Blacks in the Jewish Mind

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The Jew as Middleman

*Jewish Opposition to Black Power, 1967–1972*

People preoccupied with their own identity are not wholly free.
—Robert Alter

There were, of course, American Jews who did not share with liberal and leftist Jews the penchant for sustaining a commitment to or a relationship with Black Americans. For the most part, those Jews who advocated a more conservative stance toward the Black revolution tended to be more religiously observant. By the late 1960s, events had made it so even the orthodox could no longer maintain their traditional silence on contemporary issues. "In the area of political life," wrote an orthodox journalist in 1967, "orthodox Jewry is now evolving into an ethnic pressure group, much the same in character as other ethnic groups."¹

The debate over the urban crisis and Black Power among orthodox leaders and thinkers revolved largely around the issue of "relevance," or whether it was incumbent upon Jews to apply the precepts of Torah to present-day events. The question of "relevance" among orthodox thinkers had come as a response to the contention of liberal Jews and radical Jewish college students that the alienation of young people from Jewish life was a result of the failure of Jewish institutions to make themselves relevant to the issues of poverty, civil rights, and peace. Orthodox leaders had vehemently rejected an emphasis on relevance in prior decades, at least partly because it had been so strongly associated with Reform Judaism, which in its 1885 "Pittsburgh Platform" proclaimed Judaism's role to "participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."² But by 1967, there were forces within orthodoxy that were propounding this view. Rabbi Maurice Lamm stated the view
of the proponents, without himself endorsing it: "Among these activist forces, number one on the agenda of modern Jewry is relevancy. The most important concern today is relating Judaism to the world. Only as this is done will Judaism survive modern secularism. . . . Jews will not become or remain observant unless they see that Judaism is pertinent to their condition." Lamm himself cautioned that relevancy alone was never a measure of validity used by traditional Judaism. But orthodox spokesmen who advocated more Jewish involvement generally held views of the Black revolution that, like those of Jewish liberals and leftists, were inspired by the memory of Jewish victimization. It is interesting that these spokesmen generally took a more cautious approach to the Black revolution, perhaps because of the geographic proximity of orthodox communities to the exploding Black ghettos. While Jewish leftists saw American Jews as surrogate oppressors whose true allies were Blacks, orthodox Jews were far more likely to view themselves as middlemen, caught in a storm of social change with allies on neither the right or the left, Black or white. Rabbi Jerry Hochbaum of Yeshiva University, for example, believed that orthodox communities should become involved in alleviating problems of Black poverty through social action and education because Jews would be harmed by the radicalism of both right and left. "Incipient revolution or Fascism?" wrote Hochbaum of the alternatives facing Jews. "So there must be Jewish involvement. No other position is socially expedient or morally acceptable." 4

Orthodox Jews were by no means of one mind on the urban crisis. Leo Levi, a City University of New York physicist and an author on Jewish subjects, noted that there is no injunction for Jews to admonish non-Jews for immorality toward Blacks. "It is by living the Torah that we are to inspire the other nations," and Jews had long ago failed to live up to this mission, Levi insisted. By putting themselves beyond reproach, Jews would make a more lasting impression on the contemporary world than they would through a program of marching and protest. 5 Rabbi Yaakov Jacobs noted that the idea of relevancy was originally a Protestant idea stemming from "social gospel" thinkers of the late nineteenth century but that Protestants were already becoming disillusioned with those who would "substitute picket lines for prayer." It was Jacob's belief that the causes to which many wanted to make Judaism relevant might be worthy but that they were merely symptoms of deeper societal ills, namely, modern humanity's alienation from God. "The enemy is not discrimination or war," Jacobs wrote. "The enemy is the tidal wave of secularism and its twin brother,
'sciencism,' which have led us to believe that we can solve all human problems alone, while in fact we have compounded them."6

Most orthodox leaders agreed that Jews could best help themselves and others by leading pious Jewish lives but felt compelled to address the issue of the Black revolution because of their suspicion that nonorthodox Jewish leadership had gone far astray in their mission of defending Jewish interests. In doing so, orthodox leaders often revealed that they viewed Black anti-Semitism as part of a continuing historical saga in which Jews continued to be caught between oppressive rulers and an outraged populace, a line of reasoning not so very different from the left-wing Jews in the Jewish Liberation Movement. But in an interesting permutation of Jewish identity, the orthodox were inclined to see the Jews as standing alone in an alien culture, rather than as one oppressed group joined together in racial brotherhood with other oppressed groups. Rabbi Bernard Weinberger, a prominent leader of the Jewish community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, believed that orthodox Jews, in contrast to nonorthodox Jews, had no illusions about the existence and prevalence of anti-Semitism, Black or white, and were therefore not shocked or dismayed when it manifested itself. "We do not need ADL studies to substantiate its existence," Weinberger wrote. It was the activist Jews in the civil rights movement, according to Weinberger, who threatened the survival of the Jewish community in the United States because they had failed to see that Jews had survived throughout the ages by not making themselves conspicuous: "That we have survived as Jews in such a hostile world is a miracle. . . . But, no small share of this miraculous survival is due to our awareness that we simply cannot afford to tell our neighbors how to govern their lives." Revealing his belief that Jews were still vulnerable outcasts, Weinberger held that what was permissible of others was not permissible for Jews and that this was as true in the United States as it had been in Nazi Germany. "The sad reality is that Jews simply cannot speak their mind, openly and honestly, without jeopardizing Jewish lives." Because orthodox Jews lived in proximity to Black neighborhoods, with their concomitant problems of rioting, burglaries, theft, and looting, Weinberger believed it was necessary for them to break their traditional silence and try to help solve some of the racial tensions that were threatening the stability that orthodox Jews depend on, but to do so by setting an example. What Jews could do by way of helping is to learn to live with Blacks rather than in fear of them and to offer them the example of the stable orthodox Jewish family. "Money, jobs, and equal opportunity alone cannot achieve this. The example provided by the orthodox Jewish
community affords the Negro the inspiration which he instinctively feels compelled to emulate, and which is worth infinitely more than all our programs.”

