

(Download free pdf) Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America (Religion and American Culture)

## **Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America (Religion and American Culture)**

*Michael Staub*

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**Michael Staub : Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America (Religion and American Culture)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America (Religion and American Culture):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Rachel AExcellent. Readable. Balanced. Very thorough. .12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. When Bad Analogies happen to Good People, 3.6 starsBy pnotley@hotmail.comMichael Staub has presented a somewhat unusual book at divisions within American Jews from the fifties to the mid-seventies. His book does not possess a formal conclusion, but consists of eight chapters and an introduction. The first looks at the struggle between communists and anti-communists and how they argued over the Holocaust and American racism. The next two discuss the growing divisions within American over civil rights, and the fourth looks at divisions over the Vietnam war. The fifth looks again at civil rights, the sixth looks at the rise of Radical Zionism, the seventh looks at debates over family and sexuality and the eighth looks at the brief life of the pro-peace group Breira. Staub concentrates on especially Jewish movements: non-Jewish organs such as Partisan Review or The New York Review of Books get little or no mention. The participants are often theologians and members of explicitly Jewish groups. Novelists such as Bellow, Malamud, Mailer or Singer get no mention, while Philip Roth is mentioned only in passing. This appears to me as a mistake, since these writers obviously have a lot to say about Jewish-black and Jewish-feminist relationships, the topic of his book. Moreover they strike me as far more influential and important than the theological debates and the small groups such as Jews for Urban Justice, the Radical Jewish Union, the Jewish Liberation Project, or even The Jewish Defence League that Staub concentrates on. Notwithstanding these eccentricities, Staub has still produced an interesting book. Staub's sympathies are clearly with those who tried to combine their Judaism with support for left-wing activism. He writes of those minority of Jews who were active supporters of civil rights who invoked traditions of 'prophetic Judaism' to emphasize justice for all humanity. He is sympathetic to those who seek to support a just peace via a two state solution in Palestine. He points out those Jews who sought to revive Judaism by supporting and incorporating the demands of feminists and homosexuals. He writes of those Radical Zionist groups who also strongly opposed the Vietnamese war and those groups who incorporated the style and arguments of the Black Panthers for Jewish purposes. (He prints a cartoon where a Black Panther is disgusted by one Jew's lack of enthusiasm for Zionism.) He also discusses the widespread spread of Holocaust consciousness among Jewish spokespeople at the time. This is in fact a bit of a problem since the use of Holocaust tropes, such as the 'passivity' of the victims, the 'passivity' of the outside world, the 'treason' of the Judenrat and others by all sides against all sides does have the effect of making the participants look more than a little hysterical and paranoid. Staub produces enough bad Holocaust analogies to drive Peter Novick and Raoul Hilberg to despair. A reform rabbi in the seventies states Hitler will have won if Jewish couples do not have four children each by 2000. Letter writers against integration whine 'Where were the Negroes during the Hitler regime??' Nathan Glazer, who should have known better, snarkily commented that the New Left likes 'final victories and final solutions.' We get to hear the not-exactly innocent Ethel Rosenberg compare the not-exactly honorable Justice Kauffmann to the Judenrat. Radical protesters invoke Auschwitz, Vietnam and the suppression of the Attica prison riot on the same sign. One can go on. But not everyone is equally foolish. One of the most useful things about the book is the way that it describes the limits of moderate (later conservative) Jewish opinion on civil rights. For decades Commentary has been arguing that Black extremism and anti-Semitism after 1965 was the cause of the Black-Jewish split. Nothing could be further from the truth. Commentary, as Staub shows, was almost always lukewarm towards the cause. He quotes some stunningly complacent, all honey and butter articles by Elliot Cohen in 1952 and James Rorty in 1954. He notes the opposition Southern synagogues expressed to actions by their more forceful Northern cousins. More important, he discusses opposition to 'Prophetic Judaism.' These relatively conservative Jews argued that liberal activism did not arise from the Torah per se, but instead was simply an internalized liberalism. They also argued that such activism was faddish, ostentatious in its show of guilt and sympathy and not really attuned to the interests of Jews. This not only started Commentary's obnoxious habit of describing every Jew who disagreed with them as deeply neurotic self-hating wimps, inauthentic and insufficiently masculine. It also evaded questions about desegregation in the north. Such arguments wrote of 'de facto' segregation in the north as simply a historical accident, a natural reflection of group cohesion, when it would be far more accurate as the systematic effort of both state and society in the North to quarantine blacks into the poorest areas and the least desirable jobs. We get to see such prominent thinkers such as Norman Podheretz, Nathan Glazer, Arthur Hertzberg, Oscar Handlin, Marie Syrkin and Leslie Fielder evade the issue and reject integration before Stokely Carmichael weighed in on the issue. This, along with his discussion of their obtuseness about feminism and how they red-baited Breira out of existence for agreeing to talk with the PLO avant le letter, provides an important perspective for the reader.

