

Rabbi Hochbaum teaches sociology at Yeshiva University and serves as consultant on the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. The following essay has been adapted from a presentation delivered at the mid-Winter Conference of the Rabbinical Council of America.

THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY AND THE URBAN CRISIS

Within the Orthodox community there has been little concern and commitment to the urban crisis facing us. Our responsibility now is to try to bring illumination, rather than heat or hate, to this terribly difficult, complex, and explosive problem; to objectively and dispassionately examine and reassess whatever priorities, policies and programs we are committed to and, if necessary, modify them or establish new ones.

Presently there are two divergent positions on the urban crisis articulated with great passion in the Jewish community. There are those who contend that the racial and urban unrest is not a Jewish concern at all and it would be best not to get involved unless Jewish interests are threatened.

The second camp, the liberal extremists, declare the Jewish struggle for justice on behalf of the minority communities is, as one rabbi put it, "a religious commitment as fundamental to Judaism as monotheism itself, as binding as the Covenant itself." Within this group there are those who believe that Jews must make the necessary accommodations to the legitimate demands of the social revolution.

Neither position is valid. This writer submits that in essence Jewish interests and our wider social responsibilities do largely converge and that the Jewish community therefore has no alternative but involvement. However, the precise scope of our involvement in the urban crisis will be shaped by our identification of

the parameters of that convergence and a full understanding of its character. Thus, we must locate our stake in the urban crisis relative to the private and public sectors and the religious and indigenous communities, and then act on our responsibilities — both our Jewish interests and our stake in the wider society. Indeed, we can not act effectively on either one, independently of the other.

What are the social issues and the Jewish implications mandating our participation as Jews? First, the growing blight in urban areas, and the increasing unmanageability of city government — the gradual weakening and erosion of our consensual base, the normative and social unity of American life. This is most dramatically reflected in the deepening polarization in American society between black and white, the growing fission into two separate but unequal societies, so comprehensively documented in the Kerner Report. Unless that process is arrested, and unless the social and economic pathology in our cities responsible for it is reduced, it is inevitable that there will be greater social upheaval and convulsion. What more compelling reasons for our involvement than our self-interest in protecting our businesses, our homes, our families.

Ironically the social, economic, and psychological forces that underlie the problems of our cities are the forces responsible for the surfacing anti-Semitism which Jews are now seeing in the militant black community. Were we even totally indifferent to the plight of our cities as citizens, as Jews we cannot escape these uniquely Jewish consequences.

Secondly, as a result of the increasing visibility of the inequities of American society and our inability or unwillingness to address them forthrightly, there is a growing loss of confidence among the underclasses in our society — blacks, other minority groups, university students — in the democratic process as a means for resolving group differences and as an instrument for social change. Instead, on the streets, the campus, even the churches, the tactic is not negotiation, but confrontation. For those impatient for change, orderly democratic process has not delivered. Confrontation, they believe, has or will work for them as a device for wresting concessions from the establishment.

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But confrontation is also a threat to Jewish interests. We have been favored by, and have flourished in, the American democratic framework. The fate of the Jew is inextricably bound to the health and vigor of the democratic institutions of our society. To paraphrase Charles Wilson of General Motors: "What is good for America is good for the Jews, and what is bad for America is twice as bad for the Jews." If the democratic fabric of American society is rent, then the security of individual Jews and the welfare of the Jewish community is no longer secure either.

Thirdly, the accelerating racial crisis threatens the pluralist framework of American society. Jews have fought hard to ensure a pluralist society, a triple melting pot, where the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities function as socio-religious, or at least socio-cultural communities. Indeed, the Jewish vision of America has been that of a society in which all groups — religious, ethnic, national — can maintain their distinctive values and style of life while fully and equally participating within the mainstream of American life.

Those groups not achieving full integration are developing an ideological rationale for separatism, arguing that only through the creation of such institutions can they help revive or recreate black pride, black consciousness, and Negro peoplehood. Certainly the Jews should be sympathetic to the development of a more positive Negro self-image — no group can appreciate so deeply as the Jews the growing interest among Negroes in black identity. Our historical development has sensitized us to these concepts. Jews can also be sympathetic to a network of *private* Negro institutions controlled by them — no group has invested as much energy as the Jews in creating institutions to serve our people in accordance with our philosophy of purpose. But within the Jewish perspective of pluralist America, the Negro community would be legitimate as an ethnic, not a racial community; as a socio-cultural, not a separate, sub-society.

Many Negro ideologues' conception of American pluralism has another challenging dimension — the switch from individual to group rights. It has long been accepted as a principle that an individual's merit, rather than his family or group mem-

Anything but such cooperative and collective efforts will not generate the leverage required to reform and rebuild our cities.

