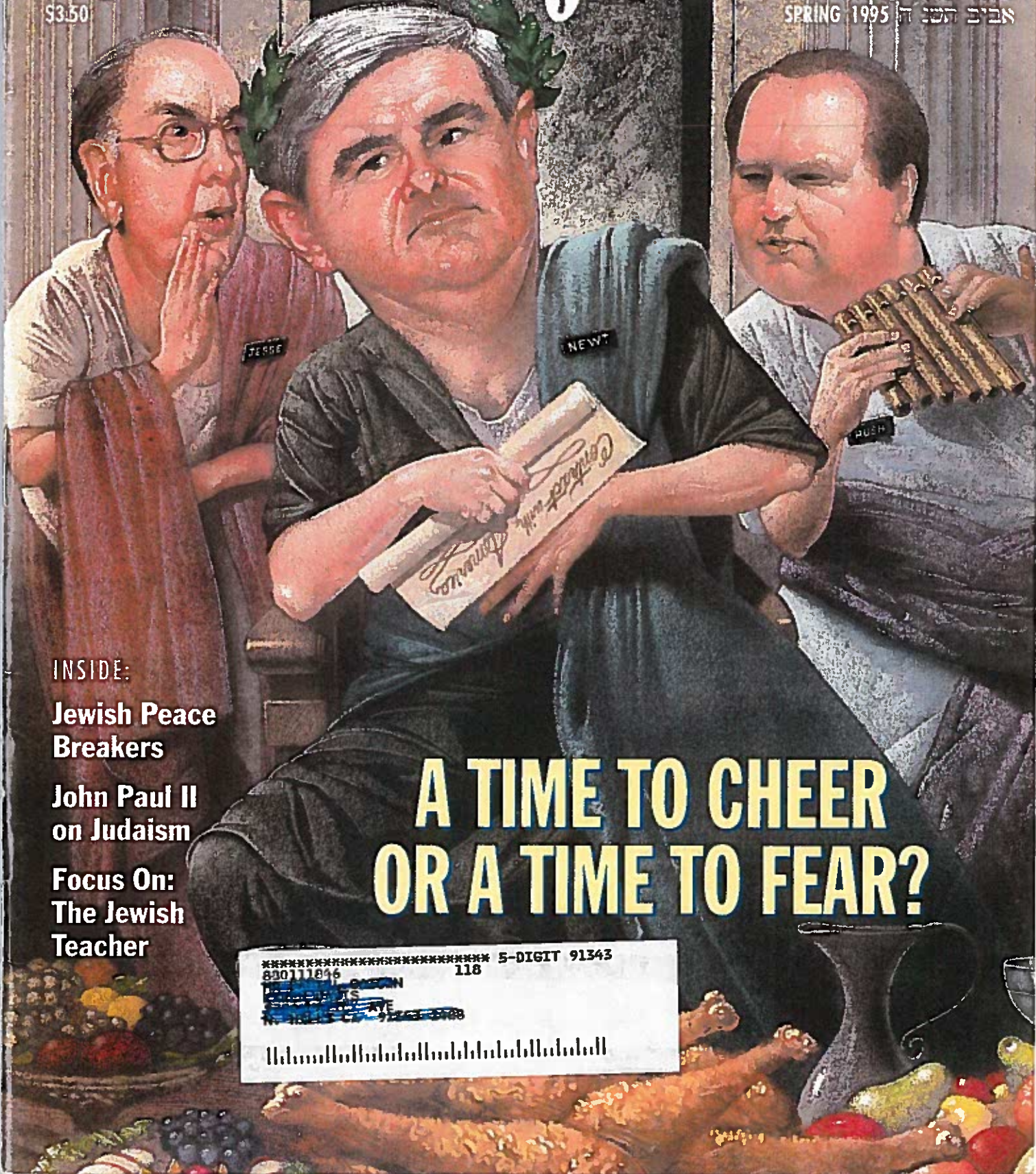


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A TIME TO CHEER OR A TIME TO FEAR?

