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# Books in Review

## *The Death Of An American Jewish Community: A Tragedy Of Good Intentions*



### The 1960s Revisited

**The Death Of An American Jewish Community: A Tragedy Of Good Intentions.** By Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon. *Free Press. 370 pp. $24.95.*

*Reviewed by* Edward S. Shapiro

IN NOVEMBER 1969, Hillel Levine, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and a doctoral candidate in sociology at Harvard, addressed the annual conference of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds in Boston. Published later that year in the Jewish magazine *Response* under the title "To Share a Vision," Levine's speech became the most influential statement of a group of young Jewish radicals who sought to reorder American Jewish priorities and to reshape Jewish communal life.

Levine's audience, made up of the lay and professional leaders of the American Jewish communal establishment, were both resentful of and sympathetic toward Levine. They resented the fact that they had been forced to allow Levine to speak because of threats that, otherwise, Levine's followers might disrupt the conference. But they were also sympathetic to his message since it seemed to be a harbinger of a Jewish renewal among a sector of the population assumed to be apathetic regarding Jewish concerns, and because it fed the masochism common among liberal American Jews.

"To Share a Vision" conformed to the Jewish radicals' goal of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. According to Levine, young Jews were "dismayed with the reality of American Jewish life which we cannot reconcile with what you have taught us to cherish." They had found "fewer exciting models . . . in the Jewish community, little opportunity to give expression to our youthful ideals. . . . Perhaps it was a sign of our health that we were not attracted to a Jewish life devoid of intellectual and spiritual energy." Where, Levine told his listeners, "can we find inspiration in the multimillion-dollar Jewish presences of suburbia?" "When walking through the neat rows of split-level in Brookline or Beverly Hills, Scarsdale or Highland Park," he claimed, "one gets a sense that the cumulative aspirations of millennia of civilization went into such push-button comfort. Yet what unhappiness is there to be found behind so many of those gold trim doors."

LEVINE placed much of the blame for the sterility of American Jewish life on the federations, since they were responsible for establishing the financial priorities of the community. So desperate was the state of the American Jewish community that the federations could no longer operate on the basis of business as usual, relying on the generosity of "a few generous men or the patrons of particular projects whose concerns do not transcend their project." Levine was particularly concerned with the federations' funding of hospitals, defense agencies, and recreational institutions such as community centers at the expense of Jewish education. Jewish philanthropy, he asserted, was content to mobilize more resources "to combat one crackpot anti-Semite than to deal with the Jewish illiteracy of millions of Jews. . . . A vague sense of Jewishness can no longer compete in an open market of identities for Jews three or four generations removed from a substantive Jewish experience. Identities are based on ideologies and experiences, and neither can be offered by Jewish swimming pools and game rooms."

Levine urged his listeners to increase radically the funding of Jewish afternoon schools, Jewish day schools, and Jewish Studies programs in academia. This reordering of priorities would help build a Jewish community "that is creative and not one that must concern itself with mere survival." But Levine warned the Jewish establishment that young Jews would not be mollified by tokenism. "We will not be pacified, co-opted, nor compromised with vague resolutions. We want action and not delays. We want a change of the order of allocations and we want more equitable representation in decision making."

Twenty-three years after Levine presented this challenge to the American Jewish establishment, he has coauthored a book on the transformation during the late 1960s and early 1970s of the once vibrant Boston Jewish community of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan into a black slum. Both Boston's blacks and Jews had hoped to create a stable, integrated environment of good schools, busy stores, and safe streets in these contiguous neighborhoods. Instead there emerged an urban jungle ranking among the worst in the country.

*The Death of an American Jewish Community* is concerned, above all else, with allocating blame for this development. Its underlying assumption is that there was nothing inevitable about the process of urban decay, that what we have here is a problem and not a condition. Major responsibility for the change in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, Levine and Harmon claim, rests largely on the political, banking, and real estate establishment of Boston that decided to channel Boston's growing black population into Jewish neighborhoods rather than to scatter them in Irish, Italian, and other ethnic enclaves. The politicians, bankers, and realtors, Levine and Harmon claim, believed that Jews would put up less resistance to this incursion of blacks, and that the violence associated with the later busing of blacks into the Irish area of south Boston could be avoided. Boston's Jewish leaders were also partially responsible for the demise of inner-city Jewry. They had turned their backs on the problems of those less-affluent Jews who preferred to remain in the old neighborhoods rather than to relocate to the suburbs. From the perspective of the Jewish establishment, it was preferable for

Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan to become *judenrein* rather than to dissent from the cozy liberalism that equated urban renewal and integration with political righteousness.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, both the substance and the tone of this indictment resemble Levine's 1969 speech. There is the same contempt for suburbia in general and Jewish suburbia in particular. "Can the smell of chlorine and fresh cut grass evoke the 'warmth of belonging' and the 'sharing of Jewish values' in a way that scores of neighborhood synagogues, shops, and clubs could not?" Levine and Harmon ask. There is the same disdain for all political, economic, or social establishments, and the same belief that such establishments by their very nature engage in malevolent conspiracies against those they are putatively representing. There is the same affection for outsiders, whether they be radicals knocking on the doors of Jewish federations or poor Jews in Roxbury and Dorchester. There is the same demand for "participatory democracy" and accountability within Jewish institutional life, and the same assumption that Jewish leadership to be effective must be localized. There is the same belief that those who talk the loudest make the most sense. In the 1960s it was Jewish radicals such as Levine; in the 1960s and 1970s it was Meir Kahane and his Jewish Defense League which defended Jewish pedestrians and shopkeepers against black predators.

THERE IS the same type of apocalyptic thinking and the same seizing of the high moral ground. "By helping to clear away the 'structural underbrush' of contemporary racism," Levine and Harmon inform us, *The Death of an American Jewish Community* has "tried to foster understanding and, ultimately, new means of resolution." There is also the same inclination to talk in terms of rights rather than duties and responsibilities. "Communality," they argue, is "a basic human right" which government and the private sector are obligated to respect.

*The Death of an American Jewish Community* is saturated with a nostalgia for the 1960s, when supposedly Jews and blacks marched arm-in-arm in behalf of civil rights and economic justice. That this is no longer true is due not to social and economic forces but to the blockbusting and white flight fostered by realtors and bankers that set blacks and Jews at each others' throats. "So busy blaming each other, neither the blacks nor the Jews of today manifest much understanding of the elusive forces that are external to their communities and function independently of both their wills and interests." We should now be thankful to Levine and Harmon for revealing these hitherto "elusive forces."

Some of us, however, will remain skeptical regarding Levine and Harmon's claim that they have discovered the snake in the garden of black-Jewish relations. While the Jews of Boston were fleeing to the suburbs, the same thing was occurring in Newark, Minneapolis, Washington, Cleveland, New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, and other major American cities. Certainly Boston's White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant bankers could not have been responsible for these exoduses as well. Was it possible that similar conspiracies of bankers and realtors eager to take advantage of the largesse of the federal government could have sprung up simultaneously throughout the United States? Is it rational to believe that all these cabals were directed at Jewish neighborhoods?

The plight of the central cities and the reasons for the flight of Jews and others, whites and middle-class blacks alike, cannot be found in the machinations of bankers and politicians. A more likely source is the decline of the black family (approximately three-fifths of current black births are illegitimate) and the effect that liberal economic and social policies have had on encouraging dysfunctional social behavior and in undermining those forces within the city such as religion that have attempted to hold back the new urban barbarism. Nostalgia for the 1960s is of little use in understanding the plight of our cities.

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