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### Jewish Power in America: Myth and Reality (Review)

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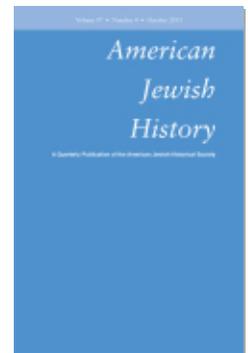
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## Jewish Power in America: Myth and Reality (review)

Michael Galchinsky

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*Jewish Power in America: Myth and Reality.* By Henry L. Feingold. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008. xiv + 164 pp.

In 2007, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer published *The Israel Lobby*, claiming that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its neoconservative allies were misshaping American foreign policy in accordance with Israeli interests. In *Jewish Power in America*, Henry L. Feingold, an elder statesman among historians of the American Jewish experience, offers a counter-polemic. He identifies the belief in American Jews' outsized influence with the age-old antisemitic conspiracy theory that Jews constitute a demonic cabal. Through case studies of American Jews' historical attempts to exercise political power, Feingold demonstrates that the conspiracy theory misunderstands the nature of Jews' power and the extent of their influence. He argues that American Jews have been able, to a limited extent, to exercise "ideational" or "soft" power—basically, moral suasion carried out through effective organization and public relations campaigns. Yet their soft power has succeeded only when there has been a "confluence of interests" between Jewish goals and American national priorities (36). Where such a confluence did not exist, American Jews' best efforts have failed to gain their political ends.

American Jews have succeeded at times in influencing the political process, he argues, because they have mastered the skills of democratic organizing, training generations of activists coming up through the intricate system of communal affairs. Groups like the National Conference for Soviet Jewry (NCSJ) were successful, for example, in convincing the American people that the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate would be a key sign of the success of American Cold War politics, consonant with the nation's values and interests. This public relations success enabled NCSJ to work with Richard Perle, a member of Senator Henry Jackson's staff and a key figure among the neoconservatives, to draft and gain support for the Jackson-Vanik amendment linking Jewish emigration to the U.S.S.R.'s obtaining Most Favored Nation trade status.

Influence depends on confluence. Hence, American Jews' success is conditional. Despite some Jews' high profile positions in the Roosevelt administration and the community's disproportionate support for the social welfare state—called by antisemitic wags at the time the "Jew Deal"—Jews' soft power was ineffective during World War II in persuading Roosevelt to enter the war earlier to stop the Holocaust. Roosevelt did not believe most Americans would see intervening in Europe to save

Jews as a reason to go to war. Even during the Soviet Jewry campaign, American Jews' influence was limited; during the Nixon administration, Henry Kissinger argued that pressing the U.S.S.R. on Jews' human rights interfered with the détente policy. Again, while the Israel lobby has used the American political process effectively to advocate for aid, political cover, and weaponry, it has never been as effective as the exaggerated narrative suggests. Jews were unable to prevent the sale of AWACs technology to Saudi Arabia or Hawk missiles to Jordan or to convince the U.S. to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital (73). Feingold points to recent flare-ups between US and Israeli officials with regard to the war in Iraq (Israelis thought the focus should have been on Iran) and the West Bank settlements to suggest that the alliance of mutual interests is not unassailable.

Even the Jews' most successful projections of their interests on the national stage do not signify the kind of unity that the myth of hyper Jewish power imagines. Feingold calls attention to Jews' internal factionalism due to the varying aims of the alphabet soup of organizations. He explains that during the Soviet emigration debacle, the Israeli government clashed with American Jewish agencies like the Joint Distribution Committee over the question of whether Soviet Jews should be compelled to immigrate to Israel or be permitted to "drop out" of *aliyah* and immigrate to the U.S. Feingold points out that no organization can be considered the representative voice of American Jewry. Whether the group is AIPAC, the American Jewish Committee, or the Conference of the Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the mandate of their leaders is only to speak for their group's interests. President Roosevelt may have called Rabbi Stephen Wise the Jewish pope, but Feingold makes clear that the United Jewish Communities' slogan "We Are One" has become mere fodder for intracommunal jokes.

If even the avowedly Jewish organizations do not present a unified front, Feingold asks, how is it possible to see more general political movements like the New Left and the neoconservative movement as Jewish? He points out that most Jews in these movements have had only vague affiliations, if any, with Jewish ideology or organization. Moreover, he claims that to identify Jewish power with either radicalism or neo-conservatism is misleading because both of these political movements are more extreme than the majority of American Jews, who hew to a position "slightly left of center" (86).

Feingold offers no social-scientific evidence to support this claim, in keeping with the sparse scholarly apparatus of the book as a whole—one of the indications that the book aims to reach beyond the academy. The tone also suggests a broader aim and personal investment. The chapters

on the New Left and the neoconservatives sometimes speak of Jews in the first person plural, rather than the third person typical of historical studies, and veer toward sarcasm, as if to imply that Feingold does not want middle-of-the-road liberal Jews to be tarred with the extremist brush.

The book has one conceptual limitation: it does not posit a satisfying historical explanation for the theory of inordinate American Jewish power. Feingold argues that the source of this theory “remains a mystery whose roots may lie in prehistoric myths and fears,” as exemplified by the ancient deicide charge, and the myth of the Elders of Zion (117). Yet identifying the recent animus against the Israel lobby with a primeval antisemitism obscures the motivation of those groups who express it, such as the anti-Zionist coalition in the international community, or the activists and scholars whose sympathy with the Palestinian cause sometimes leads to knee-jerk anti-Zionism, or those who see Israel as an obstacle to peace. Where the stakes are so high, it is no great mystery why some members of these groups have adopted a spurious explanation. They will use any means to discredit current Jewish political aims. One does not expect a historian to resort to a “prehistoric” theory of Jew hatred. Feingold needs only to correct the record, as he does splendidly in this important book.

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*Race and Religion among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights.* By Henry Goldschmidt. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. xi + 281 pp.

This sometimes gripping ethnography begins with a wonderful vignette about misunderstanding between blacks and Jews—“intimate strangers”—in a hot, sweltering laundromat in Crown Heights, Brooklyn (6). The rest of the book unpacks how these two groups, Lubavitch Hasidim and mainly West Indians, who clashed so violently in 1991, make sense of their differences. Whiteness in Crown Heights, unlike elsewhere in the United States, is uniquely Jewish. But the Jews of Crown Heights see themselves as Jews, not whites. For them, the neighborhood consists of besieged Jews living amid aggressive Gentiles. Yet West Indians recognize a different neighborhood: disempowered blacks segregated from privileged whites. This difference, argues Goldschmidt, makes a difference. The thesis of the book is that Crown Height disrupts any simplistic or essentialized classifications of sameness and difference in contemporary America.