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Should Jews Fear the C

Marshall Breger

Author Dennis Prager has pointed out in *Reform Judaism* that most American Jews derive their values not from Judaism, but from the dominant secular liberal culture. Thus, many Jews believe that all they need to do in order to formulate a Jewish position is note that Judaism teaches compassion; take the liberal

position, which always seems to be the most compassionate; and then label that position as Jewish.

Whether this marriage with liberalism is religiously determined or a reflection of modern European history, there can be little doubt that the Jewish community followed this dictum in the recent election cycle: 78% of the Jews voted for Democratic congressional candidates last November. And local election results do not significantly differ. Only about one-third voted for George Pataki, the Republican victor in the New York gubernatorial race. Only one ethnic group—the black community—pulled the Democratic lever more than the Jewish community. But even among blacks, the shift to

the Republican column was greater than among Jews.

Our scriptures tell us we are an *am lev-adad yishkan*, a people who dwell alone. Many established Jewish organizations unfortunately believe that this theological injunction applies to politics as well. For even as the rest of the country reassesses “politics as usual,” Jewish community relations organizations dig in their heels to defend a superannuated liberalism best suited to an earlier era.

The fact is that if you study the domestic agenda of the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center or the yearly agenda of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, they read as if they were generated in the back rooms of the Democratic National Committee. That’s not good for the Jews.

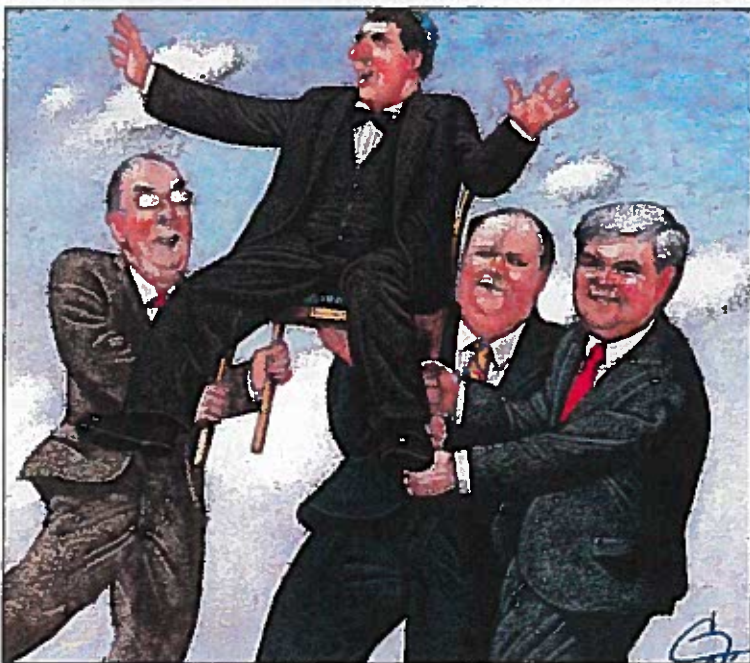
Jewish organizations defend their commitment to liberal ideology on two bases. First, they argue that political liberalism is demanded by Jewish values; second, they suggest that they must support liberal positions to create the coalitions that often support Jewish concerns. It is time for the Jewish community to reevaluate both these propositions. Unless Jewish communal organizations rethink what constitutes Jewish public policy, they are in danger of becoming marginalized in the coming public policy debates.

This in no way means that the Jewish community should surrender its scriptural responsibility or refrain from *tikun olam*, the repair of the world. Nor should it ignore the religious requirement of *chesed* (compassion) for our fellow citizens.

There is no reason why we cannot fulfill our moral responsibility as Jews without signing on to the liberal welfare state. Put more

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no



forcefully, there is a Jewish view of *chesed* that may well bear on welfare reform, but there may be better ways to achieve that goal. The 1994 election offers an opportunity for the Jewish community to reach out for new and possibly better ways of fulfilling its responsibilities. It is worth a try. The liberal formulations have rarely worked.

What the conservative election victory means is a new-found focus on personal accountability rather than state largesse in addressing social problems. And Judaism is certainly a religion based on notions of personal accountability. Unlike Christianity, we have no "turn me, My Lord, that I might turn." As the liturgy of the Yom Kippur service tells us—even as God determines "who shall live and who shall die," redemption starts with ourselves, for "prayer, repentance and charity can avert the severe decree."