Orthodox Jews might have remained silent on contemporary matters of race during the late 1960s had not the disparity in class and outlook between more assimilated middle-class Jews and the orthodox become so pronounced. During the late 1960s some Jewish critics came to suspect that American Jews were increasingly in the middle of an alliance between an uncaring white establishment and an agitated Black lower class and that, in fact, many in the “establishment” were liberal and assimilated Jews. For the first time since the 1920s, class differences among American Jews were showing signs of emerging as a class conflict. “Now,” wrote a Jewish sociologist, “growing numbers of the non-upper Jews have begun to suspect that when it comes to the things that they are most concerned and anxious about, and that affect them most directly, the upper Jews could not care less, or are actually hostile, and contemptuous in the bargain.”

It was this class division between the predominantly working-class urban orthodox Jews and the more affluent, suburban liberal Jews that led to the rise of Rabbi Meier Kahane and the Jewish Defense League (JDL) in 1968. As an obscure rabbi at the Traditional Synagogue in Rochdale Village, Queens, and an editor at the politically conservative *Jewish Press*, Kahane had been able to accurately measure the pulse of less affluent urban Jews who were on the front lines of skyrocketing crime rates and Black anti-Semitism. Kahane’s views reflected the anxieties of these Jews, many of whom began to feel that they were becoming extremely vulnerable to Black demands, the economic problems of the cities, and discontent over U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In response, Kahane formed the Jewish Defense League, ostensibly to “physically defend Jews . . . to go out among Jews and instill within them a feeling of Jewish pride, to defend the Jews from simply fading out.” In this sense, the JDL resembled a number of ethnic activist movements that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it became an active presence in the various disputes between Blacks and Jews in New York City. The JDL took a pro-union stance during the New York City teachers’ strike, showed up with clubs and chains to prevent the unsolicited appearance of the Black militant James Forman at New York’s Temple Emmanuel, picketed the Metropolitan Museum of Art to protest the Museum’s catalogue to the exhibit “Harlem on My Mind,” and publicly demanded that the left-wing radio station WBAI-FM dismiss the Black radical Julius Lester, who, on various occasions had in-
vited anti-Semitic guests to speak on his show. In these actions, Kahane believed he was simply taking seriously what most establishment Jewish organizations did not: the growth of Black anti-Semitism. "It bothers me strongly that Jewish groups are so ready to see anti-Semitism under every white bed and will ignore blatant anti-Semitism on the part of Blacks," Kahane told the New York Times reporter Walter Goodman, "What kind of mind is it that refuses to see a danger because a person is Black?" It was Kahane's belief that increasingly extreme Black demands would be associated with Jews because of large-scale Jewish support for civil rights and that these demands would, paradoxically, have the effect of increasing white anti-Semitism. "Mr. Jew is blamed for Blacks—and in certain ways there is truth to it," Kahane explained. "An embittered white ethnic who sits and is out of work and is angry and worried . . . blames the Jew for the Black man. [The white ethnic thinks] 'If the Jews hadn't started this thing, there would be no Black problems.' "

Despite Kahane's skillful exploitation of the feeling of many poorer Jews that they had been left in the lurch by establishment Jewish leaders, the increasingly extreme and confrontational tactics of the JDL eventually resulted in the movement's decline. Kahane and his followers interrupted concerts and performances, harassed and attacked Soviet diplomats, attacked members of Arab groups in the United States, invaded and occupied offices of Jewish organizations that disagreed with or denounced the JDL, and blew up the tourist office of a foreign government, an act that Kahane claimed to know nothing of but that he verbally supported. In July 1971, Kahane was arrested on a charge of conspiracy to violate federal gun and bomb regulations, for which he was given a five-year suspended sentence, fined five thousand dollars, and placed on five years' probation. Kahane and the JDL were effectively isolated by the larger Jewish community, which denied Kahane the right to speak at conferences, refused to engage him in public debate, and continuously and stridently denounced him and the organization he led.12

But perhaps most interesting was the opposition that Kahane and the JDL found within the orthodox community itself. The highly influential orthodox authority Rabbi Moshe Feinstein declared that the JDL's actions against governments and states were "contrary to the Torah." The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America unanimously voted to condemn Jewish extremists.13 Following these denouncements, Kahane continued to experience a decline in fortunes and, in 1971, he and his family took up residence in Israel, from where he would continue to lead an
almost fatally weakened JDL in the United States. Kahane's movement found its greatest support among Jews who could be considered "folk" orthodox, Jews only one or two generations removed from the immigrant world who by custom or upbringing remained ritually observant but who were not educated in the demanding and indoctrinating world of Jewish day schools. While Kahane's activities and political positions with regard to the State of Israel would later find support among a growing triumphalist orthodox right wing in the United States and Israel, the "folk" orthodox, among whom he found his earliest constituency, were a dying breed. Unable to sustain an adherence to Jewish observance among their young, and falling fast to the lures of secular education and suburban affluence, by the early 1970s it was obvious that this cohort, located primarily in the outer boroughs of New York and of other large cities, represented the final generation of American Jews with the recognizable imprimatur of earlier immigrant generations. Kahane's movement, despite its lack of appeal for the overwhelming majority of American Jews, touched the nerve of the last significant segment of working-class Jews, a segment of Jews increasingly absent from the concerns of the organized Jewish world and fading fast, along with the immigrant stamp on the American Jewish character.

Other Jewish Voices of Opposition

Aside from the orthodox, there were other, smaller yet quite vocal segments of the Jewish community that remained skeptical about Black Power and its meaning for American Jews. Essentially, these critics thought Black Power and the left were using their vast numbers to agitate and threaten the stability of American institutions important to American Jews and that the mostly white "Anglo-Saxon" establishment was showing a distinct willingness to sacrifice Jewish interests in order to appease the more dangerous Black agitators. This formulation was based on the belief that the Jews were vulnerable to oppression and not completely at ease in the United States, but, unlike the Jews on the New Left, these critics defined the problem as more a matter of power politics than one of an oppressive capitalist system. Like the Jewish leftists, these critics focused on anti-Semitism, but it was the present anti-Semitism on the left and in the Black community, rather than the anti-Semitism of the right, that concerned them, and they were thus willing to release themselves from what they now believed to be an anachronistic alliance with Black Power. That said, it should be pointed
out that however more realistically and less sentimentally they were able to see new developments on the American political scene, these critics were, in effect, thrown back into the mire of Jewish history by the new anti-Semitism on the left. That is, Black anti-Semitism had the effect of enveloping these critics in the discourse surrounding the historic Jewish concern with safety and vulnerability, rather than with the challenge presented by freedom and assimilation.

