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Beyond Whiteness: Revisiting Jews in Ethnic America

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BEYOND WHITENESS

*REVISITING JEWS
IN ETHNIC AMERICA*

Edited by Jonathan Karp

Casden Institute
for the Study of
the Jewish Role
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The Jewish Role in American Life

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Study of the Jewish Role in American Life**

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Volume 21

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Parkchester: A Suburb in a City and the Challenge to Ethnicity, 1940–circa 1970

by Jeffrey S. Gurock

On June 22, 1944, just sixteen days after D-Day where American troops courageously charged across the beaches of Normandy, a grateful United States Congress passed a most far-reaching piece of legislation rewarding the country's troops. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, provided that those who had served honorably in the military could turn to the government for a range of benefits to assist them in not only recovering from the traumas of European and Asian battlefields, but in substantially improving their forthcoming post-war lives. Among the most significant emoluments was the making available of low-cost mortgages, facilitating sixteen million soldiers, sailors and airmen owning their own private homes. This government mandate played a critical role in the creation of suburbs. Indeed, it was said that when real estate folks examined the legislation, "they look[ed] at one another in happy amazement, and the dry, rasping noise they made rubbing their hands together could have been heard as far as Twi Twai"—an island off the Philippines known to GIs who fought in the Pacific Theatre. A new unparalleled building boom was soon underway which would "serve the American dream-house market."

Single-family housing starts jumped from 114,000 the year the bill was passed to 1,692,000 six years later, constituting "an all-time high." The largest and best-known development was Levittown, situated in Long Island, begun in 1946, that ultimately became home to 17,400 dwellings for 82,000 residents. These homes were functional for growing baby-boomer families. Friendly

critics were known to call Levittown “Fertility Valley.” With their little kids in tow, families could spend leisure times in the sixty community parks. As the youngsters grew older, nine swimming pools were available to them as well as the ten baseball diamonds, perfect for Little League games. A new way of life was born for a new generation of white, young Americans who had grown up in cramped, contested city environs and who now made efforts to get along with their neighbors in a bucolic setting. “The middle-class suburb family with the new house and the long-term fixed rate mortgage” issued through the Veterans Administration “became a symbol and perhaps a stereotype of the American way of life.”¹

Levittown was, however, off-limits to African Americans. In an oft-quoted explanation of the development’s policies, William Levitt opined: “we can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem, but we cannot combine the two.” In the 1950s, the Levitt family built a smaller version of their development in Pennsylvania and with the same open-and-closed door policies. Concomitantly and subsequently, suburban communities sprung up all over the United States with comparable enticements for whites while staying restricted against blacks.²

In this chapter, I will present two models of post-war Jewish ethnicity that emerged outside of the strict urban framework. The first is the suburban model, typified by Levittown, which despite its seemingly generic character, did provide a framework for the preservation of Jewish ethnicity, marked by residential clustering and limited fraternization with non-Jews. The second model is less well-known. It is the case of Parkchester, NY, located in the north-eastern section of the Bronx. As we will see, the case of Parkchester, although ostensibly more urban than Levittown (indeed, technically a part of New York City), exhibited far more assimilatory patterns for Jews.

LEVITTOWN AND SUBURBIA

For some Jews, moving to suburbia afforded them an opportunity to fulfill a very different “American” dream. They could now dissociate totally from their ancestral pasts. The three basic elements for assimilation were now coming together. To begin with, they long harbored the goal of leaving all aspects of their Jewishness—be it a religious or modern secular identity—behind. Secondly, they were fully Americanized, in education and occupation, in

speech, in culinary choices, in affinity for general culture, including its leisure time activities, and even in their surnames. Most importantly, they were living in a post-war era where overt antisemitism was becoming unfashionable, permitting them to generally fit in with their gentile neighbors. Their only complaint—that they kept to themselves—was that elite gentile institutions like country clubs had members who frowned upon interaction with such aspiring Jews.

