Blacks and Jews in the City of Opportunity:  
Newark, New Jersey, 1900-1967

There are two enormously compelling constructions of American history, which for the longest time shaped the way we think about modern American life. The first of these constructions goes something like this: American cities are springboards for the uplift of ethnic groups, including the Irish and Germans immigrants of the mid-nineteenth century and the eastern and southern Europeans who came after them. According to this construction, cities, despite the hardships they impose on newcomers, serve the great purpose of giving them safety in numbers. Cities, with their rich mix of travail and opportunity, give to ethnic groups a sense of their difference within the larger society and the motivation to overcome legal obstacles to equal opportunity. Cities, in short, give ethnics a chance to secure a place of the industrial/commercial marketplace.

The other construction has to do with the perceived links that exist between blacks and Jews in modern America. They are seen as two groups who have fought together against racial and religious bigotry. During the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, many Americans believed that blacks and Jews formed a grand alliance which succeeded, like no other social reform effort, in toppling racial segregation as a way of life in the South. This construction also links the symbols of black American and Jewish history: the ordeal of bondage and other forms of past persecution. Blacks and Jews, it has been argued, form an inter-ethnic and interracial bond which to some was encouraging, to others dangerous. They are the nation's Seventh Sons "gifted with second-sight in this American world."

In recent years, however, these two interrelated constructions have lost much of their resonance. Most Americans now see cities as virtual wastelands for the predictably poor of our society. They are hardly recognizable by those who left them more than a generation ago. Cities now symbolize the failure of many of their inhabitants rather than their uplift. Indeed, most Americans have drawn the conclusion that in order to move up in American society, people had to move out of the cities that settled their forebears.
The belief in a black/Jewish alliance is also a causality of contemporary America. Tensions between the two groups are the stuff of the evening news and highly publicized harangues about the slave trade, the movie industry, and what one group has done to the other. On issues that range from public policy positions on affirmative action to shock treatment history lessons, it is now clear that if a formidable alliance ever existed between blacks and Jews, it didn't extend very deeply or very far beyond the civil rights movement.

This afternoon I would like to take a look at these two historical constructions through the prism of the history of Newark. Most Americans know of Newark through its infamous image in the national press. It has long been seen as a metaphor for all that is wrong with urban America. Newark is seen as a theater of wasted lives, a city which may have been great in the past but is no longer. It has become caricatured as a warehouse for the poor black and brown residents who have no other place to live.

What is most striking about that image, other than its one-dimensionality, is its recent usage. Throughout nearly half of the twentieth century, Newark was seen as one of the nation's most vital cities. It was a city for two generations of immigrants, which included the Jews, and migrants, which included the blacks, who in settling there gave added potency to the ritual of ethnic uplift in America.

The image of Newark as a great city was strongest at the beginning of this century when it was the commercial, social, and political hub of New Jersey. It was, as local civic and business leaders boasted, the City of Opportunity, which in retrospect was the first of three twentieth-century marketing devices designed to remake Newark's image as a gritty, time worn, old industrial town.

There was much to substantiate such an image. At the turn of the century Newark was one of the nation's most important urban centers. It was one of the leading centers in insurance and banking. Over the next two decades, the growth of its chemical and electrical industries nearly compensated for the decline of some of the older smoke stack industries. By 1920, local lore held that the intersection
Broad and Market Streets was one of the nation's busiest. A housing boon during the decade created new neighborhoods at the southern end of the City, in an area once known as Lyons farms. Driving the optimism of those years was the best barometer of a great city--an increasing population. In 1900, Newark residents numbered just over 246,000; by 1910, they would increase to over 347,000, and by 1920 to over 414,000.

Newark's thriving commerce and industries, its proximity to the Golden Door of New York, and its tradition of ethnic villages helped to make the settlement of all sorts of newcomers a major feature of its history in the twentieth century. Blacks and Jews were among the most prominent of the groups who came to Newark to escape terrible circumstances. Both groups found that the City's racial and ethnic relations were benign when compared to many other cities. There were no race riots or other dramatic forms of racial/ethnic confrontations that would stem the tide of blacks and Jews seeking some semblance of a Promised Land.

