SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

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2006

Volume 9

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Southern Jewish History is a publication of the Southern Jewish Historical Society available by subscription and a benefit of membership in the Society. The opinions and statements expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the journal or of the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts, America: History and Life, Index to Jewish Periodicals, Journal of American History,* and *Journal of Southern History.*

Southern Jewish History acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation of New York and the Gale Foundation of Beaumont, Texas.

ISSN 1521-4206

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REVIEW ESSAY

Jews, Whiteness, and Civil Rights

by

Ronald H. Bayor

Goldstein, Eric L., *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 307 pages.

Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 351 pages.

Eric Goldstein and Cheryl Greenberg on the surface have written very different books—one that concentrates on Jewish identity and the other on black-Jewish relations. Yet, the issue for both is twentieth-century Jewish acceptance as unambiguous whites and the impact of this recognition on their perception as "others" in the American ethnic/racial spectrum. Can Jews be an out minority if they are part of the white elite and can there be a natural affinity with blacks, the historic outsider group? Furthermore, if Jews try to maintain their identity as a distinct group, do they take the chance of losing their white acceptance and becoming classified like blacks as the racial other?

These are basic questions for America's Jews and both books provide well-researched and trenchant answers. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Goldstein meticulously traces the way Jews described their place in America—from race to ethnicity to religion to a combination of religion and ethnic/tribe. It is clear from studies of German, Italian, and Irish newcomers to these shores that moving from in-between peoples to fully accepted whites was a strong desire. This shift, according to Goldstein, appeared more divisive for Jews than other European immigrants.

The desire to be part of general white society clashed with a need to be a distinct group. There was a cost to assimilation. As Goldstein also notes and Greenberg takes as the main theme of her book, this dualism was an important part of how Jews and blacks interacted. There was a continuing desire, especially among the Jewish leadership, to cast the group as a persecuted minority that must join with others who were outside mainstream America's approval. But Jews, as both authors relate, had also made it in America and increasingly blacks saw them, as in the Ocean Hill-Brownville controversy, as part of the oppressive white society. As Goldstein notes, trying to fit into America's black-white racial division presented Jews with contradictory feelings. Jewish navigation of this fissure became the most significant aspect of adjusting to U.S. culture. Most authors of whiteness studies relate the benefits of becoming fully white; Goldstein skillfully discusses the Jewish problems with this transition.

Some adjustment especially was needed when eastern European Jews became the dominant Jewish cohort in the United States. Fleeing European persecution, these immigrants had difficulty accepting the harsh racism of America's whites, but did not desire identification with blacks. Antisemitism, including the Leo Frank lynching in 1915, convinced some Jews that a secure future lay with stressing their whiteness and not interfering with the racial divide. Others, as Greenberg suggests, saw the Frank case as the reason to join with blacks to fight racism. Helping blacks, if possible, while always protecting Jewish interests and inclusion were the goals Jews generally sought. The waxing and waning of white antisemitism through the twentieth century pushed Jewish Americans toward assimilation into white society, but a desire for distinctiveness, although weakened, remained.

Goldstein provides the Jewish ideological and identity issues that placed Jews in a confusing state in contemporary society. Were they now too much part of the white majority? Were they losing their sense of difference and was that a positive or negative situation for the future of Jewish life in the United States? Jewish relations with blacks remained an important indicator of Jewish inclusion as unambiguous whites or exclusion as an out minority.

Greenberg moves beyond identity issues, although still considering them as key to her discussion, and cites Goldstein's book as a source. The books are actually complementary and should be read together. However, Greenberg's focus is on a rigorous and detailed analysis of black-Jewish relations. She considers class and gender as well as neighborhood versus leadership interaction but concentrates on the elite Jewish and black civil rights organizations such as the American Jewish Committee, ADL, NAACP, and National Urban League. It is a study that pulls no punches and delves thoroughly into Jewish racism and black antisemitism. It is true that the bigotry of the larger society drew them together but specific features of each and of U.S. life—class, structural racism, occupational roles in neighborhoods—pushed them apart.

This was a multifaceted alliance based on necessity, convenience, heritage, and common goals. At times blacks and Jews needed each other. At other times, this was an alliance of convenience—Jews maintained their minority connection and blacks their ties to an influential voice. The so-called "Golden Age" of black-Jewish relations was necessity, convenience, and other factors converging at that moment in time. The alliance existed but the individual aspirations of each as well as the societal structure limited it. In that sense, tensions would always be just beneath the surface, ready to appear.

Furthermore, racism and not antisemitism was a basic element in America. Jews were accepted into the white majority, were upwardly mobile, and did not face the debilitating discrimination of being black in a society that valued whiteness. Essentially Jews made it in America and blacks were held back. Affirmative action disputes illustrated the differences in how each perceived U.S. opportunity. The black-Jewish coalition and subsequent disaffection had a significant impact, as both authors ably note, on the shaping of liberalism, U.S. politics, the pace and tactics of the civil rights movement, and the development of multiculturalism.

Both books are essential reading for understanding ethnic/race relations and Jewish identity. Goldstein provides an excellent history of Jewish efforts to place themselves within the

American racial hierarchy, although there is some doubt, in my mind at least, that Jews are as accepted as he claims. White supremacist organizations still target Jews, not Irish or Italian Americans. Distinctiveness is still part of Jewish life. Acceptance as unambiguous whites is still not present. On her part, Greenberg offers the best study on black-Jewish relations and one that will stand as a classic in the field.