.”

Benny Avni: Whose answer was that?

Abbie Hoffman: I can’t give the names of the people. At that time we couldn’t approach the formal Minister of Immigration because they would tell the U.S. authorities, and I was planning to go underground. What was stated to me through my lawyer was that Abbie Hoffman is worth a Phantom and a half, so fuck him.

Avni: Did it hurt you as a Jew?

Hoffman: Sure it hurt me. You measure democracy by the freedom it gives its dissidents, not the freedom it gives its assimilated conformists. I am a dissident. I’ve been in jail forty-one times. I’ve been beaten on several occasions. I was tortured by the government of the United States.

I have a tape of Nixon and Haldeman hiring thugs to beat me up. Why? Because “the Chicago Seven were all Jews.” Abbie Hoffman is a Jew. They weren’t all Jews; I saw them in the shower. When the tape came out it was on the front page of the *New York Times*, and not one Jewish organization said anything.

The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith would have raised a stink from San Francisco to Tel Aviv, but because this is not the most respected member of the Jewish community, they said, “Let’s not think about it” — the same thing as the assimilated Jews did in Argentina fifteen years ago and the German Jews did in the thirties.

Avni: Is that the way you were always treated by the Jewish community?

Hoffman: I am generally written about favorably. They say, “He’s Jewish, let’s convert him.” Jews don’t disown you. Goyim disown. So they wanted to convert me.

Avni: What’s Judaism for you?

Hoffman: I see Judaism as a way of life. Sticking up for the underdog. Being an outsider. A critic of society. The kid in the corner that says the emperor has no clothes on. The prophet. You are talking to a Jewish prophet who used to be a Jewish road warrior when he was younger.

Avni: So the idea of the Chicago Seven was a Jewish idea?

Hoffman: The organizing movement, the leftists in the civil rights movement, the fight for women’s rights, the social progressive movements—a disproportionate number of Jews have been involved in them and involved in the leadership. I mean, if you’re gonna be involved, you might as well be a leader.

We get choices. You know you are chosen, especially when you are a first-born son. My father said, “The whole world is wrong and you are right.” I didn’t know he was trying to make a point so I would assimilate. I thought he was telling me who I was, and I’m supposed to go out and make the world right.

And it still is true. And so first-born males have a choice between going for the *gelt* [money] or for broke. And it’s people who have changed society I admire who are Jewish. People who said “Workers of the World Unite,” “Hang Your Bosses,” or “Every Kid Wants to Screw His Mother,” or “E Equals MC Squared” — you know all these Jews who have not chosen to go for the money. They’ve chosen to go for broke. I will end up broke.

Avni: Will you also change history?

Hoffman: I’ve already changed history. As a community organizer. I organized at least a dozen projects in twenty-five years that are still there. You might have this image that the sixties was all sex and drugs and rock ’n’ roll, and it was a lot of fun. But there were people on my side that got tortured, died, sent to jail, and shot by the government.

In Nicaragua there are 500,000 troops fighting. What’s keeping them back is the legacy of the sixties, of rebellion in the army, riots on the campuses, demonstrations short of civil war back at home. The whole history of American intervention, before Vietnam and after, has changed. I was banned in eleven states. Now they respect me. They call me mister.

Avni: Maybe you are not kicking any more.

Hoffman: During the last ten years I've been involved in environmental battles. Look at all the local battles I won under the name Barry Freed. You know, all the names I picked underground are Jewish sorts of names. Mild Jewish names. Freed, Michaels, Samuel. It's *inteneștiq* Psychologically, as another person, I still claimed that I was half Jewish.

I was an organizer. Army Corps of Engineers looked at me as a threat. In these local battles I am a pain in the ass. When I go to Nicaragua, when I come back to the airport, all of a sudden my briefcase vanishes and then shows up again. Mysterious clicks on the phones again, petitions circulated to take my American passport away.

Avni: How seriously do you take it?