Within that milieu both blacks and Jews laid the foundations for their twentieth-century communities. Both groups located their religious institutions at the spiritual center of their communities, which fostered a sense of their ethical responsibilities and ethnic identity. Both groups developed a leadership class that articulated their interests to the Protestant elites who still held considerable power in political and economic affairs. And both groups endured the travail and the promise inherent in their ghettos: the Jews in the old Third Ward, the blacks in the southern end of town, but increasingly also in the Third Ward, as the Jews moved south along High Street and then west into the Clinton Hill and Weequahic sections.

During the early twentieth century, both groups were objectified in what was then an ethnic town still dominated by a largely WASP power structure. They lived, often in close proximity, in some of the City's shabbiest housing districts in the Old Third Ward and complained about the symbolic and concrete indignities faced by all newcomers. They were viewed as strangers in the local press, which of
Jews from the East European diaspora brought to the City the customs of the native lands and their own particular orthodoxies. The blacks did as well, although the American baggage their carried was historically familiar. Immediately on their settlement they were viewed as the people on the bottom.

Although the common perception of blacks and Jews as unkempt strangers in early twentieth century, Newark helped to link them in the imagination of life in the ghetto, there were to be profound differences in their ethnic trajectories and in the way they were able to exploit the promises of Newark's future. Generally, blacks were never able, as did the Jews and other white ethnic groups, to marshal their collective identity and culture into a formidable economic ethos. Over the course of the twentieth century, some blacks made it into the working and middle classes, but as a group blacks remained a largely poor people and underappreciated people. Their ghetto experience, as the historian Gilbert Osofsky observed in 1965, endured. Black progress over the legacy of nineteenth-century slavery and racism was their greatest achievement, but that measure of their genius was dwarfed by the reality of inter-generational poverty. The plight of the poor black Newarkers continued while other groups, especially Jewish Newarkers, were experiencing upward mobility—a disparity of opportunities and fortunes in modern life that reinforced the nation's oldest stereotypes of blacks as an anomaly and Jews as successful.

What is perhaps most striking about the enduring perception that blacks in Newark chronically fail while their white ethnic neighbors succeed is that it obscures efforts by blacks to mimic what had worked for other groups. For example, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, the recently arrived migrants focused much of their energy on educational advancement; they did so more than any group in the City except for the Jews. Indeed, one of the major reasons why blacks came north to places like Newark was to advance themselves educationally. The early black community was also economically vital. In 1920 the black community published The Classified Directory of Negro
Business Interests and Profession of Essex County. It revealed the extraordinary extent to which local blacks had established enterprises "from beading to boot-black parlors and from funeral directors to furniture repairers." Their community, moreover, was thick with all sorts of religious and secular organizations that addressed the spiritual, social and professional needs of the group. Black newspapers told of successful blacks, they articulated grievances against the white majority, and carried the news of the day from the vantage point of their black patrons. Not unlike the Jews, early twentieth-century black Newark had to work through the discreet divisions along regional lines—the divisions between migrants from the upper South and those from the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama. Blacks, in short, worked to modernize their intra-group relations across the lines of class, gender, culture, and history.

Becoming a modern people in a modern city, however, did not mean that the obstacle of race would be brought down. As late as the 1950s, blacks were still barely able to change the conditions their grandparents faced a generation earlier. The first black ghetto in the Third Ward was transformed into a larger and increasingly more problematic second ghetto that extended far beyond the Old Third Ward. By the 1960s, the black ghetto stood beneath the shadows of the new high rise corporate headquarters along Broad Street. It was without much of a political voice; its businessmen found it virtually impossible to do business outside of the race, and its vital statistics likened it to a Third World settlement.

