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Democratic Dreams

Richard M. Valelly

The Death of An American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions

Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon

The Free Press, $24.95

Hearing door chimes but not expecting visitors, Rabbi Gerald Zelermyer of southern Mattapan's Temple Beth Hillel in Boston opened the door of the temple's parsonage late one afternoon on June 27, 1969. He had just come home from a day of meetings with concerned African-American and white clergy from the Mattapan and Dorchester areas of Boston. The topic of their discussion was panic selling by whites in response to fears of minority influx. Standing in front of the 28-year-old rabbi were two young men, both black. One thrust a note toward the rabbi, who held it long enough to make out the words, "lead the Jewish racists out of Mattapan." Suddenly, the other threw acid into the rabbi's face. Had Rabbi Zelermyer not turned his face he would have been blinded for life.

Preparing for the next Sabbath in great physical and emotional pain, Rabbi Zelermyer wondered how Temple Beth Hillel would survive. The acid thrown in his face was a strike against the 300 families in the congregation and against their 5-day-a-week Hebrew school; the last such school in Boston, it served 125 children. He even speculated that real estate agents profiting from the panic selling had put his assailants up to the job. Rabbi Zelermyer had been sucked into the violence surrounding neighborhood change in Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester. That change began in the 1950s with the departure from Boston of a number of major, longstanding Jewish institutions. Temple Mishkan Tefila relocated to Roxbury, where it had been since 1925, to Newton. Hebrew Teacher's College moved to Brookline. An urban community that once numbered 82,000 in the 1940s shrank to about 53,000 by the late 1960s. In the process the level of municipal services in Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester dropped, intersecting a rising level of crime.

But many Jews remained in Mattapan (the precise numbers are a matter of controversy). And many who stayed hoped that hopeful suggestion carries important lessons for us now. Others, but their treatment of the black community has none of the depth and insight of their characterization of the Jewish community. Indeed, they hardly recognize it as a community. A second study, from the black side of the process, is waiting to be written.

Levine and Harmon are more successful, however, in their description of the pressures that helped to kill the ideal of inter-racial, neighborhood democracy. The first pressure arose, ironically, from the government of Boston-area Judaism, for which Levine and Harmon have scathing criticism. Government by makkheker, say the authors, lacks internal democracy, accountability, and debate. Their critique has not gone unmet — it was the centerpoint of the spirited, instructive exchange in the Jewish Advocate (March 27 - April 2, April 10 - 16, and May 1 - 7, 1992) between the authors and Gerald Gamm, an accomplished student of Boston social and political history who teaches at the University of Rochester. Gamm suggests that the nature of Jewish institutions determined...
The second source of pressure came from bankers and other wealthy Boston elites.

working and middle-class Jews of Mattapan and Dorchester. But they did too lit­tle too late. According to Levine and Harmon, the roots of that failure lay in a combination of class bias, a fixation on the glories of the civil rights movement, a shallow optimism about the happy future of the African-American community, and a belief that they knew best how to protect the Jewish community in a hostile world.

The second source of pressure came from bankers and other wealthy Boston elites. The analysis of the role played by these elites focuses on a private, federally-backed mortgage program. Announced in 1968, in the wake of Martin Luther King’s assassination, the program was put together by B-BURG, the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group. Levine and Harmon provide telling details about the people who established such organizations as B-BURG and The Vault, Boston’s private business round table. While portraying themselves as statesmanlike emissaries from the private sector to a helpless public sector, they in fact come across as flawed, even narrow people. There were, of course, men and women of good will who sincerely believed that they were creatively solving social problems and adjusting conflict. But their capacity to address social ills was fatally undermined by their resistance to public accountability.

In response to private complaints, B-BURG made clear its wish for complete discretion. If B-BURG required federal guarantees, why couldn’t politicians at the federal level — the Massachusetts congressional delegation, for instance — have demanded strong, substantive accountability in return?

S
o alternative policies were possi­ble. Ultimately, however, the details of these alternatives are less important than the recognition that racial and ethnic divisions are simply not “natural” or inevitable, but are instead the product of social and political hierarchies. As such, those false social divisions can be overcome by people who genuinely care about democracy. Levine and Harmon offer a critical book, but it’s not a complaining book. Instead it argues — though not as fully as one might like — that ethnic and racial frustra­tion are at once the cause and the conse­quence of democratic social policy.

Neighborhood democracy requires very hard work — but there were people who gave that kind of hard work. In a more democratic society their struggle just might have paid off. Next to the story that Levine and Harmon tell, in other words, is another story that could have been told. They write their book so that the counterfactual story about the realization of democratic possibilities is always there, between the lines.

The actual history is truly tragic. Blacks got lousy housing, Jews got hurt, though both wanted the same thing in the same place — a decent neighbor­hood. The other story, of what could have been, is encouraging. It is a vision of what America ought to be. We very much need a comparable vision to guide our national struggle both with the con­sequences of the growing political isola­tion of America’s cities, and with the obstacles to building a working democ­racy — together.

“...in a 1987 interview with Levine and Harmon, former Boston mayor Kevin White speculated that pressure from the mainstream Jewish leadership would have given him the resources to proceed with instituting accountability. Far better that White and others had asked ques­tions earlier. If a program like B-BURG’s federally insured mortgage program was the quickest, most efficient way to meet black housing needs in Boston, then was it really necessary for B-BURG to have complete discretion? If B-BURG required federal guarantees, why couldn’t politicians at the federal level — the Massa­chusetts congressional delegation, for instance — have demanded strong, substantive accountability in return?"