Milton Himmelfarb was one such critic. Educated at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Himmelfarb was an astute observer of the Jewish scene, an accomplished sociologist, and perhaps the most gifted of the writers who subscribed to the “Jew as middleman” theme. Some months after the Six-Day War, Himmelfarb wrote that the Jews were changing in a way that suggested a profound disillusionment with the liberal outlook they had acquired as a result of the modern Enlightenment. “The French Revolution had equality for the Jews as a corollary. We were for the Revolution and its extension, and the right was against. Now the location of our enemies is not quite so simple. We have enemies on the right, but also on the left.”

Writing of the infamous June-July newsletter of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee—“What’s in a name”—and the editor’s diatribe against the “Jew shops” in the Black ghettos, Himmelfarb responded with characteristic wit. “Say what you will about Marxism-Leninism-Maoism-Fidelism-Fanonism, what other mode of analysis would have been able to trace the causes of Negro oppression so unerringly to the real centers of economic and political power . . . Israel and the little Jew shops?”

Himmelfarb was convinced that the Jews in America were becoming the middlemen between a white Protestant establishment and an increasingly agitated Black militancy. The establishment was most interested in maintaining order among urban Blacks, and in order to achieve its goal a certain number of Black elites would have to be mollified by being given a stake in the system. In the schools, what mattered was not so much the “ability to teach” but the ability to impose discipline, and Black Americans, the establishment felt, could perform that role better than Jews. Assuming the role of an imaginary WASP, Himmelfarb wrote that Jews would be hurt the most, but “fair is fair, and as between Blacks and Jews we have no reason to reproach ourselves when we give preference to the Blacks. . . . Blacks can cause trouble, real trouble, Jews only talk . . . the price must be paid, and this is both the easiest and the fairest.”

It is interesting that Himmelfarb suggested that Jews themselves were
responsible, at least in part, for their interstitiality, because continuing Jewish support for such issues as open housing, free speech, and racial integration had alienated them from other white ethnic groups, the only potential allies available. Allies of the Jews would not come from the right or the left, and they certainly would not come from the white ethnics, wrote Himmelfarb with tongue in cheek. “Why should Poles or Italians bestir themselves for the Jews? . . . In voting on money for the public schools, the Jews are for, they are against. The Jews go to college, they do not. They hunt, the Jews do not.”

A number of critics came to believe that, with the rise of Black Power, the idea that America was a unique place for Jews in the history of the diaspora had to be reconsidered. The turmoil of the late 1960s rankled the iconoclastic editor of the Jewish Spectator, Trude-Weiss Rosmarin, who edited that magazine from 1938 until her death in 1989. An immigrant from Germany who had earned a doctorate in Semitics, archeology, and philosophy from the University of Berlin, Weiss-Rosmarin held a wide variety of original opinions on such issues as women in Jewish life, Zionism, and Jewish culture. One of the more controversial debates she entered into during her career involved the question of whether the Jews in the United States were in exile (galut) or whether America was different from the rest of the nations of the Jewish diaspora. In 1951, in response to an exchange between Jacob Blaustein, president of the American Jewish Committee and CEO of the American Oil Company, and Israeli President David Ben-Gurion, in which Blaustein affirmed that America was not galut, Weiss-Rosmarin asserted that “America is galut . . . because the American Jew must be a Jew, even when he does not want to be a Jew.” Eventually Weiss-Rosmarin came to reject the idea of America as galut, reasoning that “American Jews . . . are of America as all other Americans and resent . . . any intimation that they are not like all Americans.”

But with the advent of Black Power, Weiss-Rosmarin came to believe that Jews were getting caught in the crossfire between resentful Blacks and hostile WASPS. The events in the Black ghettos and Black Power, as well as the rumblings by some prominent literary WASPS that Jews had widespread control of the literary establishment, convinced her that “Jewish history also documents that whenever and wherever the outsiders became successful self-made insiders, popular resentment rose against them.” With her newly reinforced belief that Jew-hatred could not be fought or prevented even in the United States, Weiss-Rosmarin rejected the idea that America was different. “I have frequently expressed my belief that America
is different. But this was before the urban crisis erupted in the conflagration of the fire this time," she wrote, concluding that all of the explosive ingredients that had triggered anti-Semitic outbreaks in the past were now present in the United States.21

Another influential spokesman for the idea that Jews had to reevaluate their position toward the race revolution was the rabbi and theologian Richard Rubenstein. Rubenstein is recognized today as one of the most imaginative Jewish theologians of the twentieth century for his "Death of God" thesis, formulated in his book After Auschwitz published in 1966.22 Rubenstein argued for a radical new midrash, a radical new myth, in the wake of the Holocaust because it was now no longer possible to speak of the caring, compassionate, personal God that Jews had historically conceived.23 The harsh realism that Rubenstein brought to Jewish theology was also evident in his analysis of the American Jewish situation in the late 1960s, particularly with regard to race relations and the Black Power movement.

