

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

Faculty Scholarship

5-2012

Liberal NIMBY: American Jews and Civil Rights [post-print]

Cheryl Greenberg

Trinity College, cheryl.greenberg@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/facpub>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Liberal NIMBY: American Jews and Civil Rights

American Jews, acknowledged as one of the most reliable liberal voting blocs in the twentieth century, have also been labeled false friends of the black freedom struggle, supporting the integration of the South while resisting it in their own neighborhoods and businesses.¹ While Jewish contributions swelled the coffers of civil rights organizations and Jewish supporters worked alongside black activists, the behaviors of ordinary Jews often proved less praiseworthy. Even limiting one's gaze to the North, Jewish store owners operated in dozens of underserved black neighborhoods but, according to many, charged exorbitant prices and refused to hire from or otherwise give back to the community. Jewish landlords rented to black tenants but maintained their buildings no better than other white absentee owners. Jews did not riot at the prospect of racial integration but, citing concerns for safety or school quality, Jews fled from neighborhoods as black people moved in. The contrast between commitment and resistance to civil rights ideals was nowhere more vivid than in Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood in the 1960s. Jewish realtors there openly used the threat of incoming black residents to convince local Jewish homeowners to move away immediately and sell at a loss. Many did. Yet challenging such practices and trying to stem the tide of white flight was a coalition of local activists, virtually all of whose white members were Jewish.²

This apparent contradiction had not gone unnoticed by either the black community or by Jewish leaders, who lamented the situation even in the civil rights movement's early days. "We are fully aware that many scheming, grasping Jewish people are drawing the life blood out of our communities," observed black newspaper

editor Joseph Bibb in 1947, “[nevertheless] we are compelled to conclude that the Jews are the best friends that the colored man in America has.”³ Rabbi Lou Silberman of the Hebrew Union College in New York had made the same point a few years earlier using less inflammatory language. “Though the pulpit declaim it and the Social Justice Commission affirm it, ... the sympathy of the Jew for the Negro is often more homiletical than practical.”⁴

To the extent that such critiques are accurate, they suggest that, at least so far as black civil rights are concerned, most Jews behaved as liberals politically but as white people in their personal lives. Indeed, their experience reflects the dilemma of many white liberals in a nation where race has been inextricably tied not only to bigotry and discrimination but therefore also to opportunity. To many observers, “white flight” connoted white racism, a fear of living beside black people. Given the ubiquity of anti-black stereotypes, it would be surprising if that were not generally the case. Yet for some who left, more than racism affected their decision. They recognized that black majority neighborhoods received fewer social services and generally had lower property values. Poorer services and lower tax revenues meant their schools received less funding and school superintendents often used them as dumping grounds for poor teachers. Less police protection and higher poverty rates made their streets less safe. Even if one endorsed civil rights, the reality of integration levied real and significant costs to those who remained. What was a good liberal to do?

Liberal Jewish civil rights organizations, long and deeply engaged in the political and legal struggle for black equality, were fully cognizant both of these challenges and of the impact of Jewish flight on African Americans’ opinions of Jews.⁵

In conjunction with their other civil rights activities, therefore, these agencies also studied the residential, business and residential choices made by Jews as they pertained to questions of integration so that they might intervene when necessary. Examining a few studies of northern communities in detail reveals some of the tensions between integration as political action and integration as lived experience in a quintessentially liberal white community. Jews were, by and large, not actively racist. But within a society in which opportunity and quality of life were so inextricably bound up with race, even liberal dilemmas inevitably took on dimensions of racism.

Jewish leaders became increasingly concerned about the gap between the actions of Jewish agencies and individual northern Jews even before northern integration became a central focus of the civil rights movement. At the 1960 national conference of the National Jewish Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC), the umbrella organization for Jewish agencies, Nathan Edelstein of the American Jewish Congress confronted the issue directly. "There has been close collaboration for more than a decade between the leadership of the Negro and Jewish communities on the vital issue of civil rights. But little thought and attention have been given to the relationship between the Negro and Jewish rank and file," he warned.⁶ Although Jews had proven themselves supportive of black struggles for equality Edelstein observed that their personal actions had not lived up to the same standard. "We need only remind ourselves that prominent Negroes have been excluded from predominantly

Jewish clubs and that the best known builder of 'whites only' suburban developments is William Levitt.”⁷

In their residential practices, he lamented, the situation was equally dismaying. For a number of reasons, black urbanites looking to find housing or improve their living situation tended to move into Jewish neighborhoods, many of whose residents had themselves left for better housing elsewhere. However, as black families move into these areas, those Jews who remained become angry and resentful. The American Jewish Congress found that “[g]enuine social acceptance by Jews is at a minimum and, generally, we find the usual fear, panic and flight to the suburbs. In such situations Jews act, in the main, like other whites.” As he ruefully concluded, “Despite the deep commitment of Jewish community relations agencies and their genuine efforts to preach and teach equality, there is a wide and alarming gap between the leadership and the rank and file in the Jewish community.”⁸

In Edelstein’s assessment, the reasons for Jews’ flight were complex. Jews did hold racist views, he acknowledged, but less so than other whites. As evidence he cited surveys of Jewish attitudes about race and pointed to the fact that none of the violence associated with housing integration occurred in Jewish neighborhoods. Jews might be as likely as other whites to move out, but their antagonism did not reach the same level of resistance. Lesser Jewish racism suggested to him that further educational work within the Jewish community could improve Jewish attitudes and behaviors toward their new black neighbors. Meanwhile, regarding those Jews who acted in overtly discriminatory ways, although “the Jewish community has no way of thrusting reform on its moral delinquents,” Jewish groups can “relieve the effects of

their practices by striving for better enforcement of housing laws, for a greater supply of housing, for meaningful minimum wage laws, for improvements in our public schools... and for such other improvements as will make for a general elevation of community standards.”⁹ Ironically, such pressing for better enforcement of housing laws and the like by Jewish organizations would itself alienate some Jews, who became convinced as the decade came to a close that their agencies cared more for black people’s interests than they did for Jews’. Nor would it prove so easy to persuade even liberal Jews to support rather than resist integration.