Author Herman Wouk, saddened critic of what he prophesized suburbia would mean for the future of American Jewish life, recoiled against the attitude of a fictional but emblematic Jew named Abramson whom he depicted as, “pleasantly vanishing down a broad highway at the wheel of a high-powered station wagon, with the golf clubs piled in the back.” Tragically for Wouk, “when his amnesia clears, he will be Mr. Adamson and his wife and children with him, and all will be well. But the Jewish question will be over in the United States.” In his view, “antisemitism will not kill off the Jews.” Rather, as he evoked a suburban lifestyle, he lamented that there will be “five million Adamsons in the United States, driving cars, watching television, leading honest lives and exhibiting no trace of a terrible and magnificent origin.”³

However, the arch assimilationists—as he characterized Abramson *qua* Adamson—turned out to be the exceptions. Most Jews opted for a significant commitment to ethnic persistence even as they wanted to “conform to the expectations of . . . neighbors as neighbors rather than as Jews.” It was said that suburbia was “a setting so intent of sociability that it brooks no strangers. No one can be in it and not of it.”⁴

A key and defining decision of where these Jews stood took place when they appeared as prospective buyers at real estate sales offices. They would be shown a model home diorama and a large map showing the various culs-de-sac around which houses would be built. They could choose to settle in whatever sub-division seemed attractive to them. Although there was much uniformity to the look of sections of the massive suburban expanse, it is not known how many buyers asked the agents about the ethnicity or religion of their possible neighbors. But seemingly, most Christians were not concerned about the background of their possible neighbors. They queried only whether their fellow newcomers could afford to buy in.

That unconcerned gentile mind-set encouraged Jews to drift away from their ethnic pasts. However, Jews were different. While there were examples of places where, “Jewish families were scattered at random,” and not in adjacent houses, in most suburban communities “Jews tended to cluster together.”

Only a minority “moved into suburbs that contained few if any Jews.” These aggregations could not, however, be defined fully as a Jewish neighborhood even if the leading sociologist of suburbia would write in 1956, “generally the Jew lives in what are called Jewish neighborhoods—or now Jewish suburbs. His friends are almost certain to be Jewish and his wife likes to have the children play with other Jewish children whenever possible.”⁵ For in the new locales, unlike the city-based past, there would be no Jewish stores. Suburban Jews bought their foods at the A and P, chose their clothes from the same haberdashers as their neighbors, and dined at restaurants like Howard Johnsons, or more upscale local bistros, and not at the previously ubiquitous Jewish delicatessen. As one historian has put it: “outside the protective womb of the urban Jewish subculture, Judaism could no longer be absorbed, like sunshine from the surrounding atmosphere.”⁶

But those who chose to live together were in no way staunch self-segregationists and might well be annoyed if gentiles moved away when they moved in. While they relished being among their own kind—a spare evening would find Jews congregating together within informal gatherings—many parents believed that “it was good for the children to learn to live with others.” After all, as they grew up, “they have to learn to deal with non-Jews in life.” One sociologist has suggested that “in contrast to their parents who in many cases sought . . . segregation, they *feared* it.”⁷

The challenge for their families was to strike the proper balances between being part of, and respected within, the larger community while retaining a connectedness to their ancestral background. That meant that their youngsters attended the local public schools. The possibility of enrolling children in quality and well-funded schools had been one of the motivations for relocation. Indeed, Jews were known to be great supporters of maximizing dollars for educational institutions. In general, when it came to a community raising monies for essential institutions like a hospital or a public library or a new fire station, Jews were often the first in line to lend their support and dollars. In one study of a suburban midwestern community, it was found that nine out of ten Jews involved themselves in “non-sectarian, voluntary associations”—also referred to as “instrumental groups”—while only 75% of gentiles were so motivated.⁸

At the same time, and as important in being part of their locale, their children’s participation in after-school and weekend activities with their gentile chums—be it Little League or a dance group, etc.—was encouraged. But how close and enduring should these next generation relationships be? In other

words, how friendly might their sons become with the sisters of their gentile teammates? While statistics show intermarriage in the 1940s–1950s was still very low—as of 1958 the figure nationally was around 7%—the fear of exogamy troubled many families. It was hypothesized that “intermarriage [was] likely to become even more serious in the years ahead . . . wherever and whenever Jews live in communities that are not exclusively Jewish.” Nonetheless, parents were generally sure to put a positive spin on ongoing relationships with non-Jewish youngsters. They were certain not to evoke nasty memories of Christians troubling Jews on mean urban streets as their reason for special feelings toward fellow Jews.⁹

