

The death of an American Jewish community:

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A tragedy of good intentions.

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## ***The Death of an American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions (review)***

Peter Levine

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REVIEW

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Book Reviews 133 The Death of an American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions, by Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon. New York: The Free Press, 1992. 370 pp. \$24.95. Hillel Levine, a professor of sociology and religion at Boston University, and Lawrence Harmon, a Boston-based journalist and one-time managing editor of the Boston Jewish Advocate, have written an important and disturbing book about the disintegration of urban America, Jewish-black relations, and the internal workings of American Jewish community life. Their focus is the Boston neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, which, in the space of a few short years in the 1960s, were transformed from centers of vibrant ethnic Jewish working-class life into impoverished, crime-infested black slums—a process in which working class Jews and poor

blacks were the biggest losers. Levine and Harmon argue that between 1968 and 1970, in response to nation-wide racial unrest, a consortium of Boston bankers known as BBURG, urged on by Boston politicians and local Jewish and black civic leaders, red-lined the Jewish neighborhoods of Dorchester and Mattapan, offering low-interest home loans 'guaranteed by the federal government to any blacks willing to move into the area. Publicly the bankers accepted praise for their positive contributions to Boston's urban renewal. Privately, by red-lining specific neighborhoods and by refusing to give loans to qualified blacks who might have chosen to settle elsewhere, they hoped to move out long-time Jewish residents who had already paid off their mortgages and who no longer offered bankers any room for profit. Harassed by unscrupulous real estate brokers with horror stories about what would happen to their property values if blacks moved in, frightened by increasing violence and crime perpetrated by young blacks, and abandoned by younger, middle-class Jews who had long since moved to the suburbs, Mattapan and Dorchester Jews sold their property for less than its market value. The same property, in turn, was sold to blacks for inflated sums, guaranteeing solid profits for blockbusting realtors and bankers whose loans were backed by the Federal Housing Authority (FHA). In the end, a rich urban Jewish world was destroyed with no real gain for Boston's black community. Overwhelmed in the process were the sincere efforts of those blacks and Jews who failed in their efforts to establish successfully integrated inner-city neighborhoods. By 1974, one-half of all blacks who bought homes in Mattapan and Dorchester had defaulted on their mortgages. Neighborhoods once alive with family, religion, and ethnic tradition had become one of the nation's worst drug-infested slums. Greedy bankers and realtors, internal class division among Jews, the misplaced intentions of social activists, and federal government policies that encouraged white flight to the suburbs while inhibiting the rehabilitation of inner-city neighborhoods all figured in this result. And what happened in Boston, the authors argue, as congressional investigations ultimately revealed, also took place in other major American cities. There simply is no opportunity in this short review to do justice to the complex and well-told tale that Levine and Harmon unfold. Emphasizing anecdote and personality, they first explore Boston's Jewish neighborhoods along Blue Hill Avenue as prelude to detailing how even people with good intentions contributed to its demise. Although at times they do overromanticize the life of this urban ethnic working-class world, they make clear how younger middle-class Jews, more concerned with supporting the black civil-rights movement and the security of Israel, helped set the stage for the disaster of urban renewal by divorcing themselves both physically and emotionally from the community's life. By the early 1960s many of them had already moved to the suburbs, taking with them important Jewish religious and social institutions and showing little concern for an older and less wealthy generation of Jews that they left behind. Indeed, the authors' open indictment of Jewish communal organizations for contributing to the collapse of Jewish community is an important theme of this book. Fueled by this sense of betrayal, at times Levine and Harmon appear to chastise successful second- and third-generation American Jews for abandoning the world of..

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