Rubenstein urged Jews to be more realistic politically and to stop relying on appeals to morality and moralism in dealing with both the white Christian and the Black communities. In 1963, Rubenstein had been one of nineteen rabbis to respond to Martin Luther King's request for support in his effort to fight racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama.24 But by 1965, Rubenstein felt that the eventual withdrawal of Jewish support from the Black revolution had become inevitable. The reasoning behind this change of mind was the gnawing feeling that Jews were once again being drawn into the historic pattern of showing sympathy for other people's national aspirations despite the anti-Semitism of the ensuing revolution. "I knew that every nationalist revolution in modern times had turned anti-Semitic. . . . It is unfortunately not true that victims seek justice. Very frequently, they seek victims of their own," Rubenstein wrote.25

Rubenstein clearly overstated the attachment of nationalist revolutions to anti-Semitism, and he need have looked no further than the American Revolution for evidence to the contrary. But with regard to anti-Semitism and the Black revolution, Rubenstein drew on the international connection between Black Power and anti-Zionism and insisted that it was incumbent upon the Jewish community to reexamine its fundamental political strategy. "The presuppositions of American Jewish liberalism worked well in the America of the thirties, forties, and fifties. . . . [But] the Jewish community can no longer remain true to its own fundamental aspirations . . . and, at the same time, support the Negro revolution."26
The Jewish Neoconservatives and the Common Culture

The rise of radical New Left and Black Power movements gave birth to a small but influential school of American political thought known broadly as neoconservatism. While this movement included such non-Jewish intellectuals as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Robert Nisbet, Paul Seabury, Peter Berger, Samuel Huntington, and Michael Novak, a large portion of the movement’s top figures were prominent Jewish intellectuals formerly of the radical New York Intellectual milieu. Irving Kristol, the editor of the neoconservative house organ The Public Interest, has been labeled the “father” of neoconservative thought and once metaphorically described a neoconservative as “a liberal who has been mugged by reality.”

Other prominent Jewish neoconservatives have included Norman Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Joseph Epstein, Earl Raab, Walter Laqueur, Aaron Wildavsky, Ronald Berman, Ben Wattenberg, Midge Decter, and Martin Diamond.

While American Jews have been mostly aligned with liberal politics, there have always been secular Jewish conservatives in the United States, some of whom became quite prominent in American intellectual life. Among these were the well-known anti-Communists Sidney Hook and Bertram Wolfe. At the University of Chicago, a whole school of conservative thought took root after World War II with the active participation of many prominent Jewish scholars, including Milton Friedman, the father of fiscal “monetarism,” and Leo Strauss, the German émigré and founder of the University of Chicago school of social philosophy, which emphasized the “natural law” of civilized order and the rejection of socialist utopias. Jewish practitioners of the Chicago school included Hans Morgenthau, Mortimer Adler, and Hannah Arendt. There was also a small cadre of secular Jewish conservatives who wrote for William F. Buckley’s National Review, including Max Geltman, a journalist who wrote a number of articles on the Black revolution that were eventually published as a book. Geltman called for a “disengagement” of American Jews from the Black Power movement on the basis of the movement’s open hostility toward Jews.

But no particular group of conservative thinkers or conservative schools of thought had ever come close to carrying as sizable a Jewish imprint as the neoconservatives, a movement that attracted many recent arrivals from the precincts of the radical left. In the late 1960s, when a number of formerly left-wing intellectuals began to take on conservative colorations, it
was no surprise that a large proportion of these intellectuals were of Jewish background, bringing with them specific Jewish preoccupations along the way.

Neoconservatism shared a great deal with traditional American conservatism on domestic and foreign issues, but it represented something new in that it was possibly the first programmatic system of thought in the United States that wholeheartedly accepted many important liberal principles. For neoconservatives, it went without saying that the inequality of racial minorities, women, and the poor was bad, that access to good public schools, higher education, and job opportunities should be expanded for all, that there was a definite need for a welfare state along the lines established by the New Deal and its immediate postwar expansion, and that the United States should consider its reputation for accepting and absorbing large numbers of new immigrants from all over the world a great virtue. No doubt the heavy Jewish and Catholic representation among the neoconservatives accounted for their concern with the “openness” of American life and the matter of equality in general, and this prompted one liberal writer to comment that neoconservatism was the first “serious American conservatism.”

But neoconservatism also represented something new in that it was in large measure a response to the rise of New Left radicalism in the late 1960s and, consequently, reflected an overarching concern with the stability of American political and social institutions. The primary concerns of the neoconservatives reflected their belief that a crisis of authority had occurred in the United States and in the West in general, that governing institutions had lost their legitimacy, and that the rise of a permanent “adversary culture” had come, by way of a soft “New Class” of liberal bureaucrats, to seriously threaten the social stability upon which the future of democracy depended. The idea of defending “liberal” civilization underlies the “newness” of the “neo” in the term neoconservative: it was a conservatism that did not, in its early stages, see itself as necessarily conservative in the traditional sense, but rather as a defender of postwar American liberalism against a destructive 1960s radicalism. It is instructive that the neoconservatives were not self-named; the name was coined by the democratic socialist Michael Harrington, who gave himself that label in order to distinguish himself from other Democratic party intellectuals after he had decided to drop his protest against electoral politics. To this day many neoconservatives continue to believe that it is a long-lost liberalism that they seek to recover, rather than a variant of conservatism.
The stability of democratic institutions and the hostility of the radical left to the humanistic and rational traditions of the West was a major concern for a number of Jewish neoconservatives, most of whom were prompted into their ideological “apostasy” by the New Left and Black Power position on the 1967 Middle East war. Many of the Jewish neoconservatives experienced the same revival of Jewish pride after the Six-Day War that had affected most American Jews, and this change in mood was recorded famously in the pages of Commentary magazine by its editor, Norman Podhoretz. Podhoretz explained that he had embarked on an extraordinary intellectual evolution that began in the early 1960s when he first started editing Commentary, with an effort “to revive the dormant spirit of radical social criticism within the American intellectual community.” But by the end of the decade, Podhoretz wrote, “I found myself almost entirely out of sympathy with the political workings of the radical ethos,” largely because of the “barbaric hostility to freedom of thought which by the late 1960s had become one of the hallmarks of this ethos.” But, as Podhoretz went on to state, in the case of his own disaffection, and that of the other Jewish writers around Commentary, “there was an element going beyond what is customarily considered political.” For Podhoretz and his circle of writers, this other element seemed closely connected to their identities as Jews.

Podhoretz admitted that he was worried about the Jewish condition in America and that this anxiety was caused by two events—the Six-Day War and the New York City teachers’ strike. Both of these events had served to break the taboo against the open expression of anti-Semitism that had prevailed in the United States since World War II. “[I]f the anti-Semitism of the right continues to live underground, the anti-Semitism of the left has moved in recent years out of the foul-smelling catacombs of the radical tradition and into the common light of day,” Podhoretz wrote. Podhoretz was also convinced that the teachers’ strike exposed in certain elements of the white power structure an “apparent readiness to purchase civil peace in the United States . . . at the direct expense of the Jews.”