Shad Polier, an active liberal lawyer on the national board of the American Jewish Congress, also acknowledged Jewish flight from integrating communities. He too, however, insisted the issue was not racism.

I should doubt that Jews are concerned by the movement of Negroes into their neighborhoods because they are Negroes. They are concerned lest the onward movement of Negroes brings persons of a lower economic and social status and threaten the spread of slums. I venture to say, however, that the reaction would be no different if those who were moving into the neighborhood were white persons of the same economic, social and educational level as Negroes.¹⁰

Here, however, Polier inadvertently illuminated the link between liberals’ concern for social stability and racism. If black people can afford housing in a particular neighborhood, there is no reason to suspect they are of a lower “economic, social and educational level” than others who live there. Nor were new white residents subject to the same suspicion. Poor and poorly educated people of any race moving

into a middle class neighborhood could certainly raise residents' concerns. But absent evidence that the new black residents were in fact poor, the assumptions made by those who fled, however understandable, are nonetheless the product of racism. At best those who moved away understood and accepted the racist system, in which the entry of black residents would push so many to leave that prices would decline and the feared neighborhood deterioration prove a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Polier himself made a similar point when he turned to the subject of Jewish resistance to public school integration. "We have, I believe, fallen into the trap – together with the rest of the white community – of believing that public school integration in the North must necessarily be harmful to our own children." He explained the reaction not as racism but as a "misconception of American society – a lack of understanding of the potentialities of American life, a lack of confidence in the possibilities of our country."¹¹ With better school funding and greater governmental commitment, every child could receive a quality education.

He repeated this argument during a 1966 symposium on black-Jewish tensions. It was not racism that brought Jewish flight but a misguided belief that integration brought inevitable declines in local education, safety or property.

[Y]ou have to remember that Jews are human too. They often act out of selfish motives.... [But even when a Jew resists integration because of fear or a misunderstanding of the problem] he is ashamed of himself for objecting. This is why so many of these Jews contribute to the American Jewish Congress and allow us as an organization to initiate programs they are opposed to as individuals. A paradox? Of course it is; but you

can understand the paradox when you realize that even the most selfish Jew feels ashamed when he acts of outside his heritage.

Like Edelstein and other Jewish leaders, Polier therefore emphasized the crucial need for Jewish agencies to press the community to do right. “We are trying to put our ideals to work in the grass roots of our communities. It is difficult work.”¹²

This presumption that Jews were less racist than other whites was based on more than wishful thinking or allusions to a morally invigorating heritage. As Edelstein observed, a number of psychology studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s regarding white attitudes toward African Americans found that Jewish respondents generally did exhibit less bigotry than non-Jewish whites. They expressed greater willingness to work or learn alongside black colleagues, or accept them as friends or neighbors.¹³

Not all scholars and investigators agreed with this assessment, however, nor with Polier’s generous explanation for Jewish resistance to integration. Sociologist B.Z. Sobel and historian May Sobel launched a broad-based study of Jewish attitudes toward African Americans. Their preliminary findings convinced them that the large majority of the Jewish community does not feel a commonality of purpose with the Negroes; that if Jews desire civil rights legislation – and by and large they do – they do not support integration. We would posit the hypothesis that basic Jewish attitudes have not changed (from pre-Black Power days); that the majority are not first becoming alienated from integration demands, but rather that these demands were never before made; that the majority never had favored integration and that

what we are hearing is not really a change in attitude but is the old attitude being voiced vigorously for the first time in reaction to a new problem.¹⁴

The Sobels' were correct that resistance to integration was not new to the Jewish community. In Detroit, for example, black residents began moving into a Jewish neighborhood in 1948. "The first reaction was one of antagonism, panic, and rumor-mongering," the local Jewish Community Council explained. "There was also a movement which began to resemble mass flight."¹⁵ In this case quick action by the Council and black and white Christian colleagues quieted tensions and the neighborhood integrated peacefully. As Nathan Edelstein would remind his listeners in 1960, however, elsewhere such interventions succeeded less well, and Jews abandoned integrating neighborhoods along with many other whites.

In many ways the Sobels' broader characterization of Jews as politically inclusive and privately exclusive is entirely in keeping with patterns of liberal activity, at least in the North. Outright racists opposed civil rights of any sort, while liberals supported them. But ending legal restrictions was not the same thing as living together. Especially for Ashkenazic (European) Jews, who had historically sought emancipation from restrictive laws but resisted assimilation into Christian life, community and legal opportunity were separate things. Jews as a group had long desired competing (and occasionally conflicting) desires for full political integration and a more exclusive and cohesive communal life.

This distinction between public and private choices was hardly unique to Jews, however. Liberalism, or at least the liberalism of post-war America, was an

individualist liberalism that emphasized public equality, to be legislated and enforced by government action. For most American liberals, equality, social welfare and the like were legal and legislative matters. Their liberalism required active political engagement in the form of voting and lobbying for appropriate governmental policies. It did not, however, require personal or private actions beyond this, however laudable such actions might be. The left had often made precisely this critique of liberalism, that it extended to public forms of equality only. Structural barriers, maintained by layers of private decision-making, past and present, were left untouched. Indeed the Jewish leaders lamenting Jewish behaviors, most of whom were progressive or left-leaning liberals on the question of civil rights, were making this critique as well.