It should be emphasized that Orthodox activity *must* involve cooperation with the other Jewish agencies possessing the larger resources to engage in such programs. But the issue is more than resources. The Jewish community must provide a response, wherever possible, as a community. Therein lies our strength, and therein lies one of the tragic failures of the New York City Jewish community in the recent school crisis. In these efforts, *interreligious*, as well as *intra-religious*, cooperation, which we on principled grounds do not accept in strictly religious matters, are also necessary and even desirable. Most importantly, we must work with our allies on these issues within the Negro community — the Rustins, the Wilkinses, the Whitney Youngs. Joining with these responsible minority group leaders minimizes, and in future instances may prevent, the polarization that has marred Negro-Jewish relationships. Hopefully, it will also undercut the black extremists. One of the findings of the rather meager Botein report commissioned after the school strike in New York City was that a vast majority of the responsible elements in New York City failed to speak out clearly during the school strike and that this was a contributing factor to the exacerbation of the crisis. The Jewish community must not allow this to happen again; neither the black militants nor the Jewish extremists must be allowed to occupy center stage. Because extremists are most effective where there is a leadership vacuum, we must do what we can to uphold and work with the Negro moderates, and expect and exact a *quid pro quo*.

But recognizing that a collective effort is vital and necessary, it is nonetheless not sufficient. There are areas which are of special interest to Orthodox Jewry to which the rest of the general and Jewish community may be indifferent. This is particularly true of the problem of the Jews in the inner city. Many of these are Orthodox Jews and, although still a substantial population, they are largely invisible to the affluent suburban Jewish communities. Now it is true that Jews are weakening their institutions in the city by moving to the suburbs, but moving Jewish

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institutions out of the city also destroys Jews and the Jewish community which remains, sometimes prematurely when the community is still viable or can still be consolidated. With that destruction, Jewish interests in the city are destroyed too. As Orthodoxy has a substantial religious, economic, and political investment in the inner-city, we must work toward preserving as much as possible of the inner-city Jewish communities and Jewish interests there, as the Hassidim have done. We need not panic as victims of uncontrollable forces. Certainly, there are threats from without — but the Jewish community does little to help address these problems by destroying, or at least not supporting, the internal strength of the Jewish community.

Thus, as part of Orthodox social action, we must involve ourselves in legislative programs supporting the creation of middle-income housing in the ghetto, obtaining insurance for inner-city merchants, supporting appropriations for more adequate and effective police work, and designing poverty programs in which our people can participate. Furthermore, we must move toward mobilizing all Jewish institutions to act on behalf of the Jews in the inner city — our federations, centers, welfare agencies, and our synagogues and their leadership. Interestingly, the reform rabbinate has created an intern program making it possible for recently-ordained reform rabbis to work with the poor in the ghetto. Would it not be appropriate on our part to have some of our graduates work within those same areas with the remaining Jewish population. Furthermore, there are areas in which we have a special competence — halakhah and its application to Jewish life. This may be relevant for some areas of the urban crisis, for example, the establishment of a *bet-din* similar to the one created in Boston to arbitrate between Jewish merchants and landlords and their tenants and customers. We must make our voices heard and our actions felt on these matters of concern to us, but they will not be heard or felt unless we create the necessary instrumentalities for community relations activity.

Simultaneous with social action there must be education. Education helps generate the understanding and the personal and communal commitment needed to engage in social action. Education here connotes more than its fundamental sense of impart-

ing information and knowledge, a diagnosis of urban problems and an understanding of its causes. Education also means understanding; becoming more aware of the poverty and deprivation in the ghetto.

Even more specifically, education means identifying the specific Jewish concerns and demonstrating the relevance of the urban crisis to Jews: the problem of Negro anti-Semitism; the plight of the Jewish merchant and landlord in the ghetto; and the larger problem of the Jew in the inner-city.

Lastly, we have to educate our people to the ideological basis for participation and sensitize them to the religious imperatives for our involvement. Not only because it is socially expedient, not only because of Negro demands and the threats — implied or other — that accompany these demands; not only because we are citizens concerned with the welfare of American society and democracy; but because we are Jews and have a profound commitment to social justice, because we are obligated to conform to these mandates as they are expressed in the Torah. The halakhic perspective must be examined, applied when applicable, and disseminated to those in our midst who are or have become spiritually callous to these teachings of the Torah.

In conclusion, the Orthodox community and its leaders must begin to become involved in the urban crisis because it has an overwhelming impact on our congregations and on our communities. If we blind ourselves to the social realities of our times or are too near-sighted to observe the larger dynamics of these changes, we place ourselves, individually and collectively, in great danger. We must become part of the action before it overtakes us.