Accordingly, when thinking about political and social issues, Podhoretz suggested that Jews should ask themselves the age-old question “Is it good for the Jews?” In a statement that reflected the cosmopolitan milieu from whence the Jewish neoconservatives came, Podhoretz admitted that only a short time earlier this question would have evoked a response of anger or embarrassment from American Jews like himself, who believed that it reflected a “mentality no broader than that of the tribe.” But now it ap-
peared that the “Golden Age” of American Jewry was over, and it was appropriate to ask such a question.

Between 1967 and 1972 Podhoretz fleshed out the program of Jewish neoconservatives with the help of a coterie of extremely talented writers, most of whom had embarked on an ideological evolution similar to the one he had taken. As with Podhoretz, these writers were deeply impacted by the anti-Semitism of the New Left and Black Power movements and by the stubborn refusal of Jewish leftists to denounce the ideological extremism of these movements. The feeling that the rise of New Left radicalism and Black Power and the acceptance of their premises by liberals had put American Jews in a precarious situation found articulate and strident expression through the writers at Commentary.

The neoconservative approach to Black Power and Black anti-Semitism was perhaps most fully fleshed out by the sociologist and Jewish communal leader Earl Raab. In a widely read article that appeared in Commentary in 1969, Raab attacked the irrelevance of studies that showed small amounts of Black anti-Semitism on the grounds that anti-Semitic political movements did not require large numbers of supporters in order to succeed. To demonstrate this point, Raab cited the political phenomenon of the Catholic priest Charles Coughlin in the 1930s. After a point the Coughlin movement became explicitly anti-Semitic, yet polls showed that only around 20 percent of Coughlin supporters said they would back a campaign against Jews.35 While anti-Semitism might not have been a salient enough issue to attract supporters, it was also insufficient to inhibit support for a movement that had anti-Semitism as only one of its central platforms. It was for this reason that political anti-Semitism usually originates not in the grass roots but in the minds of elites who are capable of articulating an integrated ideology. Raab insisted that the anti-Semitism emerging from Black extremism was not the folk anti-Semitism that Black Americans shared with whites and that utilized the characterizations of Christian mythology but rather was political anti-Semitism, “the abstract and symbolic anti-Semitism which Jews instinctively find more chilling.”36 Accordingly, Raab insisted that, “as far as the ‘vulnerability’ of the population is concerned, the key is not the level of anti-Semitic beliefs, but the level of resistance to political anti-Semitism.”37 The relevant fact was that Black Power was developing an anti-Semitic ideology that many Blacks refused to reject because it met so many unexpressed needs in the Black community. While the majority of Black Americans might be horrified by expressions of anti-Semitism, Raab wrote, they were reluctant to oppose
it on the community level “because it would seem to be an attack on the militant movement itself.”

The Jewish neoconservatives represented the first attempt within the American Jewish community to provide a programmatic alternative to the predominantly left-liberal tradition of Jewish politics in the United States. For perhaps the first time in the twentieth century, an identifiable group of well-placed and influential Jewish thinkers had exhibited a willingness to reorder the priorities of American Jews and to suggest in the strongest terms that Jewish well-being might not necessarily be tied to the political aspirations of Black Americans or to progressive social and political forces of any kind. But it was not the objective of the Jewish neoconservatives to deal in any programmatic depth with more substantive issues of Jewish culture. As intellectuals who had recently left the folds of American radicalism, the neoconservatives were necessarily of an insurgent psychology, concentrating specifically on ridding the Jewish community, and American political life at large, of what they considered to be dangerous new radical notions that had gained ascendancy in American intellectual and political life. The neoconservatives were therefore tied to the discourse of liberalism and all of its underlying preoccupations, including the ambivalence with which liberals approached their Jewish identities. Such liberal preoccupations included the idea that Jews were historically, and continued to be, potential victims and that the primary measure of Jewish welfare was the size of the buffer American Jews could put between the forces of anti-Semitism and themselves. Accordingly, Jewish neoconservatives saw the welfare of American Jews almost solely in political terms, in strengthening those forces they thought were less inclined toward anti-Semitism and weakening those they thought promoted it. But while this included a warmer approach toward Israel, in general, the neoconservative program was strictly political, more an attack against a liberalism “gone mad” than a prescription for an affirmative Jewish life.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the neoconservatives came under criticism from more religiously observant Jews for not focusing on religion or internal Jewish problems. Jacob Neusner, the renowned religious scholar, has claimed that *Commentary* magazine is “Jewish” but never “Judaic” and that anything “Jewish may find its place in the worldview of the neocons of Jewish origin, history, sociology, literature, politics—anything except religion.” It was Neusner’s belief that, “when it comes to the rich and sanctifying Judaic religious life, with its sophisticated intellectual heritage of reflection and rigorous thought, these people stand at one with the
left.”40 To their credit, and in striking contrast to the Jewish liberals and the Jews of the New Left, it was never the stated intention of the Jewish neoconservatives to be anything other than a loosely defined program of political and cultural criticism. The long liberal tradition of invoking Judaic injunctions to bolster political agendas, from the Reform rabbis of Germany, who pronounced that Judaism obligates its adherents to serve the Fatherland, to the Jews of the New Left, who argued that “true commitment to the Jewish tradition necessitates participation in revolutionary struggles,” was not, on the whole, duplicated by the Jewish neocons. Pohoretz even wrote that “those of us who have been fighting the ideas of the radical left have been fighting precisely in the name of liberal values, not in the name of Judaism. It is shallow and vulgar, if not blasphemously presumptuous to think that Judaism gives its blessings or its warrant to a particular political position.”41