The Sobels went further, however, arguing that the question of integration was not a liberal dilemma in an imperfect world. They found those Jews most committed to educational quality were actually among those most likely to support integration. In other words, those Jews who left were not liberals at all, and claims that Jews were less racist than other whites were not valid. Jews the Sobels interviewed in the Boston area did support legislative and legal equality but the feelings about integration and black people they expressed were largely negative and no different from those reported by other whites. A contemporary *New York Times* survey of attitudes in that city also found roughly the same proportion of white Jews and Christians supporting or opposing integration in their neighborhoods. Nor did the Sobels believe, as many others did, that these negative attitudes were new, a backlash to the heightening intensity of the movement by the middle 1960s. They argued instead that “backlash’ should be defined not as a retrenchment of civil-

rights support, but rather as a new expression of old integrationist opposition” – an argument supported by the earlier assertions of Rabbi Silberman.¹⁶

Few Jewish commentators went so far as to blame racism for continued Jewish resistance to integration. But by the middle of the decade, tensions between blacks and Jews, between blacks and northern whites, and between radicals and liberals had all worsened considerably. A spate of racial violence swept urban areas between 1964 and 1967. Calls for a militant black nationalism intensified and public expressions of black antisemitism became dismayingly common. In the face of these developments Jewish enthusiasm for civil rights cooled, and a number of concerned Jewish leaders reiterated several of the Sobels’ points. Acknowledging Jews’ real concerns, they nonetheless asserted with the Sobels that the broader Jewish community was using school quality or black antisemitism as a cover for bigotry, and that Jewish organizations needed to do a better job at articulating the importance of taking an activist moral stand. The tendency of Jews to explain their declining support for integration by pointing to allegedly growing black antisemitism “must be identified precisely for what it is: the expression of deeply rooted and long-felt bigotry, now made acceptable, and even fashionable, by the tenor of the times,” insisted progressive liberal Leonard Fein.

May we not, in candor, ask ourselves whether some Jews have not reacted [with relief] ... happy to be American by being bigots?... The dirty little secret of our community, after all, is that its leaders have always spoken more forcefully and more radically than its followers have felt. We have pushed and pulled, we have prodded and cajoled, and, failing all

else, we have spoken our mind even when we knew that our people were recalcitrant. And now we are confused, diverted, uneasy; now the intense anti-racist pressure which has been so central a part of the behavior of Jewish leadership over the years has been relaxed, and, as the pressure has relaxed, the latent bigotry has bubbled up. People today are saying things they may well have felt, but would not have dared to say, just a year or two ago.¹⁷

Jewish agencies as well as Jewish individuals, he chided, had pulled back from civil rights activism. They had not become opponents, but they had abandoned their previous position in the front lines of the struggle.¹⁸

In 1967, in the wake of more northern riots, NCRAC undertook a study of urban Jewish communities across the country, regardless of whether those cities had themselves experienced any unrest. Its questionnaires focused primarily on Jewish business owners' and Jewish residents' views of civil rights and engagement with the black community.¹⁹ Thirty-six cities responded: large metropolitan centers like Boston, Memphis, Minneapolis, San Diego, Houston, Charleston, Des Moines; as well as smaller cities including Waterbury, Conn.; Portland, Maine; Perth Amboy, N.J.; Canton, Ohio; South Bend, Ind.; and Erie, Penn. The cities varied in the number and proportion of Jewish businesses active in black ghettos, with the preponderance of such activity focused in eastern cities. In every city black store owners also served the same areas, as did small numbers from other groups including Puerto Ricans and Cubans.

On the whole, the study found that, not surprisingly, Jewish businessmen based their decisions about whether to remain in riot-torn areas on economics. Those stores whose profit margins were narrow by and large did not reopen following the riots; those whose businesses were more profitable remained. Racism did not seem to be an explicit factor in these decisions. But those who did stay by and large did so ambivalently. Most Jewish store owners reported that they felt a great deal of fear and anxiety, primarily about their physical safety. Such concerns were also expressed by store owners in cities that had not had riots. A large number reported that they were actively seeking to leave, but were unable to do so without incurring financial ruin. Beyond profit margins, then, it appears that fear, not generalized racism, prompted Jewish business closings in ghetto areas, and that financial limitations, not political conviction, kept others there.

Class mobility as well as security concerns contributed to the demise of Jewish businesses in poor black neighborhoods by the end of the 1960s. These store owners generally pushed their children toward higher education and better job opportunities than a small store could provide. The NCRAC study found that few of these children planned to take over their parents' business. That Jewish shop owners left black neighborhoods – or wished to leave – is undeniable. But they appear to have left for a variety of reasons, including economic and class considerations having little to do directly with racist attitudes. After all, they had been working among black people all along.

While one might not expect Jews who had served a black clientele for years to suddenly leave for reasons of racism, the same cannot be said for other Jewish urban

residents. The NCRAC study examined their views as well. It found “[o]n balance,... a definite and substantial withdrawal of rank and file Jewish support for the objectives of the Jewish community relations field” regarding civil rights following the riots. “Where continuing support for special governmental and social action directed toward the improvement of conditions for Negroes was observed among Jews, it often was attributed to a grudging recognition that such improvements might pacify Negro frustrations and resentments and thus deflect them from violence.”²⁰

The report also proposed a number of alternative explanations than racial violence for such shifting views. Close on the heels of the riots came SNCC’s announcement of its support for Palestinians and its critique of Israeli policies, and the New Politics convention at which a number of statements were made that most Jews considered both anti-Israel and antisemitic. As the NCRAC report pointed out, the shift in Jewish support for civil rights occurred just as often in cities that did not have riots, and a similar proportion of respondents in both types of cities explained their changed attitudes as resulting from the growing black antisemitism they perceived rather than from fear of violence. Nevertheless, the report clearly documented that a preponderance of urban Jews now reported far less support for civil rights activity than before, and far less than their own community organizations were still engaged in.

