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# Rise of the Judeo-Cons

*Kenneth R. Weinstein*

After five decades of feverish intellectual and political activity, Jewish conservatives have finally gained recognition from the academy. On April 15-16 of this year, a conference entitled “The History of American Jewish Political Conservatism” was convened in Washington under the direction of Professor Murray Friedman of Temple University and in conjunction with The Feinstein Center for American Jewish History and American University’s Department of Jewish Studies.

The central message of the conference was that American Jews, despite a well-deserved reputation for being overwhelmingly liberal, have also contributed substantially to the intellectual underpinnings of political conservatism. From the birth of modern American conservatism in the early 1950s through the culture wars of the 1990s, Jewish intellectuals have played a key role in virtually every major development. Among the twenty-five presenters and panelists who drove this point home were a number of prominent scholars, including the reigning dean of American intellectual history, John Diggins; the leading intellectual historian of American conservatism, George Nash; and the leading historian of American Jewry, Jonathan Sarna. In addition, several individuals who were themselves key players in the history of conservatism in the United States offered their perspectives, including Midge Decter, an author and senior figure in the neo-conservative movement; Elliott Abrams, a policy intellectual who served as a high-ranking State Department official in the Reagan Administration; and Charles Krauthammer, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *Washington Post*.

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Yet there was a more interesting message which emerged from the conference: That of the marked cultural shift which has taken place among Jewish conservatives in recent decades. Whereas Jewish intellectuals involved in the founding of the modern American conservative movement in the early 1950s were only nominally Jewish, the neo-conservatives who came to the fore two decades later could rightly be described as Jewish nationalists—Jews with an open affiliation with the Jewish people and with Zionism. This heightened Jewish connection, however, paled in comparison with that of the generation which has emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. The latter derive their worldview not only from an attachment to Jewish nationhood, but also from an interest in the Jewish religious tradition. This increasingly conservative character of Jewish conservatism, if it continues, has the potential not only to reshape the politics of the American Jewish community, but also to enrich political conservatism in the United States, as well as in other countries where conservative movements have for years been seeking to forge a new agenda following the end of the Cold War and the apparent victory of free-market ideas.

**T**he wall separating the political views of the early Jewish conservatives from Jewish nationalism and tradition was described at the conference by George Nash in a paper on the early days of the *National Review*, the magazine that laid the foundations for an intellectually respectable American conservatism by providing a platform that forged the now familiar front uniting anti-Communists, economic liberals and cultural traditionalists. Seven members of the magazine's inner circle—Frank Chodorov, Marvin Liebman, Eugene Lyons, Frank Meyer, Morrie Ryskind, William Schlamm and Ralph de Toledano—were Jewish ex-student radicals who sought to defend the individual against the state, whether from the full-fledged totalitarianism of Soviet Communism or from the soft despotism they saw as endemic to the welfare state. Though Chodorov and Meyer began as libertarians and the other members of this group as anti-Communists, they increasingly came to see

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religious tradition as the bulwark of Western civilization's defense against tyranny. Yet these Jews did not consider Judaism to be a religious tradition on which the West could build; for the most part, argues Nash, they considered Judaism to be a ritual-based religion incapable of providing a moral antidote to the excesses of Enlightenment rationalism. Thus, rather than embrace the faith of their ancestors, those who turned to religion looked to that of their Christian comrades. Under the spiritual guidance of the *Review's* publisher, William F. Buckley, Jr., Liebman and Meyer were actually baptized as Catholics, while Schlamm was buried in a Catholic ceremony. De Toledano, too, was drawn to Catholicism, though he stopped short of conversion out of respect for his Sephardi forebears who had suffered at the hands of the Inquisition. Indeed, Chodorov, who attended church regularly though did not convert, summed up the feelings that most of them shared when he opened his essay, "How a Jew Came to God: An Intellectual Experience," with the proclamation: "I am a Jew. Not that anyone cares about it, least of all myself."

In the 1960s and 1970s, American Jewish conservatives came to be recognized as a movement distinct from Christian-American conservatism through the vehicle of what became the "neo-conservative" movement, which sprang up around a pair of magazines edited by gifted Jewish ex-radicals from New York: Irving Kristol's *The Public Interest* and Norman Podhoretz's *Commentary*. These publications shaped a generation of intellectuals disenamored with the New Left by applying scholarly expertise and a critical eye to America's foreign policy, welfare state and cultural institutions. The community of writers which formed around *Commentary*, including leading non-Jewish figures such as Jeane Kirkpatrick, assumed key roles in the Reagan Administration's effort to roll back Soviet expansionism, while the community that crystallized around *The Public Interest* guided the administration's policies in critical domestic areas such as tax reduction, welfare reform and education.