Yet critics like Neusner are not wrong to point out the very secular nature of the neoconservative program. For Jewish neoconservatives like Earl Raab and the sociologist Nathan Glazer, the fight for Jewish security focused on the threat to America’s political stability symbolized by the Black revolution and the mistaken commitment of intellectuals to antidemocratic thought. For the neocons, liberalism had come to mean something far different from what it had meant in the past, and its wayward trajectory was for them a more important development than any of the internal concerns of the Jewish community. In an article written in 1970, Raab declared that the question as to whether Jews could preserve their identity as Jews in an open society was now moot because the threat to an open society in the United States itself had superseded it. For Raab, “the most direct threat to the American Jewish community is not the seepage of assimilation but the growing inhospitality of the American political environment,” an inhospitality attributed to the crisis of liberalism in which the United States was at the vanguard.42

Whereas left-liberal Jews attacked the Jewish middle class for its conformity and political complacence, the Jewish “new class” of upper middle-class intellectuals and students got it good from the neocons. Raab singled out the thousands of Jewish lawyers, businessmen, and housewives who he believed constituted the backbone of workaday ideological liberalism in communities across the land; he insisted that these people “should never be forgotten for the way in which they have heightened concern for human problems in the country” but that, in addition, “they should never be forgiven for the way they have tolerated and fostered a self-destructive
liberal innocence while so engaged." Raab also detected the limitations of Black Power pluralism as it concerned American Jews. It was true that Jews continued to participate fully in big city government, usually as "advisers" or "social experts," but they were in these roles primarily as professionals whose departure from the Jewish community was "urban affairs" or the social sciences, Jews who identified with the rising urban minority groups, rather than as representatives of any particular segment of the Jewish community. "Indeed, the new liberal big-city coalition, in which the only ethnicity is Third World, bears with it a bias which is, if anything, anti-Israel and cool to the Jewish community." Jews who remained attached to the new liberalism were behaving in a "particularly pathological and self-destructive" way.43

One of the Jewish neocons most deeply influenced by the rise of Black Power was Nathan Glazer. Glazer's now famous early period of "mild" radicalism, when he encouraged young Jews to join progressive social movements and supported preferential treatment for Blacks, had by 1967 evolved into a self-described "mild" conservatism. The large-scale riots in Newark and Detroit had convinced Glazer that extremism had come to dominate the mood of the Black American, and, like Raab, he was skeptical about the meaning of this development for the stability of democratic institutions. "The line is difficult to draw between an aroused citizenry flooding council chambers to voice their grievances... and the threat that unless these grievances are immediately acted upon the city will be in ashes."44

Glazer was not sure what ignited the riots themselves, but he expressed the opinion that they were substantively different from earlier riots by urban Blacks because thirty years of what could reasonably be viewed as a "good deal of progress" had made no change in the mood or living conditions of the ghetto. Glazer argued that there were more Blacks in elected office, the civil service, the mass production industries, and white-collar and professional jobs; that there was better housing; and that the shame of Black disenfranchisement in the South was over—but that all this made little difference.

For Glazer, the prevalence of the belief that Black Americans were doing badly just as it became possible to demonstrate that there had been vast improvements in their condition constituted America's racial paradox, and the paradox had its roots in a fallacious idea about race and ethnic groups in America: that all white ethnic groups had been allowed to move rapidly into American society and achieve respectable levels of income, good con-
ditions of living, and political power, while racially distinct groups had been held back from doing the same by racism. The truth, Glazer thought, was nothing like this. In the Northern cities, there were differences between Blacks and white immigrant groups, but the similarities and continuities were more important. White ethnic groups exhibited a wide range of experience, varying with time of arrival, skills at time of arrival, the character of the cities to which they came, and the degree of prejudice and discrimination they faced. Blacks, for example, had more “political power than Puerto Ricans in New York City, a somewhat higher income, a substantially higher proportion of professionals. . . . African-Americans probably have more college graduates than Polish Americans, more political muscle than Mexican Americans, more clout in the mass media than Italian Americans,” Glazer wrote. But even if one believed that Blacks were the worst off of all the distinctive ethnic groups, Glazer believed that it was possible to see that Blacks were part of a pattern that had seen some groups do better than others and all groups experience ups and downs within different time frames. “One can indeed contend that the Negro is the worst off of the major ethnic and racial groups in this country, but not that much worse off to explain by itself the special quality of despair and hysteria, and the tone of impending violence and doom that now dominates much African-American political discourse.”

The race paradox played a pivotal role in Glazer’s ideological evolution. Like Earl Raab, Glazer saw unity in the forces on the New Left, the attack on the universities and public bureaucracies, the general movement away from humanism in the earlier radicalism, and the Black Power movement. While the radicalization of Black Power may have been fed by frustration and deprivation at the grass-roots level, it was ideological at its core, aided and abetted, in Glazer’s view, by the growing rage and hostility centered around radical students and encouraged by a wide range of intellectuals. Glazer indicted radical Jewish intellectuals for espousing the notion that those in the middle class were beneficiaries of white-skin privilege, that they acted in compliance with the racist order and, therefore, were not entitled to preserve their status, their property, or even their lives. If America “is believed to be inherently discriminatory and racist in its treatment of minority groups, the very success—economic, political, cultural—of the Jewish group becomes suspect: it becomes a success based on collaboration with the enemy.” If Black anti-Semitism was primarily the work of the Black intelligentsia, then it was also “abetted and assisted and advised by a white, predominantly Jewish, intelligentsia.” This led to a vituperative at-
tack against radical Jewish writers and editors such as Andrew Kopkind, Robert and Barbara Silvers, Robert Scheer, Paul Jacobs, and Marvin Gar- son, whom Glazer accused of tolerating the Black use of antiwhite violence. After all, Glazer reasoned, if some WASP foundations and mayors saw anti-Semitism as an opportunity to divert Black rage, it was from the “experts,” many of whom were Jewish, that they learned this. It was from these “disinterested experts” that they got the idea that judgment by universal criteria was discriminatory, that revolutionaries were closer to the grass-roots needs of the people than were upholders of the “system,” and that bureaucracies robbed people of their freedom—“And if Jews are doing these things, a serious job of education must be undertaken among them.”