Indeed, and somewhat in contrary to Fein’s claim about the withdrawal of Jewish groups from the civil rights struggle, the study documented the many and continuing projects of local Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRC) and other Jewish organizations during and after the riots to restore community and rebuild

relationships between black and Jewish city dwellers. They pressed for more extensive job creation programs, improved housing conditions and stronger enforcement of civil rights laws. In cities without riots, both large and small, local JCRCs also undertook similar activities, designed to ease tensions that could spark violence. While Jewish organizations continued their civil rights engagement on both the local and national level, the support they enjoyed from their constituents had fallen noticeably.

The sharpening division between the organized and lay Jewish communities was inadvertently underscored by Cleveland Robinson of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, attempting to represent black attitudes about Jews to a liberal Jewish audience in 1966. “The American Negro is confused by the Jewish community. You initiated many of the programs against segregation and fought for the equal rights of all citizens. Now, in the area of housing and education, we see many Jews blocking our progress in these areas. That is the reason for the Negro’s confusion and resentment. And that is the problem you have to face.”²¹ The “you” who initiated the programs were not, of course, the same Jews who appeared to block black progress. But that distinction was lost on the larger black community, who presumed a more monolithic Jewish viewpoint. To outside eyes, Jews appeared to have changed their political commitments. More accurately, perhaps, many Jews had not altered their views about racial integration but rather moved from private doubts to more public resistance, precisely as the Sobels had posited.

Although the NCRAC report obviously lamented these developments as much as it understood them, it is important to note here what the report did not: the falling

support that Jewish residents reported was of civil rights activity broadly speaking. Although NCRAC conflated the desire of residents to leave integrated areas with declining support for civil rights, we have already seen that such desires predated the riots, while support for civil rights activity was still high. Put another way, racial violence and increasingly public expressions of black antisemitism and anti-Zionism weakened American Jews' previously staunch support of Jewish political engagement in civil rights activity. But far fewer American Jews, and far fewer white liberals, had ever held such strong convictions when it came to their personal lives. It was neither politics nor simple racism that led these Jews to move. Had it been the former, they would never have supported civil rights activity at all. Had it been the latter, they would have left long before. Rather, the combination of racially based fears and class-based anxieties pushed these liberal urban residents at last into their own version of segregation.

The Philadelphia JCRC was not able to participate in NCRAC's national study due to the illness and death of its director. Instead, it conducted its own follow-up of the city's Jewish residents a few years later. Pairing this report with a similar study it had produced in 1966 reveals a Jewish community undergoing economic and demographic transitions that paralleled the broader northern trend. Because they focused on a single city, however, these reports provide details regarding Jewish movement within and from the city, and the views of those still in residence, that are invisible in NCRAC's larger metasurvey and offer provocative hints about the multiple and complicated effects of race on Jews' decisions.²²

Philadelphia, with its substantial black and Jewish populations, faced a number of issues typical of black-Jewish relations in this period, including a strong and organized liberal Jewish political presence, continued black in-migration, active local branches of several national black civil rights agencies, Jewish economic involvement in poor black neighborhoods, outbreaks of rioting and other racial disturbances, Jewish upward mobility, rising black militance, and a relatively racist municipal power structure. In fact the first northern race riot of the 1960s took place in the black neighborhood around Susquehanna Avenue in October of 1963. A larger and more destructive riot in 1964 centered around Ridge and Columbia Avenues in North Philadelphia.

Although many of the stores vandalized in the 1964 riot were owned by Jews, JCRC investigations uncovered no evidence to suggest that they were targeted because they were Jewish. The rioters' motivation appeared to be anti-white rather than antisemitic, the report concluded. Nevertheless, because Jews were among those affected, the JCRC set out to improve relations between the business community and those it served. It discovered it had a great deal of work to do; according to the preliminary survey of the riot area there had been "no communication or contact whatever as between the business and customer communities." This claim was reinforced by the comments of a black minister who helped organize a JCRC-sponsored "unity conference" after the riots to bring together business owners and neighborhood leaders. He "confessed that while he has been with his church for twenty years, this was the first time he sat in the same room with any of the white merchants."²³ The JCRC found the same lack of contact in each of

the black neighborhoods of the city. Not surprisingly, communication between Jewish landlords, property owners or agents and their black tenants – or, as the report characterized it, “the lack of landlord-tenant communication” – paralleled that of the business group.

Instead, both Jewish owners and black residents reported that the other was abusive or irresponsible. The JCRC investigation found less exploitation or hard feelings than inflamed rhetoric on both sides suggested, concluding that “most businessmen, property owners and their agents, their customers and tenants, are decent people who conduct themselves properly and by a very heavy preponderance they do all get along.” Still, the report emphasized that the public and angry nature of the charges hurt black-Jewish relations and posed a threat to stability.²⁴

To improve the situation, the JCRC launched a program to bring together Jewish business leaders and building owners located in black areas to strategize about ways to build stronger and more positive relationships with the communities they served. These private meetings proved widely popular, and the JCRC held a number of them through 1966. These were followed up by individual contacts between the Jewish agency and Jewish business owners.

