

Diminishing Returns

The Report's former New York correspondent unravels the myths of Jewish political power

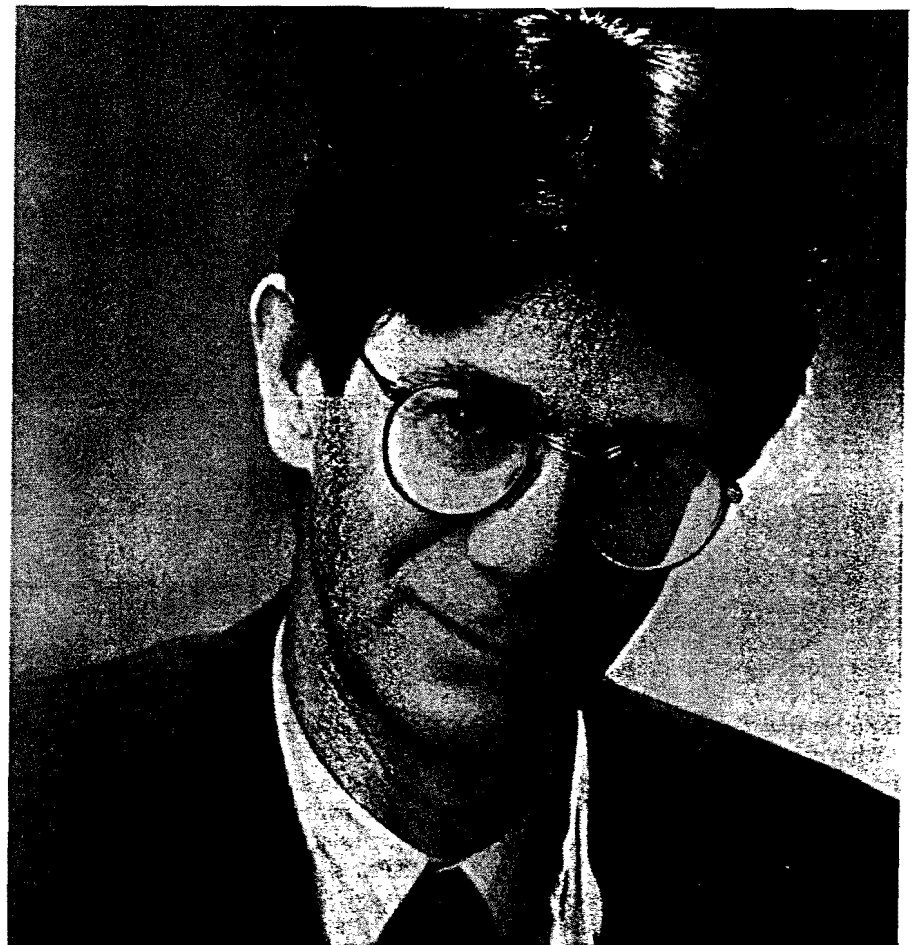
JONATHAN D. SARNA

Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment, by J.J. Goldberg. Addison-Wesley; 422 pp.; \$25.

"**J**EWISH POWER" seeks to unlock the mystery of "Jewish power politics in contemporary America." Goldberg, a contributing editor and former New York correspondent of this magazine, pursues here a daunting array of subjects, including "the structure of the organized Jewish community, the issues that drive the Jewish communal agenda, the internal politics of the major Jewish organizations, and the complicated relations between the Jewish community leadership and the masses of American Jews." In the process, he exposes one of the American Jewish community's last remaining taboos.

For most of their history, American Jews loudly denied that there was any such thing as "Jewish power," or even, for that matter, "Jewish politics." "I am utterly opposed to any plan whereby the Jewish people shall segregate themselves from the remainder of the citizens of this country for political purposes," the early 20th-century American Jewish leader Louis Marshall once wrote. He sternly insisted that Jews "have no political interests which are different from those of our fellow-citizens." Privately, though, he and other leaders of the American Jewish community did manipulate power, and played politics with great effect. They battled for equality at home, an end to persecution of Jews abroad, generous immigration policies, and, finally, support for Israel — all under the rubric of "communal defense." Outwardly, though, Jews generally portrayed themselves as weak.