In the early 1960s, Glazer considered the achievements of “gifted young Jews” to the arts, to radical politics, and to the labor movement the Jews’ greatest gifts to the United States. Less than ten years later, he questioned whether Jewish radicalism had ultimately been a good thing after all. “Anyone concerned for the future of Jews in America who sees what the intellectuals have accomplished will certainly think twice before applauding or rejoicing in the Jewish role in the transformation of the United States.”

In the end, Glazer felt that the Jewish response to Black anti-Semitism depended on what Jews believed the character of American life to be. “If Jews really believe that America has not changed for the better and cannot change further, that democracy is a fraud, and that intelligence and political action within the scheme of the American political system can do nothing and have done nothing to improve the condition of minorities . . . [A]ll they can do is give the Blacks guns, and allow themselves to become the first victims.”

The vigorous frontal assault on Black Power and on Black anti-Semitism and those who appeared to countenance it clearly set the Jewish neoconservatives apart from the liberal Jewish establishment, which struggled to maintain an alliance with Blacks. Because of this, the neoconservatives and Commentary magazine occupied an influential but relatively isolated space in American Jewish life. The Jewish neocons broke cleanly with left-liberal Jews not only over the left’s perception that the threat of Black anti-Semitism and Black Power were not particularly harmful but also over the liberal perception that Jews would inevitably benefit from Black Power because it was forcing the United States to accept a broader concept of cultural diversity. The Jewish neocons had no illusions about what a pluralism defined along the rigid lines of race would mean for white ethnic groups, and they held fast to the belief that American Jews were better off
in a society that emphasized a strong common culture. Yet it was not the prospect of Jewish dissolution in a conglomeration of melted white ethnic groups that most concerned the neocons. What concerned them most was, rather, Black Power's espousal of involuntary ethnic association, the fear of which continued to characterize many of these writers from their days on the cosmopolitan left. Raab's and Glazer's conviction, for example, that the fundamental threat from Black Power derived from its threat to the "openness" and "freedom" of America betrayed their belief that the optimal life was not one in which individuals would be forced to submit to the demands and commitments of the groups to which they involuntarily belonged. In this, Glazer was exhibiting a remarkable ideological consistency. In the first edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, published in 1963, Glazer insisted not only that the various ethnic groups of New York City continued to be identifiable and important for social and political life but that they also no longer continued to exist as completely autonomous entities. "It is true that language and culture are very largely lost in the first and second generations," wrote Glazer and Moynihan of New York's ethnic groups, "and this makes the dream of 'cultural pluralism'... as unlikely as the melting pot." It was this perceived prohibition against cultural separatism that made *Beyond the Melting Pot* so optimistic in tone. In the Northern model of group relations, which Glazer endorsed and used to describe New York City, there existed competition between groups and individuals, but it was muted and conducted through effectiveness of organization and achievement, rather than through violence. Most important, it was individual choice, rather than law or custom, that determined the extent to which any person participated in the life of an ethnic group and the pace at which one assimilated. Put another way, in the Northern model described by Glazer and Moynihan, ethnic groups acted as intermediate social structures, but individual choice was preserved.

This ideal represented the viewpoint of the Jewish neocons, and it was the belief in individualism, an attachment to the ambiguity of modern life, more than anything else that inspired the neocons to oppose Black Power and the accompanying resurgence of white ethnic assertiveness in the early 1970s. In fact, the movement for white ethnic assertiveness drew as much fire from the Jewish neocons as had the Black Power movement, and it is here again that the neoconservative preoccupation with the discourse of liberalism can be observed.

The movement among some white ethnics, including some leading Jewish spokesmen, for a resurgence of ethnicity and rigid group barriers began
to take root in the late 1960s. While other objective conditions were responsible for the ethnic resurgence, it was clear that the Black Power search for Black identity helped to foster similar impulses in other ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{53} Fashionable t-shirts and buttons proclaiming “Polish Power” and “Italian Power” inspired Andrew Greeley to write in 1971 that “the Blacks have legitimated definitively the idea of cultural pluralism. . . . If it is all right for Blacks, then it ought to be all right for everyone else.”\textsuperscript{54}

Some Jewish communal leaders and social scientists seemed to identify strongly with the new pluralism espoused by Greeley, Novak, and others. Murray Friedman, the Pennsylvania area director of the American Jewish Committee and a teacher at the University of Pennsylvania, collected and edited \textit{Overcoming Middle-Class Rage}, a volume of essays and speeches on the subject, most of which originated in 1969 and 1970 when racial tensions were at a high.\textsuperscript{55} The new pluralism may have been a response to Black Power, though not entirely in the reactionary way that some critics believed it was.\textsuperscript{56} In effect, Black Power stripped white ethnicity of its myriad distinctions, and the advocates of the new pluralism, at least in part, were responding to this challenge. Yet the increasing assimilation and suburbanization of white ethnics during these years betrayed a tone of desperation in many white ethnic writers who seemed to insist that ethnicity had more meaning in the lives of white ethnics than the increasing convergence of cultural patterns suggested. Perhaps the last wall that separates ethnic groups, the intimate bond of marriage, crumbled rapidly for Jews almost as much as it had for other white ethnics. Between 1965 and 1975 the number of all Boston Jews opposed to intermarriage declined from 70 percent to 34 percent. By 1983 only 10 percent of non-Jewish Americans disapproved of marriage between Jews and Christians.\textsuperscript{57} These numbers foretold of the landmark findings of the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990, which indicated that more than 50 percent of marriages involving Jews after 1985 consisted of marriage to a non-Jewish partner.\textsuperscript{58} “At bottom,” wrote one observer, “what all this obviously implies is the increasingly rapid development of cultural patterns that are common to all Americans regardless of religion.” Warmly as many Americans embraced it, the ideal of cultural pluralism in the late 1960s and early 1970s was flawed in one crucial respect: it failed to allow for the fact that, in some of the most basic aspects of life, the melting pot, “far from being inoperative, was bubbling away more strongly than ever before.”\textsuperscript{59} Seen in this light, the “new pluralism” of the late 1960s and early 1970s was perhaps, more accurately,
a last gasp attempt by consciously ethnic whites to avoid the psychic costs of assimilation by institutionalizing group differences. As the historian John Higham has noted, “loud assertions of pluralism almost invariably betray fears of assimilation.”