We face today a national crisis of values. We need only look around us—our cities, our schools, our workplaces, our popular culture. The degradation of women and police in modern rap music is but one example (one which leaders of Reform Judaism have, to their credit, strongly condemned).

Judaism should be part of this values debate. It has many central and important things to say about social responsibility, individual accountability, civility, and both personal and civic virtue. One of the tragedies of the Jewish dalliance with liberalism is that the voice of American Judaism on these issues has been rarely heard in the public policy arena. If a Martian came to earth to study the American political process, he would find much of the organized Jewish community standing not with church groups and believers but with pornographers and criminals, with the ACLU and the Playboy Foundation.

There is considerable irony in the Jewish communal agencies' apparent commitment to statist solutions. Few organized communities are as philanthropic as American Jewry and few have our rich skein of mediating institutions. We raise hundreds of millions of dollars annually to fund important social services to feed the hungry, heal the sick, shelter the elderly, and rescue captive Jewish communities. *Chesed* funds and other charitable societies proliferate in the Orthodox world. Similar

no

"If a Martian came to earth to study the American political process, he would find much of the organized Jewish community standing not with church groups and believers, but with pornographers and criminals."

efforts at *tikun olam* exist in Reform and Conservative congregations, including important voluntary work with the homeless and victims of AIDS. Indeed, the scriptural injunction to defend the widow and orphan is personal, not governmental. A worldview that is spurred by private philanthropy is one congenial to Jewish folkways and in keeping with Jewish law. It is, therefore, perplexing that the Jewish community has so vigorously championed government-driven welfare programs.

THE CONSERVATIVE alternatives proposed by Republicans in Congress include the idea of tax credits to encourage charitable donations to help the poor. They also recommend turning welfare back to the states through block grants and loosening federal control over Medicaid and other entitlement programs. Instead of seriously considering these proposals and assessing how voluntarism can fit into such a new federalism, most Jewish organizations have decried the Republican Contract

with America as heartless and cruel.

Yet even liberal scholars like Arthur Hertzberg have begun to recognize the bankruptcy of the existing welfare system. He wrote in the Fall 1994 issue of *Reform Judaism*: "Let us admit that the system of welfare, as we know it, has failed." Such an admission is the beginning of wisdom. Once the ideology of the welfare state is understood as something other than a sacred text, consideration of conservative solutions becomes possible.

Similarly, Jews have long understood that the workings of the market can unleash creative energies and expand communal as well as personal wealth. Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not denigrate the accumulation of worldly goods. Yet, Jewish groups support willy-nilly all sorts of proposals to regulate the market, celebrating the benefits of such regulation without taking into account the costs. They care little that overregulated societies are often inefficient and unproductive. Indeed, they often suggest that merely asking one to compare costs and benefits is morally offensive.

Jewish communal organizations also need to reevaluate their views on affirmative action and quotas. There is simply no Jewish reason why our community should support a balkanized America fractured into disparate groups, each with claims of entitlement on our nation's purse and spirit. Yet this is the inevitable result of modern day liberalism's fixation on multi-cultural diversity. We should be guided instead by the wisdom of Martin Luther King Jr., who dreamed of a day when men would be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. This was, of course, the impetus behind the 1964 Civil Rights law. Its floor manager Hubert Humphrey announced at the time that if that law meant numerical quotas, he would eat the paper it was written on.

Three decades later, instead of King's image of an America based on individual character, we have moved perilously close to a society based on group rights and group claims. The Jewish community should reject this effort to assign power proportionately according to race, gender, or class. It runs directly in the face of Judaism's focus on individual worth, hurts individual Jews, and reduces Jewish communal power. The

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almost obsessive defense of affirmative action and quotas by liberal Jewish organizations does a great disservice to the Jewish community.

To be sure, there are real areas of disagreement between Jews and the emerging conservative majority. Jews, particularly Jewish women, are intensely pro-choice. And Jews are generally more sensitive than others to issues of state intervention into personal life. In that sense, Jews are often close to libertarians on social issues, even if they may not like to admit it!