When Jewish neoconservatives burst upon the political scene, many people were surprised. Conventional wisdom held that Jews were uniformly liberal. This book explodes the myth of a monolithic liberal Judaism. Michael Staub tells the story of the many fierce battles that raged in postwar America over what the authentically Jewish position ought to be on issues ranging from desegregation to Zionism, from Vietnam to gender relations, sexuality, and family life. Throughout the three decades after 1945, Michael Staub shows, American Jews debated the ways in which the political commitments of Jewish individuals and groups could or should be shaped by their Jewishness. Staub shows that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the liberal position was never the obvious winner in the contest. By the late

1960s left-wing Jews were often accused by their conservative counterparts of self-hatred or of being inadequately or improperly Jewish. They, in turn, insisted that right-wing Jews were deaf to the moral imperatives of both the Jewish prophetic tradition and Jewish historical experience, which obliged Jews to pursue social justice for the oppressed and the marginalized. Such declamations characterized disputes over a variety of topics: American anticommunism, activism on behalf of African American civil rights, imperatives of Jewish survival, Israel and Israeli-Palestinian relations, the 1960s counterculture, including the women's and gay and lesbian liberation movements, and the renaissance of Jewish ethnic pride and religious observance. Spanning these controversies, Staub presents not only a revelatory and clear-eyed prehistory of contemporary Jewish neoconservatism but also an important corrective to investigations of "identity politics" that have focused on interethnic contacts and conflicts while neglecting intraethnic ones. Revising standard assumptions about the timing of Holocaust awareness in postwar America, Staub charts how central arguments over the Holocaust's purported lessons were to intra-Jewish political conflict already in the first two decades after World War II. Revisiting forgotten artifacts of the postwar years, such as Jewish marriage manuals, satiric radical Zionist cartoons, and the 1970s sitcom about an intermarried couple entitled *Bridget Loves Bernie*, and incidents such as the firing of a Columbia University rabbi for supporting anti-Vietnam war protesters and the efforts of the Miami Beach Hotel Owners Association to cancel an African Methodist Episcopal Church convention, *Torn at the Roots* sheds new light on an era we thought we knew well.

From *Library Journal* Staub (English and American studies, Bowling Green State Univ.) explores divisions within Jewish liberalism during the Sixties and into the Seventies, showing that Jews have long differed in their stances on political issues. Chapters examine such key topics as Jewish attitudes toward the sexual revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Cold War. Staub shows that the initial Jewish response was often very different from what one might expect. Instead of being uniformly liberal, many Jews felt uncomfortable with the seemingly radical role embraced by Vietnam War peace demonstrators. The Jewish community in this country could be very complacent about Jewish identity, and it wasn't until the Six Day War in 1967 that many Jews began having a greater feeling of Jewish identity and pride. Staub also discusses the role of Jews in civil rights, which was often very ambivalent; many northern Jews professing liberal ideals felt weary about pushing Jews in the conservative South to greater action. Staub's book will be best appreciated by an academic audience and is recommended for libraries with strong holdings in Jewish studies or in the social sciences. Paul Kaplan, Lake Villa Dist. Lib., IL Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. Jewish liberalism and its history is a familiar subject, but this book by Michael Staub offers a great deal of new insight and information; indeed, it is arguably the best treatment of the rightward drift of the Jewish mainstream from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. (*Tikkun Magazine*) [T]hrough Staub's book we have a much clearer and better appreciation for the depths of the intra-Jewish, internecine struggles that took place within the American Jewish community from the end of World War II until the end of the war in Vietnam. *Torn at the Roots* paints a sobering picture of a Jewish community torn by ideological conflict. (Abraham J. Peck *Journal of American History*) Staub explores divisions within Jewish liberalism during the Sixties and into the Seventies, showing that Jews have long differed in their stances on key political issues... recommended. (*Library Journal*) *Torn at the Roots* contributes significantly to our understanding of what Jewish identity meant to different groups of American Jews, those marching on the left, sitting in the establishment's center, and leaning towards the conservative right in the decades after the Holocaust. (Pamela S. Nadell *History*) [Staub] challenges commonly held notions regarding the purported liberalism of US Jewry while underscoring the growing importance of spirituality for left-of-center Jews... This is an important work... highly recommended. (*Choice*) Masterful... A vibrant history of the liberal quest for improving the world, a history relevant for the present and future, and one which deserves wide reading and discussion. (*American Jewish History*) Staub's work is important precisely because it records the history of competing visions of Jewishness. (Marjorie N. Feld *The Minnesota*) Staub's carefully researched and cogently argued book explores the evolution and complex dimensions of Jewish politics, calling into question many widely-held assumptions about Jewish liberalism.... [*Torn at the Roots*] offer[s] new insights into the dimensions of Jewish culture in postwar America. (Beth Wenger *Jewish Quarterly*) Another welcome addition to the already large literature on the surprisingly tenacious adherence of Jews to liberalism. (Nathan Abrams *Journal of American Studies*) *Torn at the Roots* will force important and powerful historiographic changes. It is a rich, well-researched, and intricate study. (Marc Dollinger *Journal of American Ethnic History*) a vibrant history of the liberal quest for improving the world (Gad Nahshon *Jewish Post of New York*) A window into just how complex the conservative - liberal split has been in the American Jewish community... It adds an important chapter to the story of what the American Jewish community is really like. (Peter J. Haas *JAAR*) About the Author Michael E. Staub teaches English and American Studies at Bowling Green State University. He is the author of *Voices of Persuasion: Politics of Representation in 1930s America*. He lives in Ann Arbor, MI.