The response of some of the writers around Commentary magazine to the “new pluralism” revealed a great deal about the limitations of the new post-1967 Jewish consciousness among neoconservatives. In his controversial 1968 memoir Making It, Norman Podhoretz wrote about the “brutal bargain” Jews had been required to make in their figurative journey from the Jewish ghetto to the WASP gentile world of the Manhattan literary scene. The brutality of the bargain consisted, of course, in the relinquishing of those cultural habits that the power brokers in Manhattan considered unbecoming. But despite Podhoretz’s difficulty with the bargain, he would always remain enamored of the idea of an American “common culture” that was coextensive with WASP culture. When he became editor of Commentary in 1960, Podhoretz held to the idea of a higher culture in which all could share, insisting that “it was possible to be an avant-garde intellectual and at the same time to be interested in things Jewish.” Because of its emphasis on individualism, the WASP “common culture” was benign for American Jews, and the attack by the ethnic activists on the WASP foundation of American culture disturbed Podhoretz greatly. To denigrate the ideal of individual autonomy “and to imply moreover that the only choice we are offered is to remain in the ethnic community or to become facsimile WASPS,” Podhoretz wrote in 1972, “is to falsify and impoverish our sense of what pluralism can mean in America.” Podhoretz concluded that, “because just such a false and impoverishing view is implicit in the attitudes of certain ethnic enthusiasts, I find myself more bothered by their movement than—as an old believer in the value of cultural pluralism—I would ever have expected to be.”

Podhoretz’s belief that the new ethnic particularists, first Black, then white, denied the existence of a common culture in America inspired him to publish two important articles in 1972 on the subject of the new pluralism. The articles were written by two scholars, Harold Isaacs and Robert Alter, both of whom had exhibited in their scholarship a commitment to the idea of ethnic particularism. These writers used the occasion of Murray Friedman’s book Overcoming Middle-Class Rage and Michael Novak’s The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics (1972) to express concern about the new pluralism, stemming from their perception that the new pluralists were
advocating the idea that an individual’s primary commitment was to his or her particular ethnic group.64

Isaacs, the author of a seminal work on the impact of the postcolonial age on Black American identity, felt that Friedman’s refusal to assign “special virtue or culpability” to any one group amounted to a “dog-eat-dog” philosophy that opened the door for the legitimation of allegiance to such groups as the Ku Klux Klan.65 Another concern for Isaacs was the various laws new pluralists were trying to get enacted that would institutionalize the recognition of ethnic group viewpoints. One of these bills—the Schweiker-Pucinski ethnic-studies bill, proposed to Congress in 1972—proposed federal funding of ethnic studies courses.66 In response to Schweiker-Pucinski, Isaacs wrote, “[L]et anyone do what he can to instill whatever version of ethnic pride he wants in his fellows, but let him do it on his own time. In the public domain, we have to live uncontrolled by any single view and open to all views.”67

Robert Alter, a major Jewish literary critic, took pains to detail the very thin but important line between nationalism and ethnic chauvinism. In discussing Novak’s The Unmeltable Ethnics, Alter claimed that Novak went way beyond the old ethnic politics of group self-interest to propose that ethnicity was the one “true and salubrious means to a viable sense of self-hood.”68 What concerned Alter most about Novak’s book was the insistence that “people uncertain of their own identity are not wholly free,” and he endorsed the flip side of Novak’s ethnic coin: “People preoccupied with their own identity are not wholly free.”69 There may be a nucleus of truth, Alter conceded, to Novak’s assertion that “when a person thinks, more than one generation’s passions and images think in him,” but it made Alter uneasy to present the individual as a “passive conduit” for the collective past and to place so much stress on the nonrational. Alter’s fears were most aroused by Novak’s claim that a Catholic writer could not relate to Jewish writers on the primary level. Claiming that there was an ability to transcend differences by people who really wanted to, and that the language of the common intellectual life allowed him to relate to Edmund Wilson more than to the thoughts of the Hasidic Satmar Rebbe, Alter wrote that he shared with the non-Jewish critic “an embracing realm of discourse with ... an engagement in American culture and modern experience, and to that basic commonality of enterprise the differential element of Wilson’s background is incidental.” It was this aspect of modern culture for which we should all be grateful, Alter wrote, “for the fact that a person can at least in part free himself from subjugation (in some degree
it is always that) to the community and the past in order to realize his selfhood according to his own needs." 70

As the most distinct remnant of the New York Intellectual milieu, the Jewish neoconservatives took the transformative value of modern American life as their highest ideal, and they clearly preferred to live with the ambiguity of modern Jewish existence, rather than attempt to prescribe any specific program of Jewish commitment or responsibility. In this sense, neoconservatism was, in some very precise ways, a continuation of the postwar Jewish engagement with liberalism and the modern experience of emancipation. Central to this experience has been the negotiation of a tenuous balance between prejudice and freedom. In most instances, the focus on securing freedom by eliminating prejudice has denied to Jews the ability to face the growing dilemma of Jewish meaning in a free society and has redirected the attention of Jewish thinkers toward the world of external politics. As one historian has written, neoconservatism was part and parcel of the postwar shift in American Jewish life from "culture to causes." Whereas liberal and leftist Jews believed that serving the Jewish interest meant a commitment to progressive and radical politics, Podhoretz and the neoconservatives believed that the "American Jewish community would flourish best in a society in which conservative values and policies were ascendant." 71 The linkage between the two viewpoints involves the common definition of Jewish well-being. Both liberals and neoconservatives saw Jewish safety and vitality in a program of integration and the strengthening of the "common culture" held to be the highest American ideal. The difference between them was that liberals looked to Blacks, despite the advent of Black Power, as the primary catalyst for fulfilling the dream of a truly free society, while the neocons believed that Black Power had become the primary obstacle to achieving that cosmopolitan ideal. While the Jewish neoconservatives were more forthright in admitting the limitations of their program for Jewish culture, both movements were singularly committed to achieving political objectives consonant with Jewish safety and freedom, rather than with the search for Jewish meaning in modern America.