The older generation held in the back of their minds their negative youthful experiences of tensions with nearby Christian neighbors. Nevertheless, these Jews’ subconscious fear of “too much” closeness with non-Jews contributed much to low levels of intermarriage. On the other hand, this type of standoffish thinking did not make sense to their children. One 1950s’ parent understood the dilemma of how to promote Jewishness devoid of negativity toward those among whom they now resided this way: In the city, he observed, “the odds are in your favor. Out here you stack the deck” through “linkage to the social organization of the synagogue.” If nothing else, it was widely believed that within this new social mix, “the community needs a place for our children” and for themselves that is decidedly Jewish.¹⁰

So disposed, the synagogue became the primary touchstone institution for identification. Previously, within urban locales, houses of worship were frequented only by the devout minority. For others, shuls were the places that Jews promenaded by as they met and greeted their friends and relatives while they strolled—dressed in their holiday best—along the wide thoroughfares of avenues like on New York’s iconic Grand Concourse in the Bronx or Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn. The neighborhood scene was the incubator and preserver of Jewishness. Now, however, the synagogue had more to do than just serve as a place to worship for the few; it had to be a social center for the many.

Ironically, the origins of the efflorescence of the so-called Synagogue Center in suburbia dates to before the war while Jews still lived overwhelmingly in the cities. Its originator was Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan who recognized that the old-style shuls had no cachet for the next generation. But perhaps, an institution that was open seven days a week which promoted modern Jewish education and a plethora of ancillary elements, ranging from a gymnasium to a swimming pool, to an art studio to a music room, would attract youngsters who

came to play and hopefully stay to learn and to pray. By design, the Synagogue Center would be far more committed to religious values and observance than the long-existing Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association. It was renamed in more contemporary times as a Jewish Community Center (JCC), even if the sanctuary building now would be just part of the multi-faceted social and cultural construct. More importantly, it would be an alternative to the non-sectarian local Neighborhood House that brought Jewish and gentile youngsters together for comparable sports and other after school and weekend activities. The Synagogue Center would be an antidote to the assimilatory Neighborhood House and even the JCC which although a *Jewish* institution, admitted Gentiles to its membership. Moreover, the branding of an institution that promoted degrees of separateness as a *Synagogue* Center would not be likely to offend non-Jewish neighbors. The early post-war period was an era where belonging to "the church or synagogue of your choice" was an important national social and political value. It was one of the ways for this patriotic minority group, during the Cold War, to line up with their fellow citizens as members of an indivisible nation under the Almighty in this country's struggle against godless Communism.¹¹

Keen to actualize Kaplan's formula for persistence were cohorts of his students who he influenced at the Jewish Theological Seminary that trumpeted their multi-faceted institutions. They came to suburbia not only armed with their teacher's game plan but also had an attractive message for that minority in the community who wanted more out the synagogue experience than just social bonding with other Jews. Those who "leaned towards the Orthodox," as one suburban New Jersey rabbi put it, were warmed when in 1950 the Conservative movement brought Jewish tradition right into their driveway. Then, its Rabbinical Assembly affirmed the religious right of Jews to drive to synagogue on Jewish holy days. That ruling enabled those congregants who cared to not feel guilty if the cul de sac street that they had chosen to be near fellow Jews was situated miles away from the Temple. Meanwhile, the movement's year-round 8 p.m. Friday night service fit the occupational profile of dads who worked in the city and then commuted back home for a Sabbath meal before going to the synagogue. And when they worshipped proudly in the town's commodious sanctuary, with their wives and children sitting next to them, they could feel connected not only to their people but what they felt was the best of their ancestral faith.¹²