Further, Jews have long held to an absolutist position regarding separation of church and state. We must remember, however, that the first amendment not only forbids the establishment of religion but protects "the free exercise thereof." This tension is made more so by the complex nature of the modern administrative state. Many public welfare functions which were previously undertaken at home or in church now include government financial and regulatory components. While one may

disagree with particular approaches to ensuring the free exercise of religion (and, remember, the Reform movement worked hand in glove with Christian groups to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act), one ought not (as so many liberal Jewish groups have done) demonize the religious right, finding in their plea that spiritual values infuse the public square the specter of a theocratic or Christian America. Christian evangelicals oppose the establishment of religion as much as Jews do. They differ with the "official" Jewish view in that they believe government should be more willing to accommodate religion in general, but they do not demand that one faith be given preference to the exclusion of others.

In our democracy, political belief is often grounded in religious conviction; yet we traditionally reject the use of religious language as the justification of political action. This is understood intuitively by the millions of ordinary Americans who quite properly disfavor appeals to sectarian religious rhetoric in political life but acknowledge that for centuries religion has been a motivating force behind political debate. We

need not—and we ought not—shrink from recognizing Jewish values in our political discourse and grounding that discourse in those values.

Even Democrats know that they cannot succeed if they are perceived as being in opposition to faith. President Clinton himself said recently that "books on faith are a comfort to me." He has urged Americans to read and ponder Steven Carter's classic, *The Culture of Disbelief*.

Too often our leaders prevent us from considering conservative views on their merits by calling up bogeymen of yesteryear. My plea is for Jewish communal organizations to revisit this love affair with liberalism and reassess their traditional political ideologies and alliances from a religious perspective. It's time for our community to engage sympathetically with conservative thought. They will find much there that is congenial to the Jewish spirit. □

Marshall Breger is senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. and a scholar-in-residence at the Columbus School of Law, Catholic University of America. He served as President Ronald Reagan's liaison to the Jewish community from 1983 to 1985.

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e Conservative Victory?

Arthur Hertzberg

In this age of computers, we did not have to wait long for an analysis of the election results. On November 8, the television reporters announced that the Republican victory had been spearheaded by a majority of white men, though the majority of women had voted for Democrats. By the next day, the newspapers had broken down

the vote by social class, economic status, religion, and ethnic identity. The only white group that had voted overwhelmingly for the Democrats (78 percent) were the Jews. And they did so in numbers even higher than in the 1992 presidential election.

The Jewish neo-conservatives have been busy for years urging the Jews to move to the Republican Party, and predicting that they would. These pundits have made their careers in recent years by promising right-wing politicians (and assuring the foundations that fund the conservative think tanks) that the Jews of America are in the process of moving to the right. This did not happen in the "national referendum" which Newt Gingrich called on the steps of the capitol. The Jewish voters heard his call to vote against liberalism, and they spurned it. As Irving Kristol, a leading neo-conservative, said, ruefully, several elections ago, Jews once again displayed their inclination to be as well off as the Episcopalians and to vote like the Puerto Ricans.