To his credit, Goldberg reclaims "Jewish power" as a concept and places it in balanced perspective. American Jewry's political establishment, he concludes, has at once been "far more powerful than most Jews realize" and "not half so powerful as their enemies fantasize." He musters a wealth of illuminating detail in support of this argument, revealing how Jewish lead-



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ers worked to win equality for Jews at home, to free Jews from the Soviet Union, and to build widespread political and economic support for the State of Israel. He shows how Jewish leaders responded, successfully, to crises like the Saudi arms deal and to president George Bush's ugly attack on supporters of loan guarantees for Israel. He also analyzes Jewish electoral power, unraveling the myth of the Jewish vote and pointing up the political and economic realities that have made Jews far more important in American politics than their numbers alone would warrant. Along the way, he introduces readers to the dramatic personae who at one time or another have exercised significant power in American Jewish communal life, and he lays bare some of the behind-the-scenes battles that have prevented the "Jewish establishment"

from speaking with a single voice on a growing range of issues — including, in recent years, peace in the Middle East.

GOLDBERG: Conspiracy theory about 'New Jews of 1967'

GOLDBERG BECOMES FAR LESS persuasive when he lowers his journalistic voice and cranks up instead the wrath of the critic. What is, for the most part, a sober and objective account degenerates in these sections into something of a conspiracy theory whose villains are the so-called "New Jews of 1967" — the Zionists, the Orthodox, and the neoconservatives." This "small minority," according to Goldberg, seized the reins of Jewish leadership in the wake of the Six-Day War, thereafter leaving the liberal Jewish majority unrepresented. "The values

that for so long had characterized American Judaism — equality, tolerance, and social justice — became suspect" among the "New Jews," he laments. "A new set of basic values came to replace them: loyalty to the Jewish people, commitment to its survival, and hostility toward its enemies."

These, of course, were not really "new" values at all, but deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. What really happened is that the Six-Day War and other features of the turbulent 60s stimulated a healthy turn inward among American Jews; and what Goldberg sees as a coup carried out by a small and unrepresentative clique turns out upon closer inspection to reflect a much larger popular movement. As is so often the case, communal leaders sensed change and adapted to it.

Even Goldberg characterizes the takeover he describes as remarkably bloodless. "The rest of the Jewish community," he writes, "respectfully stood back and let the New Jews take the lead." And take the lead they did, much to his own evident regret.

Indeed, he suggests, they have been misleading the American Jewish community ever since. He believes, for example, that instead of learning from the Six-Day War that "Israel was more secure than anyone had dreamed," the "New Jews" worried that it "might be destroyed at any moment," resulting, he decries, in "a politics of fear and suspicion."

In my opinion, that fear was amply justified — as the Yom Kippur War surely demonstrated. More recently, he claims, the New Jews are once again misleading the community by focusing on "the crisis of continuity." "There is no crisis," he exclaims, relying on a critique of the National Jewish Population Survey by Steven M. Cohen. "The current intermarriage scare," Goldberg charges, "is . . . putting liberals on the defensive, by raising doubts about the very idea of full Jewish integration in an open society." It seems not to occur to him that "full Jewish integration" is anything but an unmixed blessing.

Goldberg concludes with a well-written

backstage account of the politics surrounding the ill-managed 1995 memorial tribute to Yitzhak Rabin at New York's Madison Square Garden. That event, which succeeded in spite of the religious and political infighting surrounding it, reveals, he believes, the gap between leaders and led among American Jews, and he uses the occasion to mount a parting shot at those who seek to mold them "in a way they never wanted to be molded." What the infighting actually disclosed, however, is that the "Jewish establishment" in America is fragmenting, more divided today than at any time since World War II. The recent decline of AIPAC and of Jewish political action committees, and the absence of attention to Jews in the 1996 election suggest that Goldberg, caught up in his futile critique, missed what may turn out to be the most important story of all about "Jewish power" in the 1990s: its decline and fall. □

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