The JCRC had learned from two decades of organizing within the Jewish community that strengthening Jewish commitment to civil rights was accomplished most effectively through appeals not to a vague universalist morality but to more parochial issues of group security and individual economic success. Thus, when contacting store owners, the JCRC emphasized its desire to prevent further violence that harmed business and to protect the Jewish community by minimizing points of

black-Jewish friction. “The JCRC is, of course, particularly interested in the implications of this situation for the Jewish community at large. The purpose of the meeting is to develop with your help a constructive program for dealing with this delicate and complex situation,” the invitation letter explained.²⁵ Similar letters went out to Jewish landlords. Attendees, then, presumably came not to improve their own behaviors or deepen their understanding of black needs but to find ways to calm their clients and advance their own economic and security interests.²⁶

At each meeting CRC leaders emphasized the immediacy of the crisis. Because of their substantial presence in black areas, Jewish businesses suffered the worst damage during the riots. Tensions remained high and, unless eased, posed continued threats to safety. Jewish businessmen also faced specific local challenges, the JCRC reminded them. There had been talk of developing black economic cooperatives in black neighborhoods to undercut white businesses there and force them out. Increasingly activist black civil rights groups in Philadelphia were beginning to take public action against whites perceived as exploiting black clients. “You are undoubtedly familiar with the activities by CORE in the Hawthorne section of Philadelphia a couple of years ago, and the more recent announcement by the NAACP youth group of its intention to picket the businesses and homes of property owners and real estate men in Negro neighborhoods,” they explained. In fact the youth group had already picketed one such man, whose obviously Jewish name had appeared prominently in the local news articles covering the action.²⁷

Although the JCRC feared resistance, in fact the businessmen “are cooperating magnificently,” JCRC leader Jules Cohen reported. With the agency’s help both the

store owners and landlords agreed to organize joint committees with local residents to resolve disputes and improve their neighborhoods. In some areas “Decent Housing Pacts” and other formal agreements committed landlords and tenants to specific standards of maintenance. Several business and tenant groups collaborated to clean and beautify residential blocks. Black young people were paid a small stipend and invited to shadow business owners to learn business operations firsthand. The Lancaster Avenue Businessmen’s Association publicly supported the effort to strengthen the Philadelphia Fair Housing Ordinance and wrote to Pennsylvania’s Congressional delegation in support of a 1966 federal civil rights bill.²⁸

The enthusiasm of the businessmen certainly cheered the JCRC, which noted the “unprecedented” nature of this initiative.²⁹ On the other hand, even JCRC leaders recognized its limitations. Beyond accusations that these groups addressed only superficial issues and left the more fundamental problems unaddressed, the larger challenge was how to ensure that these new organizations would continue. This much had been accomplished only with tremendous expenditure of resources which the JCRC could not maintain indefinitely.

Ultimately, as the JCRC feared, these activities had limited impact on the larger problem of re-energizing Jewish support for civil rights and stemming Jewish (and white) flight from the city. That the JCRC’s efforts did not alter most Jews’ attitudes became obvious in the agency’s 1971 study on recent Jewish residential and business mobility in the city. Like other whites, and like Jews elsewhere, Philadelphia’s Jews had grown wealthier and more educated over the course of the previous decade. As they did so, they tended to move to more attractive communities,

many of them outside the city limits. In fact by 1970 almost half of the area's 360,000 Jews lived in suburbs. Upward mobility also led to dramatic population shifts within the city itself..

But other factors than class seemed to be at play in these residential changes as well. The neighborhoods which saw the greatest losses of their Jewish populations were those that had become, or were quickly becoming, majority black. Of the 80,000 who lived in the largest Jewish neighborhood in the city, Northeast, for example, most had moved there relatively recently from Strawberry Mansion, Parkside, and West and South Philadelphia. These areas, previously heavily Jewish, had by that point become almost completely African American.

The report surveyed Jewish residents as to why they had chosen to move or stay. Most of those who had remained in the now-black neighborhoods were elderly, ill and poor; close to 80 percent reported that they wished to move but for whatever reason could not. Their unhappiness stemmed primarily from fear and loneliness. More than a quarter had been victims of violence and most were deeply concerned about their personal safety. And because so many city residents shared their fear of these neighborhoods, they received few visits from friends or relatives who had moved away. They complained that the area had become more dilapidated and less well maintained than before. Like those in other cities, then, these residents seemed more concerned with the quality of life than with race per se. On the other hand, the terms they used to explain themselves to interviewers suggested that race clearly played a role in their thinking. Many reported feeling "outnumbered and unwanted,"³⁰ almost certainly a reference to the changed racial makeup of their community.

Their views were echoed by the Jewish store owners who had remained in these neighborhoods. About a fifth had been held up at gunpoint; most feared further violence. Like the residents, and like Jewish owners in other cities who had remained, most were older, and their children did not plan to take over the family business when they retired. Half wanted to sell but could not do so without suffering unacceptable financial losses.

Jewish residents who remained in neighborhoods like Germantown, Chestnut Hill, Mount Airy or Wynnefield that were currently undergoing racial change were generally younger and had school-aged children. They reported that their greatest concern was the quality of the public schools. As the report summarized their views:

These parents are most concerned that the quality of education being offered should not suffer either by reason of the influx of schoolchildren from other areas who are not prepared to absorb the level of teaching theretofore offered to their children, or by the placement of poorly qualified teachers in such schools for the purpose of effecting racial balance in faculties. Part of their concern relates to the lack of discipline in the public schools threatening the safety of their children.³¹

Like the elderly Jewish residents of black neighborhoods, some also mentioned concern for their own safety.

These comments, and the fact that these residents had stayed when they could afford to leave suggests that racism per se did not play much of a role in their thinking. But they did acknowledge it had affected others. They were skeptical of efforts to maintain racial balance in their neighborhoods and pointed to the

widespread use of scare tactics by realtors as a “major cause of the wholesale exodus of whites, including Jewish families.”³² They recognized the role race played even in those decisions that appeared to be about other things.