Hoffman: It's more serious than it was two years ago. Obviously it's not the sixties, when the FBI was breaking into my apartment and everything. Obviously I'm not that kind of a threat. We don't have a war.

Avni: So, maybe American society is better?

Hoffman: No way. It's worse.

Avni: Why aren't you in jail, then?

Hoffman: I am not a practitioner of outrage for outrage's sake, or civil disobedience just to break the law. I am a strategist. One has to make a judgment. Are you on the brink of apocalypse as we were in '68-'69, or are you at a point that you have to concede that Rome hasn't fallen in one day, and you pace yourself? You measure your energy.

Avni: Has your energy changed?

Hoffman: Of course. If I was twenty-eight I would be fighting with the Sandinistas. It's my Spanish Civil War. It's not Vietnam to me, but my heart is not here. My heart is on the mountains in Nicaragua. If I was younger I'd be there.

Avni: Are you tired of fighting?

Hoffman: I'm tired all the time. I need my chicken soup once a day. I'll be fifty in November.

Avni: So why aren't you doing a Jerry Rubin?

Hoffman: At the moment, in the United States, people who want to be rich are a dime a dozen.

Avni: So?

Hoffman: I don't wanna be a dime a dozen. I wanna be none-of-the-above. I want to change history, to change society. The idea of making money to me is of a lesser calling. In *The Big Fix* the question was, "Where is Abbie now?" They found me in Beverly Hills, making millions of dollars as an advertising executive, something that I can easily do. If you can .make unpopular causes popular, if you can go against the grain, you understand the communication system and the economic system on a level that very few people do.

That's why all the people of my generation who were tried in Chicago are millionaires. I am broke, and I'm gonna stay broke until I die. And you buy me lunch. Jerry Rubin once made a big thing about putting Jewish women down. Then he married a wife so she will look good in a fur coat. It's disappointing. It's like picking up the newspaper and reading that my son has joined the Marine Corps.

Avni: What do you do for money?

Hoffman: I do the same. I give speeches, talk on campuses. I get royalties from my books. I gamble on sports. I handicap. I make \$5,000 a year gambling.

Avni: And that's enough for you?

Hoffman: It's not enough. I'd like to have medical insurance. I'd like to have an apartment. I'd like to have a few more of what are considered the basic trappings of middle class. It's a weird state, because I am famous. You'd expect famous to be rich. There is no money in being a dissident.

Avni: What's the problem? Make one Hollywood movie. That will do it.

Hoffman: Well, talk to your Israeli friends at Cannon. As far as people on the left in the sixties—except for Martin Luther King, because he is dead and they can do anything they want to him—I am the most packageable, the most sellable, because I am entertaining.

But now, if you look at the movies in which the theme is youth rebellion, they don't want to avoid the draft. It's the revolution of the fifties. *Back to the Future*. They don't want to touch the sixties at all because the sixties are still too political and too controversial. But there will be a movie about me. [That was before Oliver Stone's *Platoon* changed Hollywood's approach to the sixties. Stone, according to reports, is working now on the final touches of a film about the Chicago Seven, starring Mr. Hoffman as himself.]

Avni: Are you angry at people of your generation who went to Wall Street, then?

Hoffman: I have nothing against people who go to Wall Street, but I am not going to devote my life to that. Like all Americans, I have a fantasy about being rich. Of course, what I'd do with my money is not the same as all Americans. I'm not Mother Teresa. She has a big organization supporting her poverty. I have nothing. No relatives, no friends. I am the Jewish road warrior. I would steal gasoline. If I have to go against the law, I will. I'll do what I have to do, within my limits. If I had enough money, I would travel in the developing world, in Africa, Asia.

Avni: Talking about money, how many dollar bills did you throw on the New York Stock Exchange floor?

Hoffman: Three hundred crisp, but it doesn't matter. That's a myth, a symbolic violence. Recently we made a statement about urine tests. I collected urine from the audience and sent it to the president.

Avni: In the sixties lots of people did things like that.