Unlike their predecessors at the *National Review*, the neo-cons were for the most part Jewish nationalists, who proudly identified with the aspirations of the State of Israel, as well as with Jews suffering oppression behind the Iron

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Curtain. Offering what she called her “memoirs” at the conference, Midge Decter, a central contributor to *Commentary* and wife of Norman Podhoretz, proclaimed that “Zionism was bred in my bones,” that Israel “was spoken of day and night” in her home, and that her “only avowed intention as a teenager was to die on the barricades in Palestine.” Moreover, she cited her disgust with Marxist and New Left antipathy towards Israel as an important factor in distancing her and Podhoretz from the “radical shenanigans” which drew so many of their peers among New York’s literary elite. Nevertheless, despite her deep disapproval of what she called the liberal tendency to try to “escape forever from God’s seemingly difficult and peculiar decrees,” Decter and her neo-conservative colleagues never made Jewish tradition a central concern—a fact she emphasized by noting that she and her husband did not even join a synagogue until recently.

It is only in the last generation, during the 1980s and 1990s, that prominent Jewish conservatives have increasingly come to view their politics as a natural outgrowth of their dedication to Jewish tradition. Elliott Abrams, one of the leading figures in this group and a central speaker at the conference, has been a symbol of this transformation. Like Decter and Podhoretz, he was repelled by the Left in the 1970s largely because of its support for “liberation” movements like the PLO, then the leading practitioner of international terrorism; it was his views on foreign policy that led President Reagan to appoint him as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. In recent years, he has turned his attention to religious and cultural issues, and now heads the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington. Abrams created a stir in 1997 with the publication of *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America*, in which he argued that a return to traditional Jewish practice is the best answer to the Jewish “continuity” crisis and the bog of moral relativism which has come to characterize so much of liberal Jewish thought. Particularly controversial were his claims that American Jews must abandon their traditional hostility to religion in public life, and that they must build an alliance with like-minded Christians.

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Other Jewish conservatives have also become well known for championing Judaism. Among the most successful American radio talk-show hosts and commentators are a number of Jewish political conservatives, including Dennis Prager, Laura Schlessinger and Michael Medved, all of whom openly connect the moral and religious themes of their general-audience programs to their own personal relationship with the Jewish religious tradition. Prager has even co-authored two books on Judaism (with Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Telushkin) aimed at broad audiences unfamiliar with Jewish history and sources. Likewise, Wendy Shalit's 1999 book, *A Return to Modesty*, compared traditional Jewish principles such as modesty and chastity with what she views as the destructiveness of sexual liberation. And Lisa Schiffren, who penned Vice President Dan Quayle's "Murphy Brown" speech criticizing the glorification of single-parent families by American television, spoke at the conference about how her decision "to affiliate as a Jew and a more serious Jew" was "parallel" to her political conservatism. She called on Jewish conservatives to rely on their own tradition in proposing remedies to cultural problems in American life.

Perhaps the clearest indication that American Jewish conservatives have come full circle can be seen in Buckley's *National Review*, where senior editor David Klinghoffer has authored a number of articles linking his Jewish commitment to his conservative views on a variety of subjects, even introducing rabbinic concepts into articles on mainstream culture, such as a critique of the novelist Toni Morrison. Klinghoffer last year published *The Lord Will Gather Me In*, an autobiographical account of his embrace of Orthodox Judaism.

**T**hough it is unlikely that the visceral bond between the American Jewish community and political liberalism will be dissolved any time soon, the ultimate meaning of all these efforts is the intellectual legitimization of a conservative politics among Jews—a development that may have a lasting impact on the Jewish community in America. The political conservatism

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of Jewish intellectuals can serve as an ideational bridge between Reform and Conservative Jews, on the one hand, and their Orthodox brethren on the other. As the arguments raised in books like *Faith or Fear* and *A Return to Modesty* gain currency with the general reading public, Jews from the heterodox movements may well gain a greater appreciation for the traditional Jewish way of life, while Orthodox Jews may feel that they have potential allies and partners outside the narrow circles that share their views on Jewish law and practice.

And political conservatism in America and other countries could benefit as well. Despite its successes in winning the Cold War and reshaping the domestic policy agenda on issues such as welfare reform, conservatism has not fared well in the culture wars of recent years, especially in defending traditional family values against a multiple-front assault from sexual liberationists stressing individualism and from advocates of alternative lifestyles preaching equality. The Jewish tradition has developed a set of down-to-earth teachings on these issues which might resonate better with a broad public than the lofty moralism sometimes associated with Christian-inspired writers, or the statistics-laden arguments made by social scientists preaching restraint. Moreover, the image of religious conservatism, which today is linked in the minds of most Americans with devout Catholics and Evangelicals, would develop a more ecumenical character, through the addition of Jewish intellectuals outspokenly offering up their tradition's contribution.

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