Further evidence that many Jews resisted the integration locally that their organizations called for nationally comes from Northeast, still virtually all white, where so many Jews had moved. Despite the racial stability of their neighborhood, Jews there also reported concern for their safety and believed the quality of their public schools was declining. They had clearly absorbed the racial fear realtors and others had promoted. As a result, the study found, they “are openly antagonistic to any attempts aimed at effecting racial balance either in the faculties or student bodies of their schools.” In fact a recent public hearing on the subject of school desegregation by the Philadelphia Board of Education “was thrown into uproar and a near-riot by angry Northeast resident demonstrations.”³³ It is precisely these Jews, the report concluded, who have begun to criticize Jewish organizations for spending so much of their energy on civil rights work and to accuse them of abandoning Jewish interests. Nathan Edelstein’s advice to Jewish agencies to engage more actively in local and national civil rights efforts in order to strengthen Jewish commitment had backfired. At least, it had backfired with these – as the report termed them – “angry Jews.” Unlike overt white racists, these Jewish opponents of integration did endorse the principle of black equality, even if their support for organized Jewish engagement had waned. But they had obviously accepted those racists’ convictions that actual black people brought violence, lower standards, and neighborhood deterioration wherever they went.

To a certain extent, their assessment of the situation they faced was reasonable, even if their explanation was not; the failure of integration was a liberal failure not because liberals proved racist in their own choices but because liberals were unwilling to invest in the kinds of programs necessary to make integration a success. As Polier had noted, schools did not have to decline in quality, even if the new children attending them came with poorer preparation. What was required was a substantial investment in those schools, something governments, including the liberal federal government, was unwilling or unable to provide. As the Anti-Defamation League's 1963 study on "The Negro Revolt" had observed, busing a few black children to white schools would not solve the problem of integration or achieve educational equality. "Housing, redistricting, motivation and above all a heroic effort involving vast expenditures to provide compensatory education to Negro students, will have to be undertaken." Yet, as the ADL well understood, "some of the actions to be undertaken by Negro organizations and people" to resolve these problems "will be distasteful to some segments of the white community."³⁴ Whether Jews would fall into that segment depended on the extent to which liberals followed their rhetorical commitment to black equality with an economic one. Because the economic investment was not in fact forthcoming (perhaps because so many whites did indeed find it "distasteful"), even liberals found themselves confronted with choices made impossible by racism: undermine civil rights' goals by fleeing integrating neighborhoods, or remain in those neighborhoods as they declined because of a racially inspired public and private divestment of resources.

The changing political landscape compelled the Philadelphia JCRC to shift somewhat in its response to continued Jewish flight. It did maintain its active legislative and legal work in support of civil rights, and joined with several non-Jewish civic organizations to stop real estate agents from scare-mongering or using discriminatory advertisements or sales tactics in changing neighborhoods. And it did continue organizing community responses to specific challenges. For example, it worked with the police and others to produce educational and neighborhood patrol programs to reduce crime. (A special protection program was even organized to protect stores in high risk areas, supported by the Police Commissioner, Frank Rizzo.) But now, the JCRC also began actively assisting those who wished to move in finding suitable alternative housing. It also sought qualified black buyers for those Jewish business owners wishing to sell.³⁵

This change in programming was inevitable, given such pressure from their constituents. Certainly the JCRC did seek to mollify those “angry Jews” in other ways and regain their support for continued civil rights activity. Consulting broadly and nationally, it considered a number of strategies for promoting productive dialogue with them, from holding public hearings in Jewish communities whenever controversial issues arose to opening board meetings to all who wished to attend. “Thus far an effective technique has not been found but the Committee intends to continue to explore ways and means of trying to reach this segment of the Jewish community,” it concluded.³⁶ Meanwhile, until such time as they came around, community agencies would have to respond to their more immediate demands. A gulf

so wide between Jewish agencies and their constituents could not long endure without jeopardizing the agency by alienating its sole source of support.

NCRAC president Theodore Mann made precisely this point. JCRCs needed to address Jews' specific concerns directly, he insisted, even if it ran counter to other aims. This would demonstrate that the organization cares about them "so that while we wait for the basic solutions to our cities' problems, which in the end are the only real solutions to the Jews' problems too, we won't lose them; because if they feel that we have abandoned them, they are going to abandon us."³⁷ Edelstein's call in 1960 for Jewish agencies to expand anti-racism education to lessen Jewish prejudice and to enforce housing laws to prevent Jewish discrimination had taken on a new component a decade later. It now included aiding Jews in their quest to abandon precisely those integrated areas Jewish agencies had fought for.

In the 1940 and 1950s, Jewish agencies struggled to expand Jewish support for their civil rights agenda by emphasizing that working for black equality directly enhanced Jewish well-being. As Isaac Toubin of the American Jewish Congress argued in 1953, "We must be concerned with safeguarding the democratic process as the best way to preserve our integrity and identity as Jews." Therefore, to protect Jewish interests, Jews must fight "to establish and safeguard the rights of all groups in America wherever those rights are curtailed."³⁸ By 1970, the JCRC understood that even that was not enough. Politically, they had succeeded in persuading the vast majority of Jews to embrace such humanistic liberal values. Persuading them to enact these values in their own lives was an entirely different challenge.

In fact, Jews' failure to promote integration in their own communities may well have been an unintended byproduct of precisely such political arguments. Jews, like others, are fundamentally concerned with their own group's well being. By drawing a link between black equality and Jewish security, Jewish organizations solidified the community's support for civil rights. But it also implied that the link was external to Jews themselves. If white Americans can restrict black rights, they can limit Jewish rights as well. If white Americans can attack African Americans, can attacks on Jews be far behind? The battle, in other words, was for the hearts, minds and votes of white, Christian Americans who hated Jews as much as they hated black people. Jews themselves, then, may have felt less call to actively integrate in their own, private spheres. The chief reason for many Jews' civil rights support, Jewish security, was unrelated to their own behaviors. This view also fit well into the individual-rights liberalism of the era that saw government as the vehicle to ensure those rights. An individual's obligation extended to the voting booth and to full compliance with the law.