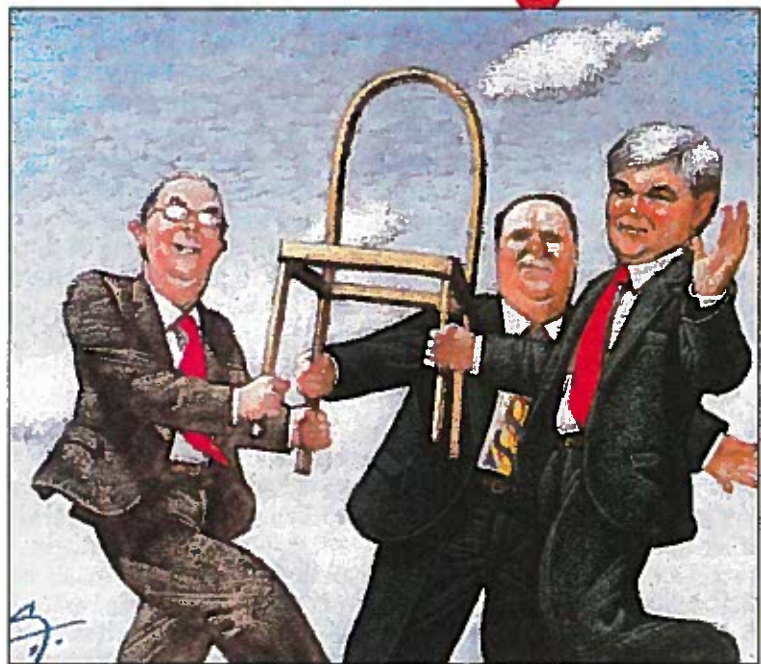
What explains this persistent anomaly? Why do Jews continue to vote with the poor? Two conventional explanations have been offered. The first is that Jews remember when they were poor and continue to have sympathy for Americans who still are. There is some truth to this explanation. Most older American Jews remember being poor as children in the Bronx in New York, or in Rogers Park in Chicago, or in a similar neighborhood in one of the other American cities, but this is not true of most of their children and grandchildren, few of whom have any personal memory of grinding poverty. Yet the large majority of these younger generations also vote consistently for liberal candidates and the liberal agenda.

The second explanation is that Jewish vot-

ers are motivated by a biblical compassion for the weak and defenseless. This argument is not entirely convincing. Christian Americans read and study the same Bible, but that has not inhibited the majority of them from rallying behind those who are trying to make liberalism into a dirty word. Consider too that Orthodox Jews, who constitute perhaps five percent of American Jews, support Republicans in larger proportion than do any other definable elements in the American Jewish community. One must conclude, therefore, that the Bible, like the Constitution of the United States, is subject to interpretation. Some Jews, it seems, agree with Newt Gingrich that God wants the government to

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yes



stand aside and not help the poor, because the reward of guaranteed alms will only reinforce their bad conduct. Most Jews, however, insist that the Bible is a compassionate document that teaches abiding concern for all people. They remember that all the prophets denounced the kings and the rich for taking care only of themselves and grinding down the poor. Jews have come to this attitude because they understand their own tradition, their own history, and their own self-interest.

Neo-Conservatives have been telling Jews for years that their self-interest dictates that they vote their pocketbooks, just as other Americans of their economic class do. The vast majority of Jews has rejected this argument, understanding that the basic interest of Jews is bound up with peace in society. Jews have known for many centuries that they are the most vulnerable of the haves, and that Jew hatred is most marked among the have-nots who fear for the future.

FEUDAL KINGS AND princes, and the rich bourgeois of medieval and early modern free cities took turns in deflecting the angers of the poor on the Jews. Late in the nineteenth century, the tsarist regime in Russia bought time and delayed revolution by offering up the Jews to the angry muzhiks as the objects of pogroms. The rich in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s were pleased that the motifs in National Socialism, which reflected the anger of the poor at their misery during the inflation of the 1920s, were directed not at them but at the Jews. Many plutocrats in Germany indulged and helped finance the Nazis. And in America, the most virulent anti-Semitism occurred in the 1930s during the Great Depression. It has waned in the last half century, as a more inclusive America has woven a safety net for the poor.

We are now living a moment in American history when high-tech jobs are more available, but less secure, a time when opportunity for blue-collar workers is shrinking irreversibly. Not so very subtly, right-wing ideologues are already deflecting these angers at scapegoats—the blacks and the poor—suggesting that the chronic unemployed, recent immigrants, and welfare mothers

YES

“If the social safety net is removed, a violent reaction will follow. It will no longer be enough to blame the liberals; Jews will become the prime scapegoat.”

are destroying the moral fabric of society and, because of their supposed innate intellectual inferiority, are undermining our nation's economic future.

If the social safety net that was constructed in the last half century is removed, a violent reaction will follow and cities will become even less safe than they are today. It will no longer be enough to blame the liberals; Jews will become the prime scapegoat.