At the same time, young American Orthodox rabbis from Yeshiva University did their level best to promote their version of Jewish traditionalism

when suburbanites met to determine which of the denomination's leaders and programs they might follow. They could offer comparable week-long social activities but would not budge on validating the Sabbath driving option. In most encounters, the representatives of the Jewish Theological Seminary won out. In the end suburbia during the first quarter century after World War II became the venue for the heyday of Conservative Judaism.¹³

PARKCHESTER: DRIFT TOWARD ASSIMILATION IN THE CITY

While assimilation-bound Jews in suburbia strove to fulfill their "American dream" of dissociation, most of their co-religionists expressed an affinity for ethnicity in an organized way. But remarkably, back in this country's largest city of New York and in the borough of the Bronx—renowned for its prior, robust Jewish neighborhoods where connectedness had once radiated up from the streets—a planned community was created, beginning in 1940, where breaking away from ancestral pasts was facilitated and simplified. In mid-century New York, many of the Jews who desired to reside in a newly built urban enclave had the strong opportunity to just drift away. Moreover, synagogue leaders did not move aggressively to mitigate disaffection. And, in contrast to suburbia, no alternative form of Jewish institutional life like a JCC was developed. The story of Parkchester suggests that the assimilatory challenges to early post-war Jewish identity, in an increasingly tolerant American society, generally associated with out-of-town venues, existed in the city as well. This social history of Jews in a specific neighborhood dovetail with what has been written about the cultural and intellectual history of the decline in ethnicity among articulate Jewish writers and thinker in an early post-war urban setting.¹⁴

Parkchester, a building initiative consisting of 171 buildings over 127 acres of previously undeveloped land situated in the north-east corner of the Bronx, was the brainchild of a team of executives of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (MLIC). These business leaders projected themselves, and were widely praised, as a "prime example of private enterprise productivity devoted to public service." Their often-articulated goal was to create an environment where "moderate income families could live in an urban community in a suburban atmosphere." Their "intended community" would be nothing less than an "independent community" off the city grid, "a new middle class enclave well removed from the uncertainties of old inner city neighborhoods

many of the residents left.” In sum, an anticipatory alternative to suburban migration was tendered.¹⁵



Parkchester, aerial view. Courtesy the Bronx Historical Society.

As of 1942, the MLIC’s leadership had to have been gratified by a complimentary letter an early resident sent to their resident manager. This missive reflected many of the feelings of the thousands of New Yorkers, and even folks from out of town, who wanted to be part of this creative enterprise. The letter writer argued that suburban life was not a modern Shangri La:

It has always been our idea to eventually settle down in a small town, away from the clamor and rush of city life. However, without losing any of the benefits of city life, we have found our small town. Except that I don’t have to get up at 5:30 to start the furnace or spend all day Sunday painting the porch or mowing the lawn or shoveling snow from the walks during the winter.

These were all common complaints of suburbanites. “We hope to settle down here for the next 25 years.”

If this writer was blessed with children or grandchildren, they would have been gratified to find that community had so many people like themselves with many youngsters around who could play in the well-constructed playground areas. That same year of 1942, the management reported that “the largest group of children in Parkchester is the baby carriage group. War has stopped the *automobile*, not the baby carriage”—a veiled suggestion that their development had advantages over out of city locales which required cars.

“In Parkchester it just goes rolling along.” When looking for what they needed for their boys and girls, they were only blocks away from R. H. Macy’s of Parkchester. It was the giant department store’s first branch—a suburban-like mall outside of Manhattan but surely still in the metropolis. Seemingly, contented apartment dwellers had come close to having it all while staying in the city as the neighborhood soon bore the moniker “Storkchester,” a Bronx version of Levittown’s “Fertility Valley.”¹⁶

These sentiments and reports were precisely the sort of feelings about the place in the East Bronx that the home office wished to engender within their more than 40,000 residents who felt fortunate enough to secure an apartment in the complex. The competition for space was intense and the waiting list massive. Left unsaid but clearly the case, Parkchesterites were also abundantly pleased that the quick and cheap subways brought them daily to and from work, sparing them from a major drawback of suburban life; the burden of long commutation ills that confronted breadwinners. The Interborough Rapid Transit Line was available if they wanted to spend an evening in the “city” (i.e., Manhattan) to take in a show, concert or sporting event. Such entertainment venues had to be built in suburbia.¹⁷