In dramatic contrast, Newark's Jews benefited from the promise of the City of Opportunity. The push cart peddler, who was such a fixture in the early twentieth century imagery of Newark Jewry, became a distant memory by the middle of the twentieth century. The Old Third Ward ghetto, which had settled Eastern European Jews since the late nineteenth century, was abandoned for the gilded Jewish neighborhoods of Clinton Hill and Weequahic. Jewish life embraced and enhanced important sectors of Newark life, including education, business, philanthropy, the arts, political reform and
activism, and sports. Indeed, despite its pockets of poverty and the divisions between the Orthodox and Reform sects of Judaism, and political conservatives and radicals, Newark's Jewish community became by the end of World War II one of the cities most vibrant entities. It was, in short, emblematic of the ethnic success story.

The ability of Jews to prosper in Newark while blacks lagged far behind was, of course, hardly a unique local phenomenon. Throughout urban America, the differences between the groups were equally perceptible. Historians have shown that Jews brought to American cities a cultural repertoire, which enabled them to move forward with remarkable speed after the first generation in the ghetto. It was a quality which was noticed with increasing frequency in the local press and in the rhetoric of Jewish leaders; it was manifested in the remarkable success of Jewish businessmen turned philanthropists and social engineers, and it was undergirded by the fact that the Jewish social service centers, the grand temples of worship along High Street and Clinton Avenue, Beth Israel Hospital--the bricks and mortar of Jewish achievement--symbolized like no other evidence the rise of a community.

In 1935, then, the Newark Star Ledger observed that the Jews "have worked individually and with rivalries more bitter among each other than between them and other nationalities, they are one of the most successful groups in this sprawling industrial-mercantile-residential district which is known to the United States Census Bureau as Metropolitan New Jersey."

The perception that Jews were a thriving group could, of course, be criticized as an over simplification. Not all Jews were doing well in Newark between 1900 and 1967, and there was at least a concern that making it here carried certain liabilities, as any one who has read Philip Roth would know. Yet, the perception of Jewish success made sense given the spectacular achievements made since the mid-nineteenth century. Newark's Jews seemed relentless in developing an institutional life that insulated them from the larger Christian communities and gave their own community a sense of its integrity. After the 1846 founding of B'nai Jeshurun, two other early synagogues were formed, B'nai
Abraham (1855) and Oheb Shalom (1860). By the mid-1930s, there were approximately twenty-six Jewish congregations and scores of organizations that addressed the social, intellectual and moral interests of the group. The ability of Newark Jewry to at once protect their interests and culture while moving ahead in American society led to a rather extraordinary amount of interest in how their success was managed. By the mid 1920s, the local press featured many articles on the history and achievements of the City's Jewish community. "Age-Old Customs Survive Among Jews of Newark" ran the headline from a February 17, 1924 article in the Newark Sunday Call; "Newark's Jews Grow With City" claimed another headline from the Call on March 29, 1936; and "Newman Early Jewish Religious Leader" was the headline in the Newark Star Ledger on November 10, 1938. These are just a few examples of local recognition of the importance and complexity of Newark's Jewish community. There were many others in the mainstream press and in the Jewish press. What Newarkers were being given was a classic portrait of white ethnic mobility, a portrait of hardworking settlers, exceptionally talented individuals in business and the professions, and a community whose traditional culture seemed in concert with the ethos of American progress.

And so, in looking at the twentieth century experience of blacks and Jews we are confronted by the untidy juxtaposition of racism and the promise of opportunity. Generally, white ethnics were able to establish what the historian John Bodnar calls beachheads in employment, housing and institutional services. Those beachheads marked the distance between what white ethnics could accomplish in the City and what blacks could not. It was a distance which kept the color line alive and made it all the more formidable as another tide of blacks came north to the City of Opportunity after World War II.

In the years that followed the Great Depression, the economic and social achievements of Jews and other white ethnics took on greater meaning as Newark, like scores of other old industrial cities, began to decline. The Depression took a great toll on Newark's industrial base. Many industries and
businesses left for the suburbs or other places once the economy recovered in the 1940s, as did most of its middle-class residents by the 1970s.