Certainly Jewish liberalism, and the universalist call for justice the rabbis preached, kept most Jews from active racism and strengthened their commitment to civil rights ideals. Few opposed the idea of black equality, or engaged in anti-civil rights activities of any sort. Most understood support the civil rights agenda not only as self-interest but also as their religious and ethical duty. But when the costs of integration in a still-racist society seemed so high, fewer accepted the deeper imperative to extend their efforts beyond financial or electoral support to actively making integration a reality in their own lives and communities. The failure of the

JCRC's 1966 efforts to improve the dynamic of black-Jewish economic relationships offers a case in point. Business owners, willing participants in programs that, in the explicit terms of the JCRC, were developed because of the "implications of this situation for the Jewish community at large," nonetheless chose not to embrace integration but rather join the exodus of Jewish businesses from black and changing areas.³⁹ They were not racists. But their choices reflected the impact that racism had on every institution in the country, and the failure of liberalism to dismantle those structural impediments to equality.

Ironically, this divide between understanding what ought to be done and actually doing it was one Jewish agencies had discovered about their constituents long before. During a 1943 study of Detroit that compared the behavior of Jewish and other businessmen in black areas, researchers discovered a surprising statistic. Not only did black people expect more from Jews than other whites, on the assumption that Jews understood bigotry firsthand, Jews themselves expected more of Jews. Even more startling, while 71 percent of Jews reported that they ought to behave better, only 52 percent believed that Jews actually did.⁴⁰ From the start of the civil rights movement, then, the challenge for Jewish civil rights agencies was not to push Jews toward liberalism – they were already there – but to push them to live up to their own political ideals. Long before the more radical developments of the mid-1960s, liberal Jews were already exhibiting the same private behaviors they were criticized for after the riots. It was the Jewish civil rights agencies, perhaps to ensure their own survival, that seemed to have shifted direction somewhat. In the Sobels' pessimistic view:

We have tended to take for granted the liberalism of the Jewish community and its commitment to democratic processes, welfare programs, and, of course, civil rights. This commitment, we believe, is still viable and present. But if we continue to expect the Jews to push harder for civil rights and to support Negro action groups more unstintingly than the other segments of the middle-class white population, we might be disappointed. Jews, to be sure, are still over-represented to a marked extent in militant civil-rights causes and groups – but as individuals rather than as Jews. The organized segments of the community, while sincerely committed to full freedom for the Negro and other subjugated groups, no longer appears to be active enough in this pursuit to be able to participate in an organized way. This cannot be interpreted as Jewish rejection of freedom or equality, but neither can it be seen, as in the past, as a vital and concerted group effort in this direction.⁴¹

In their conclusion the Sobels warned that unless Jewish leaders intensified their efforts to spur the community to greater action in both the public and private sphere, not only might black-Jewish relations deteriorate but, more importantly, there would no longer be a moral reason to remain Jewish.

Interviewed at length by NCRAC in 1961 about their attitude toward the sit-ins, southern Jewish merchants acknowledged that none of them had integrated willingly. They explained they feared the loss of white business if they did. As the report

concluded, "All the Jewish merchants interviewed appeared morally conflicted about the issue. Many acknowledged the legitimacy of demands being made upon them, but at the same time felt that for economic reasons they could not meet these demands. Some of these merchants have been actively identified with liberal movements." In virtually every city that had sit-ins, Jewish merchants played a role in negotiations to meet demonstrators' demands, even when their own businesses were not directly affected. Yet in neither their private nor their business lives had most of these merchants built any personal or professional relationships with African Americans. Unlike most of their non-Jewish white counterparts, few believed African Americans did not deserve equal rights and opportunities. Rather, for them the issue was that, as one southern Jewish business leader put it, "we're not social crusaders."⁴² The northern Jewish community during the civil rights movement might have made the same point. Supportive of political civil rights activity, avowed liberals, most simply did not see themselves as social crusaders and therefore did not struggle against the racist assumptions of the day. Nevertheless, if they did not hold the same views as white racists, many did react in similar ways. In a society in which all choices were, in the end, determined largely by race, such a result should not surprise us.

1. Many books discuss Jews as liberals: see, for example, Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness* (Princeton, 2006); Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion* (Princeton, 2000); Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters* (Princeton, 2006); Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong?* (New York, 1995) .
2. *Blacks and Jews*, Documentary film, Alan Snitow, Deborah Kaufman, Bari Scott, producers, 1997.
3. Joseph Bibb, "Hating Jews," *Pittsburgh Courier* 11/30/47, Microfilmed papers of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), "Yellows 1947: Negro Race Problems," ADL library, New York, NY. Papers used with permission.
4. Lou Silberman, "The Minority Problem," *HUC Monthly* (April 1943): 6.
5. The literature on Jews and the civil rights movement is vast. In addition to broad studies such as those cited above, some works focus on a single location [see, for example, Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn* (Chicago, 2002), event [for example, Melissa Faye Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, Mass., 1996)] or conflict [Jerald Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York* (New Haven, 2002)]. Others cover specific regions [Clive Webb, *Fight against Fear* (Athens, Ga., 2001)] or time periods [Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land* (Westport, Conn., 1977)]. Most are laudatory of Jewish engagement; some border on hagiography (Mark Schneier, *Shared Dreams* (Woodstock, Vt., 1999)]. Others are sharply critical. [Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967)]. Many are primary source collections [*Strangers and Neighbors*, John Bracey and Maurianne Adams, eds. (Amherst, 1999)]; others are anthologies [*Struggles in the Promised Land*, Cornel West and Jack Salzman, eds. (New York, 1997); a few blend both [*Bridges and Boundaries*, Jack Salzman, ed. (New York, 1992)]].
6. Nathan Edelstein, "Jewish Relationship with the Emerging Negro Community in the North," 1-2, Typewritten address to National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC), June 23, 1960, Vertical files of the American Jewish Committee: "Negro-Jewish Relations: American Jewish Congress," American Jewish Committee Library, New York, NY.
7. Edelstein, "Jewish Relationship," 5.
8. Edelstein, "Jewish Relationship," 5.
9. Edelstein, "Jewish Relationship," 11.
10. Shad Polier, "The Jews and the Racial Crisis," 3, July 15, 1964, article draft for American Jewish Congress press release, Shad Polier papers, box 14, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, N.Y.
11. Polier, "The Jews," 3.
12. "Symposium on Negro-Jewish Tensions," April 7, 1966, New York, Polier papers, box 14, 1-2, 5.
13. There are many such studies and polls. See, for example, Kenneth Clark, "A Positive Transition," *ADL Bulletin* (12/57): 10, 11; Richard Simpson, "Negro-Jewish Prejudice," *Social Problems* (Fall 1959):