The MLIC carefully selected the type of people they wanted in their complex very carefully and went so far as to send white-gloved social workers to interview prospective tenants in their own homes to ascertain whether they possessed what today we might call the right “family values.” But as progressive social planners they were keen not to discriminate based on religion or white ethnicity. Most critically, and uniquely, the 12,000 families who were selected to reside in Parkchester were distributed randomly within the community. Unlike suburbia where potential homeowners could *choose* where and with whom they desired to live, in this Bronx neighborhood, the management *made the decision* for its renters. It is not certain that the MLIC intentionally mixed up groups or whether they were only background blind. Nonetheless, because of the way the MLIC filled up their apartments, without regard for religion and national origin, this Bronx community was more ethnically diversified than suburban locales. One local newspaper reported early on that the “Akuskas, the Abbotts, the Breslaus, the Devores, the Gershowitzes and the McCahans” (i.e., Greeks, Jews, Irish, Germans and others) were all very content residing with one another, “upset[ting] New York’s old pattern of neighborhoods dominated by people of similar national backgrounds.” It could be said that these Jews and gentiles were all “chosen people,” contributing to a “get along” atmosphere.¹⁸

But there was a dark face to the efforts of the MLIC's master builders and social planners. Tolerance did not extend to race. In a city, and in an era, where many of Gotham's neighborhoods were segregated, the company followed suit. Clearly when in 1939, even before construction began and the "planned community" of Parkchester was described as an "*integrated residential colony*," integration meant houses, parks, stores and playgrounds all available on behalf of its multi-religious and white ethnic clientele. But this desired neighborhood of choice was off-limits to African Americans, just as Levittown did not sell houses to Blacks. In the most telling statement about MLIC's racist policies, in 1943 board president Frederick Ecker asserted: "Negroes and whites don't mix. Perhaps they will in a hundred years, but they don't now. If we brought them into the development, it would be for the detriment of the city too, because it would depress the surrounding property." For Ecker, much like for William Levitt, given the choice of solving a housing problem or a race problem, he opted to build his whites-only community. Such were the signs of the times in the pre-civil rights era. Parkchester would remain segregated until the end of the 1960s.¹⁹

Meanwhile, for the privileged white ethnics who flocked to the development, an architectural deficiency in the construction plan—at least in the estimations of annoyed residents—contributed to an increase in intergroup propinquity. Parkchester's buildings were fire-proof and possessed very thick walls which led to very bothersome apartment overheating during summertime. In the 1940s and 1950s, air-conditioning was not available in almost all residential areas, Parkchester included. A few stores had cooling units on their premises that may have led customers to tarry indoors while they slowly made their selections. It likewise made sense to sit through a double feature at the neighborhood movie houses, which also were air-conditioned. Some fortunate families repaired during July and August to bungalow colonies in the mountains while those who stayed back in the neighborhood were sure to sit out late into the night in Metropolitan Oval, a beautiful community centerpiece with its flowers, trees and spouting fountains. By day, many residents were members of the blue-collar, Castle Hill Beach Club, which was an urban "summer sanctuary" even if it had no beach, located only a short bus ride away. However, after hours of respite it was back to the apartments that were hot as blazes.

To increase cross ventilation beyond the ever-present ceiling and floor fans and without any directives from management, neighbors determined building-by-building to keep their apartment doors open around the clock.



Parkchester's Metropolitan Oval. Courtesy the Bronx Historical Society.