At the same time, the fortunes of the City were compromised by a litany of public policies that reflected racial and ethnic biases. Federal housing policies, for example, red-lined interracial neighborhoods where blacks and Jews once lived; federal housing policies virtually placed upon Newark the sole responsibility of housing the poor of Essex County; federal and state highway policies made it easier to live in the suburbs and work in the City than to live and work in the City. The federal census of Newark's population revealed the consequences of that massive exodus. In 1940, the City's population was 429,260; it would rise by 1950 to 438,776. But within another ten years, it would decline to 405,220, then in 1970 to 382,417. By 1980, it would decline to 329,248 and to 275,221 by 1990.

It has become a part of local lore to blame Newark's decline on the influx of poor blacks and Latinos. But, in fact, just as no group can be held responsible for Newark's dramatic rise as a city, no group should be held responsible for its equally dramatic decline. The decline of Newark was a part of the general decline of old American cities in the twentieth century and the rise of what the historian Michael Ebner calls the dual metropolis. As the old cities decayed, they were surrounded by a glittering array of shopping malls, corporate parks and residential communities whose newness seemingly underscored the inferiority of urban life. Blacks and Jews didn't cause this relatively new metropolitan landscape. It was actually a prominent example of the ravages of public policy on urban and suburban America. Although many old cities experienced much the same decline after World War II, few rivaled the losses which Newark sustained in population, vitality, and prestige.

Stigmatized as an unlivable city, the flight from Newark to the suburbs, then, was at once pragmatic and fervently encouraged. Against the backdrop of a City that had lost much of its spirit because of reckless and inane public policies, political corruption, and the continued influx of the poor,
Blacks and Jews were both victims of post-war Newark, though their victimization was profoundly different. Blacks, who were largely excluded from the suburbs by their poverty and racial exclusion, were virtually trapped in the City. And Jews, who were able at last to flirt with the prospect of becoming a part of the American dream of success--life in the suburbs--left Newark as participants in what Philip Roth called a movement which took them "further and further west, towards the edge of Newark, then out of it, and up the slope of the Orange Mountains, until they reached the crest and started down the other side, pouring into Gentile territory as the Scotch-Irish had poured through the Cumberland Gap." Blacks became victims of urban decline and Jews became escapees of that decline, leaving behind, perhaps all too quickly, what it took three generations of Jews to build. In this sense, both groups were victims of a crumbling City.

Even before Newark witnessed some of the nation's worse racial rioting in July 1967, the distance between the two groups was vast. The riots were a watershed in the history of Newark for blacks and Jews. They were as destructive as they were memorable. Most important, the riots symbolized for many Americans the death of Newark. On the local front, they held different meanings for blacks and Jews. For many blacks the riots represented the culmination of many years of frustration and anger over bad housing, economic exploitation, police brutality and slights by the white ethnic population. Even now, some blacks refer to the riots as a rebellion, as if to give them a moral legitimacy usually associated with the struggle of virtue against evil. For some Jews, whose businesses were destroyed by the riots and whose culture was targeted for contempt, the riots were seen as a local pogrom. Max Geltman in his book, The Confrontation, tells of embittered Jews who remembered black rioters shouting "'Get Goldberg! as they ravaged business establishments without care whether anyone was in them or not." One Jewish merchant told Geltman that "when the mob ran toward Bergen Street, he was reminded of the tales of pogroms his father used to tell him when he was still alive."
As such, the 1967 riots quickened the pace of Jewish flight from Newark. Where the Jewish population in the City had been estimated at nearly 70,000 when the State of Israel was founded in 1948, by the end of the decade of the 1970s Jewish residential presence in Newark had dwindled to about 6,000. In 1983, Professor Edward Shapiro observed that the flight of the Jews from Newark made all the more problematic the future of Jewish life and culture in what used to be the eighth largest concentration of Jews in America. "There is no kosher restaurant, nor is there a bakery meeting acceptable rabbinical standards. The community lacks a yeshiva high school; students in this age group must be transported either to Elizabeth, New Jersey, or to New York City. More importantly," notes Shapiro, "there is a lacuna of serious learning and a general disregard for the intellectual dimensions of traditional Judaism."