The American Jewish mainstream is all the more concerned that Jews might become the target of blame because of the vehement campaign of the right-wingers for “moral values.” The key issue is prayer in the public schools. To be sure, the late Rebbe of Lubavich declared himself in favor of this idea because he ruled that it would force Jewish children to obey the injunction in the Talmud that a Jew must pray every day. The trouble with this pronouncement is that it is irrelevant to the children in his community, who all attend Jewish parochial schools. Jewish children in public schools are not likely to feel more godly when a daily prayer is said in their classroom. On the contrary, they will be forcibly reminded, almost everywhere, that they are different from the majority of their classmates.

When I attended school in Baltimore in the 1930s, the non-denominational prayer was invariably the Lord's Prayer, without the conventional ending “through Jesus Christ Our Lord.” I did not say it—even though I knew of the Jewish origins of the text—but I was isolated in my silence.

Very recently, William Kristol, a premier theoretician of the Republican right wing, argued on National Public Radio that it would be good for Jewish children to hear about the Ten Commandments in public schools. His father, Irving Kristol, was much more frank when he defended the Republican adherence to prayer in public schools during the 1984 presidential election. He wrote in *Commentary* that this issue was unimportant, a minor irritation the Jewish community should be willing to suffer in return for all the benefits that they, as haves, would reap from the conservative agenda.

This is a concession most Jews are unwilling to make. The Jewish recoil is caused by far deeper reasons than the one usually given. It is true, of course, that Jews have a particular passion for America as “the last best hope of man” because the Republic, founded on the principles of the Constitution, made no distinction of any kind between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority. Almost without exception, the several million Jews who arrived in the United States in the nineteenth century came from countries in which the law of the state discriminated against Jews. The near messianic patriotism of American Jews is rooted in this distinction. Obviously, the immigrants knew that the vast majority of the American population was Christian and that this would have a marked effect on many relationships in society, but the law of the state was neutral.

The heart of the matter is not the issue of prayer in public schools or even the content of the rest of the right-wing program which has been labeled as “family values.” It is in the uses of the program as a weapon of attack. It evokes memories and resonances in the collective unconscious of Jews. In his heyday, the tsar of Russia oppressed the Jews and the urban poor, escaping their wrath by encouraging the Russian Orthodox church to rise against the Jews with the charge of “Christ killers.”

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HERTZBERG

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Because the tsar was the head of the church, and, therefore, the "great father" of the poor, they were thus induced to forget about their need for bread by being fed the circus of a pogrom. Jews are hearing the first sounds of such a connection, as terrifying as an alarm bell in the night, in the insistence by right-wingers that the supposed destruction of family values in America is all the fault of the liberals.

The conservatives have thrown an attack on multiculturalism into the mix to position themselves as defenders of traditional European civilization against the liberal commitment to multiculturalism. This makes most Jews uncomfortable, and even nervous. The conservative vision of American culture says to us that our Jewish heritage is outside a canon dominated by the writings of ancient Greeks and medieval and modern Christians. The rich will get richer through lowered taxes in revival of "trickle down" economics, and the sinking middle class will be told that punishing unwed mothers will satisfy their hungers. The move from crying out that liberalism, and not injustice, is the enemy to shouting that the Jew, the outsider, is responsible for that injustice is a possibility that now seems nearer to the horizon.

It does not help that many conservatives keep declaring their support for Israel. Theodor Herzl knew a long time ago that crypto anti-Semites and even avowed ones would be in favor of a Jewish state because they wanted to get rid of the Jewish element in European society. The Jews in America do not share in the dreams of many leaders of the Christian Right that, come the millennium, Jews will be transported to the Holy Land by divine miracles, after the great destruction in the Holy Land in the wars of Gog and Magog. Jews came to America to stay, to be part of this land and not to fear being made, again, into a scapegoat. The overwhelming majority of Jews voted as liberals last November for their own sake and to preserve the great promise of the Constitution of the United States. The battle has been joined, and it must be fought and won. □

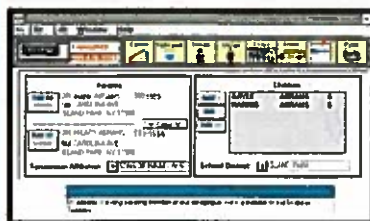
Arthur Hertzberg, professor emeritus of Religion at Dartmouth, is now visiting professor of the Humanities at New York University. His most recent book is *Jewish Polemics*, published by Columbia University Press.