Without any grand statements about cooperation, they simply assisted each other in making life more comfortable for those on their floor during heat waves. This open-door behavior spawned civility in building after building on an ongoing basis as floor residents of different backgrounds got to know one another as more than mere neighbors. In some instances, folks living on the same floor became trusting enough of each other that they set up intercoms with receivers in more than one apartment, making it possible for one parent or a single baby-sitter to keep track of multiple sets of children.²⁰

One Irish-American memoirist recalled an atmosphere of conviviality that obtained among the nine families that lived on the second floor of their building. Relationships among the four Irish-American families, the one Italian family and the four Jewish families began with their common open-door search for breezes during the summer. These good vibrations continued throughout the year. John McInerney recalled pointedly that one New Years' Eve they made sure to stop at each of their floor neighbors to wish them felicitations for the upcoming year before going off to a black-tie party on the town.²¹

Participation in the patriotic campaigns on the home front during World War II and community-wide activism addressing early post-war domestic concerns gave Parkchester residents more formal and structured opportunities to cooperate and to work together, also spawning that inter-ethnic "get along" atmosphere. For example, in the winter of 1942 a United Victory Committee

of Parkchester was organized to activate “every organization and church in the vicinity” to show “their full support of the United Nations war program.” Although Parkchester’s two synagogues were not mentioned, its leaders were gratified to be invited to join the “churches” and members were encouraged to attend the committee’s dances and rallies that raised funds for the Allies. In similar spirit, local Catholic, Protestant and Jewish clergy joined hands with a score of political leaders in a community-wide prayer service that the Parkchester Citizens Council organized outside of Macy’s to mourn FDR on a Sunday after the president’s death in April 1945.²²

Meanwhile, without management prodding, neighborhood residents of all backgrounds, especially women, worked together and enlisted their youngsters to collect wastepaper. The neighborhood was praised as “being in the lead” when a ten-ton trailer “filled to capacity . . . delivered a load to a nearby paper mill.” Collections grew as parents and children made “rounds” every day except Sunday to rouse their neighbors to cooperate. In March 1944, the Red Cross was assisted by “a detachment of nine volunteers calling themselves the ‘Flying Squadron’” who canvassed the community for donations.²³

Immediately after the war, a United Women’s Committee of Parkchester, defined as a “consumer group,” and with leaders drawn from all local ethnic and religious groups, had their say about continuing ceiling prices on commodities. It was a government policy that often contributed to the continuation of the black market. The group told the *New York Times* that it wanted the paper to print the actual retail price of commodities to alert consumers about gouging by unethical storekeepers.²⁴

In gauging the tenor of life on Parkchester’s streets in the late 1940s through the 1960s, it clearly contrasted fundamentally from what New York neighborhoods had been like just a few years earlier. In many of Gotham’s neighborhoods during the 1930s Jews, Italians, Germans, and the Irish lived in close proximity to one another but did not share common goals or outlooks. Tensions over jobs with the Irish, in particular, who believed that during the Great Depression, Jews were taking over neighborhoods as they secured scarce jobs at their expense, and fundamental differences over interventionism as opposed to isolationism in U.S. foreign policy as the world war approached were stoked by anti-Semitic groups like Father Charles Coughlin’s Christian Front that exacerbated negative feelings. In some places, especially when the Irish confronted the Jews, well-defined no-mans-land boundaries separated antagonistic youngsters and their parents. But now, as all newcomers came together to Parkchester, such volatile expressions were rarely heard.²⁵

The agreeable spirit that made that community so different also set it apart from other places in post-war Gotham where “postwar mobility did not necessarily initiate the immediate erosion of . . . ethnic communities.” Put differently, in other places, Italian, Irish and Jewish families availed themselves of new housing opportunities without fundamentally compromising the largely self-imposed residential and social segregation that had sustained ethnic neighborhoods in the first half of the century. But in their Parkchester apartment village, an ethos of “getting along with others” obtained. From its very start, residents were “terribly eager to be ‘nice,’ even if they [were] not so already—to live the amiable, conformist existence of the suburbs, to know their neighbors for a change.” If anything, as economic conditions improved within a robust American economy after the war the senses around all dinner tables was that they “they have moved up in the world by finding such a grand place to live.”²⁶