There are, of course, memories of old Newark which blacks also hold dear. In my oral history interviews on the history of twentieth-century black Newark, I have been told of the days when the Old Third Ward was a thriving black ghetto. I have been told of the good old days when there was a Negro baseball team, the Newark Eagles, and a street life in the black community that was quintessentially urbane. Indeed, most blacks who remember the days when the ghetto was hardly one-dimensional lament the deterioration of what was for them a grand city despite the racial barriers they faced.

In the memories of old black and old Jewish Newark can be found the essential and most tragic conflict over the evolution of the City. For many blacks, Newark is remembered as a City that conspired against their best interests as parents, workers and Christians. Blacks remember that many opportunities for advancement were not open to them and they resent the notion widely held by white ethnics that Newark was equally tolerant to all of its residents. They also believe that local white ethnics, including Jews, prospered at the expense of black progress. Their memory reflects the
anomaly of black life in Newark: the City of Opportunity was divided along the color line and for blacks there was no Golden Door!

But for Jews, those who left Newark in the great flight between the 1950s and 1970s, the City of Opportunity remains a legitimate construction of the past. They look with fondness upon their past lives spent in a city that was among the nation's most important centers of American Jewry. They remember the neat neighborhoods that their parents settled beyond the old Jewish ghetto. They remember the great old days spent at the YM-YWHA on High Street, Weequahic High School, the diners along Elizabeth Avenue, and shopping at Bamberger's, Klein's and Hahne's department stores. Many especially remember the rich religious life found in Newark's many synagogues that over the past generation have become Christian edifices. At present, there is but one synagogue in the City.

This conflict between the memories of two groups, which contributed to Newark’s importance as a city also, embodies a fundamental struggle over the meaning of urban America. What is the influence of cities on those who prosper in them vis a vis those who become the victims of urban living? Why do some ethnic groups make it cities like Newark while others seemingly fail to take advantage of the urban experience? What is the relative influence of Jewishness and blackness in urban America? And, finally, what is an appropriate way for blacks and Jews to remember their respective pasts in the city? These questions resist easy answers, but it is now time to raise them.

As Newark's twentieth century history draws to a close, I think it best to remember that during a time when the fortunes of blacks and Jews were veering off in different directions, there were many instances of wholesome inter-ethnic and interracial contact between the two groups. Both came to Newark seeking a better life and both used their culture and their experiences in the past to prepare themselves for the hardships of the City. They interacted with one another on the streets of the Third Ward, in the labor movement, in the shops and offices of the City. Blacks kids knew something of the Jewish faith; indeed, some old black Newarkers knew more than a few words of Yiddish and it is true
that Jews came to appreciate the beauty of Afro-American culture while both groups lived in the City. During the early years of the Great Migration of blacks from the South, Jewish merchants were the first to add to their stock the vegetables, fruits and grains known to black Southerners. Black newspapers in the 1940s excoriated the Nazis, wrote proudly of the role of black troops in defeating the Axis powers, and editorialized the shame and the horror of the Holocaust. Black and Jewish reformers were involved in the Newark Urban League, the Interracial Council, the Socialist Party, and the Congress of Racial Equality. And when blacks mounted a decade long struggle to desegregate City Hospital, they found a friend in the City's first Jewish mayor, Meyer Ellenstein. These are just a few examples of how Newark, the City of Opportunity, was an arena for the intersection of black and Jewish life.

At a time when history is often put to narrow minded purposes, it would be worthy of us all to consider how complicated were the lives of blacks and Jews during the years 1900-1967. Those two generations of change embodied much of what is decent and memorable in both groups. Recognizing that both groups want to be remembered with empathy and honor is the first step we must all take toward the future.

Clement Alexander Price
Professor of History
Department of History
Rutgers University
Newark, New Jersey 07102

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