Hoffman: It doesn't make it less effective.

Avni: It does, because we are in the eighties, and not many people join.

Hoffman: We are not in the eighties; we are in a delicatessen in New York City.

Avni: Right. What I mean is, in the sixties you were young and full of wind, and it worked. The "masses" followed you.

Hoffman: Never the masses. Not even the majority. In 1968, at the height of the sixties, the two most popular Americans on college campuses were Richard Nixon and John Wayne. While twenty thousand went underground to Canada and Stockholm to avoid the war, there were three and a half million Americans who put on uniforms and went to Vietnam. You are never talking about majority. You are talking about enough.

Avni: But your side was "in" in the movies, in rock 'n' roll.

Hoffman: Not in rock 'n' roll. There are more political groups today than in the sixties. Bands like the Dead Kennedys, U2.

Avni: You had Country Joe and the Fish, Bob Dylan...

Hoffman: Bob Dylan? Never. Have a discussion with Jackson Browne today. Compare it to anything Dylan ever said. Or Bono of U2, the Clash, the punk groups. In the sixties the music was radical because we said—because I said—it was radical. Read *Woodstock Nation*.

Avni: But today the young are not radical any more. Nobody will write about a Woodstock Nation. Maybe a Wall Street Nation.

Hoffman: That's true.

Avni: So don't you care? Do you just go on with the same tactics?

Hoffman: I am a Jewish road warrior, just like in the movie but I am Jewish. If I'm alone, I'm alone. But I'm never alone. I'm not alone.

Avni: More isolated?

Hoffman: I am more lonely. People are born again. They got stuck in their life-styles.

Avni: Well, that's more hip now.

Hoffman: But I don't care what's hip. I didn't care what was hip in the sixties.

Avni: But you were.

Hoffman: Look. You are talking to an artist who wants to paint his paintings. Obviously I had to deal with realities, the world of the art galleries and what is fashionable and all that; so I will have a chance to exhibit my paintings on a larger scale, or not do my paintings. Those are problems all artists face. This doesn't mean this phase will be forever.

Avni: Will the sixties make a comeback?

Hoffman: Never. Demographics, economics. Dope will never be so cheap. Rock 'n' roll will never be so good. Sex will never be that free. You could live on forty dollars a week then. Dropping out on your career was easier.

Avni: How do you feel about the New Age movement?

Hoffman: It is mysticism as escape from reality. It has been around for a long time.

Avni: Like the Maharishi for the hippies?

Hoffman: The difference is, for a mystic experience in California now, you pay a thousand dollars per weekend. The hippies' fashion came from Salvation Army stores. It was cheap fashion, used clothes. Now I can take you to boutiques on the Lower East Side where they are selling clothes that I wore in pictures from the sixties for \$600 a jacket. Then the food was cheap, communal living was cheap, life-style was cheap. It was antimainstream. Of all youth rebellions, the hippie movement was the most political.

Avni: Most hippies weren't aware of that.

Hoffman: You took life in your own hands; you would make a political statement. So now the sixties are a fashion along with the fifties and forties, which leads me to think a change is coming. But forget the sixties. The demographics is different, so you can't have a youth culture. History moves in waves and curves. I would say Our Side is moving up now, in the last two years.

In two weeks, at the University of Colorado, there will be a pitched battle between police and students over CIA recruiting. There is also a strong movement at Yale—South Africa and local issues. I see it more than anyone in the country. I speak at fifty to sixty schools a year, and I see more activists than anyone in the U.S.

Avni: Will they change, say, the regime in South Africa?

Hoffman: Botha's days are numbered. But will they create a national movement with leaders, with a new Abbie Hoffman, a new Jesse Jackson, Gloria Steinem? The answer is no. But that implies that tomorrow is like today. If the economy bottoms out, we will have a strong upswing in activism, but it will look more like the thirties. If there is an invasion of Nicaragua it will blow up like the sixties, but there will be more violence. Students with career plans are not gonna go to fight.

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