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REFORM RESPONDS:

a new social action strategy

by David Saperstein

In response to the 1994 election, the Reform movement has been reorienting its public advocacy strategy in three significant ways. First, we are strengthening our ties with the bi-partisan coalition of moderate and liberal Republican and Democratic members of Congress. Indeed, the track record of this coalition is a source of optimism. For the entire 33 years of the Religious Action Center's (RAC) existence, every major achievement in domestic social policy has occurred because men and women of conscience on both sides of the aisle stood up for civil rights, environmental protection, medicare, abortion rights, women's rights, and a host of other domestic issues.

During the Reagan and Bush administrations, we helped forge coalitions that ensured passage of 24 major civil rights bills (many over the objections of conservatives), stopped every legislative effort of the Moral Majority, and defeated every effort at school prayer legislation. The infrastructure of those coalitions remains intact, with many moderate Republicans chairing key committees, including Senator Hatfield at Appropriations, Senator Packwood at Finance (with jurisdiction over certain health and welfare matters), Senator Nancy Kassebaum at Labor and Human Resources, Representative Jim Leach at Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs, and Representative Bill Goodling at Education and Labor (to be renamed the Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee).

The RAC's second reorientation strategy will entail a shift of emphasis to local communities. The battle against the Religious Right will be fought mostly in local school boards and libraries across the nation. And, as the federal government withdraws from funding anti-poverty programs, the "private" charitable sector, including our synagogues, will be called upon to step up assistance to millions of people in need of food, housing, medical care, and education. To meet this challenge, the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism and the RAC will urge congregants to volunteer more time on social action committees, call on congregations to develop plans for new social service programs, and encourage their leaders—professional and lay—to join or, where necessary, develop interfaith coalitions to engage in effective advocacy for increased social service funding at the local level. To support these efforts, the RAC, the Commission on Social Action, and the UAHF Department of Interreligious Affairs are expanding their programmatic materials and training programs for lay leaders.

Third, we will need to mobilize our energies to protect our basic constitutional rights. In that battle, we must not demonize the Religious Right, but recognize the validity of many of the questions they have raised about America: the erosion of morality, the collapse of families, the breakdown of sexual and business ethics, the fear that plagues our city streets, and the weakening sense of community.

At the same time, we must oppose the Religious Right's efforts to use the coercive power of government to impose their religious views on all Americans, determining when we should pray in our schools and what that prayer should be, what we can read in our libraries and what religious teachings should be taught in science curricula. Those who argue that the answers to America's problems will be found in mandating a minute of prayer at the beginning of the school day, depriving gays and lesbians of their God-given equality, or banning kids from reading *Of Mice and Men* or *The Diary of Anne Frank* offer panaceas that divert the attention of America from seeking real solutions to real problems. Solving our nation's urgent moral, social, and economic problems must not come at the price of eroding our constitutional freedoms.

To preserve our fundamental rights, the RAC has helped mobilize a new Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty, an alliance of over 40 national educational, civil liberties, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish organizations that opposes school prayer legislation, including the proposed Constitutional Amendment. The Coalition's speedy and vigorous protest helped persuade Congressional leaders to downgrade the priority of the prayer issue in the Republican contract. Ultimately, however, our success in defeating the Religious Right agenda depends as much on our developing our own answers to the moral questions they ask as it does on our efficacy in political arenas. On those issues, we Jews have a rich and powerful tradition upon which to draw.

A final lesson from the 1994 elections: we must re-invigorate the message of social justice in our congregations. Cynicism and despair are more formidable enemies than extremists and reactionaries. The mission of Judaism is to keep faith and hope alive, to translate our ideals into the work of our hands, and to make our synagogues centers of compassion, decency, and social justice. □

Robbi David Saperstein is director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C.