138-147; Kenneth Berg, "Ethnic Attitudes and Agreement with a Negro Person," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4:3(1966): 215-220.

14. B. Z. Sobel and May Sobel, "Negroes and Jews: American Minority Groups in Conflict," *Judaism* (Winter 1966): 17. Their broader findings are described primarily on pages 17 - 20.

15. Oscar Cohen, Memorandum to Frank Trager, ADL; Fineberg, American Jewish Committee; Walter Lurie, NCRAC; Will Maslow, American Jewish Congress, Irving Salert, Jewish Labor Committee; January 30, 1948, ADL Microfilm Yellows 1948: Negro Race Problems.

16. Sobel and Sobel, "Negroes and Jews," 19. My non-systematic and non-scientific survey of polls and psychological studies suggests a substantial majority found that Jews reported fewer and weaker racist attitudes than others.

17. Leonard Fein, *The Negro Revolution and the Jewish Community*, Pamphlet, Synagogue Council of America, 1969, 12.

18. Others have argued, myself included, that Jewish agencies did not pull back on their commitments as much as the movement left such programs behind. Jewish groups continued their legislative and legal work on behalf of civil rights and integration issues (even when they disagreed with black organizations about how to address those issues) but the energy of the movement had turned toward priorities less dependent on either legislation or integration. This important question is not relevant to the central discussion here, however.

19. NCRAC, "Impact of Riots and Other Disorders on Jewish Attitudes Toward Civil Rights Issues," September 1967 (updated December 1967), NCRAC Papers box 67, American Jewish Historical Society. The study also explored the extent to which the rioters exhibited antisemitic behaviors or seemed specifically to target Jewish stores. They found no such evidence save some resentful comments made about Jewish landlords in Minneapolis.

20. NCRAC, "Impact," 3.

21. "Symposium," 4.

22. Material presented here comes primarily from Jules Cohen, JCRC of Greater Philadelphia, "Build or Burn?" Typewritten report, n.d. (December 1966?), and Nathan Agran, JCRC of Greater Philadelphia, "Our Philadelphia Jews – Their Problems – And What Is Being Done about Them," typewritten report, 1971, NCRAC papers, box 74. Both reproduce information from other reports undertaken by the JCRC and other local Jewish organizations.

23. Both from Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 28.

24. Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 29.

25. Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 35 (Appendix A).

26. Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 29.

-
27. Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 30.
28. Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 30-32 describes the plans for and activities of these committees. The civil rights bill died before the Lancaster letter was sent. "Magnificently": 32.
29. Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 33.
30. Agran, "Our Philadelphia Jews," 2.
31. Agran, "Our Philadelphia Jews," 2.
32. Agran, "Our Philadelphia Jews," 2.
33. Both quotations from Agran, "Our Philadelphia Jews," 2.
34. ADL, "Fact Sheet II: The Negro Revolt," 2, January 1963, ADL microfilm "Chicago Subjects: 12."
35. Agran, "Our Philadelphia Jews," 4.
36. Agran, "Our Philadelphia Jews," 5.
37. Agran, "Our Philadelphia Jews," 6.
38. Isaac Toubin to Hyman Fliegel, *Bnai Zion Voice*, July 13, 1953, NAACP papers box II A 362, Manuscript Collections, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
39. Cohen, "Build or Burn?" 29.
40. Eleanor Wolf, Vin Loving, Donald Marsh, "Some Aspects of Negro-Jewish Relationships in Detroit Michigan," Part I, 1943, ADL Microfilm Yellows: Negro Race Problems 1944, 7.
41. Sobel and Sobel, "Negroes and Jews," 22-23.
42. NCRAC Committee on Committee Consultation Subcommittee on Special Concerns of Southern CRCs, "How Southern Jewish Leadership Views the 'Sit-Ins,'" February 25-26, 1961, typewritten report, NCRAC box 74, 13, 7. For more on the views and activities of southern Jewish businessmen, see, for example, Albert Chernin, "Summary of Meeting of NCRAC Committee on Community Consultation Subcommittee on Special Concerns of Southern CRCs," February 25-26, 1961, NCRAC box 74; Webb, *Fight Against Fear* (Athens, Ga., 2001); Cheryl Greenberg, "The Southern Jewish Community and the Struggle for Civil Rights," in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century*, V.P. Franklin, Nancy Grant, Harold Kletnick, and Genna Rae McNeil, eds., (Columbia, Mo., 1998), 123-164; Marc Dollinger, "'Hamans' and 'Torquenadas,'" in *Quiet Voices*, Marc Bauman, Berkley Kalin, eds., (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1997), 67-94.