Accordingly, all the predicates were in place for Jews who desired to fulfill their “American dream” of unobtrusively surrendering their ethnic identities. They could drift away toward complete assimilation. They could be seen day-by-day—marching down the development’s main streets—along with their neighbors to the subway that conveyed them to their blue-collar or white-collar civil service jobs in Manhattan where they might work in the next office or within the same police station or fire house with Christians. They were contented that the MLIC had selected them to reside in a new urban initiative with other fortunate apartment dwellers where reportedly an “in-group feeling” of “back-fence friendliness”—another suburb-like metaphor—obtained. They also may have been aware that the way Parkchester was designed downplayed religious institutional life. The several churches and the two synagogues were situated—as prescribed with the architectural masterplan—within an outside ring beyond the community’s borders. Part of the rationale for such placement—at least as it applied to the churches—was the MLIC’s desire to preclude the wrong breed of people: those African Americans who were barred from the development from attending services within Parkchester.²⁷

Recreationally, Jews could take part within a larger community that included “forty social and athletic groups, a symphony orchestra [and] two self-supporting newspapers” that the MLIC encouraged and sponsored. And there was no elite county club scene within the Bronx that could deny Jewish participation. The Castle Hill Beach Pool was open to all—that is, all whites who could afford the cheap membership dues. Like Parkchester itself, this “summer sanctuary” was off-limits to racial minorities. The numbers and

percentages of such arch-assimilationists are not available, but evidently, the opportunities for dissociation were there. Those who wanted to shed Jewish ties would not have had it any other way.²⁸

However, most Jewish Parkchesterites wanted to retain degrees of adherence to their ethnic identities even though they knew from their first day in the East Bronx development that they were not living in a Jewish building within a Jewish neighborhood. The majority had chosen, and had passed the white-glove test, to reside in a diverse neighborhood. If they looked for signs of Jewishness on the streets of Parkchester—much like suburbia—there were no businesses with Hebrew or Yiddish names on the storefronts in the development where they could shop and congregate with other Jews. The informality of ethnic relationships that obtained in butcher shops or delicacy stores that had been so much a part of prior New York Jewish neighborhood experiences did not exist within Parkchester. These Jewish specialty shops were situated outside the ring of the community.²⁹

Religious leaders of the two congregations prayed that they could rely on their formal institutions to capture the allegiances of their fellow Jews for consistent involvement. As early as 1942, the first financial secretary of the Young Israel of Parkchester (YIP)—the Orthodox shul—picked up on an endemic tentativeness that was hampering his group's growth. When he contacted members who had not been attending meetings—many more Jewish residents did not affiliate at all—he emphasized the need in Parkchester for a “militant Jewish group.” For him, militancy did not mean fighting against their neighbors. Rather, he specified the need for people “dedicated to their faith in true community spirit.” He and other founders wanted a “social center in Parkchester in a refined Jewish environment . . . where young men and women, boys and girls, and small children can find a source of recreation and relaxation as well as spiritual and cultural development.” He specified that “we need a model synagogue, a Talmud Torah, a social center, a club house for the men and a meeting place for the women. Our young boys and girls want dances, handicraft, ping pong, etc.” Rhetorically, many of the elements in the Synagogue Center program were hypothesized. However, while the congregation did establish a Talmud Torah, and over the years sponsored a variety of youth programs and adult education classes and lectures over the years, all activities took place within the one sanctuary building.³⁰

The YIP's leadership counterparts at Temple Emanuel also desired a robust Jewish community, but there too no concerted effort led this Conservative congregation to emulate what their movement was so committed to achieving

in suburbia. Moreover, there was never a movement afoot to organize a less than religious but ethnic Jewish Community Center in Parkchester even while the MLIC sponsored every conceivable athletic and American cultural activity one could imagine in order to bring Jewish and gentiles kids together. The vaunted Recreational Department was the quintessential Neighborhood House, a promoter of friendships and conduit to assimilation within the younger set.

Of course, unlike suburban locales which often were virgin territory, Parkchester—though a new urban development—was still situated within what was then the largest Jewish city in the world. Thus, those who were interested could easily find their way to the many social and cultural institutions of long standing that were located just that short subway ride away in Manhattan. There also was a Jewish Community Center in Pelham Parkway, called the Bronx House, situated only a twenty-minute bus ride away. Parkchester remained a *Jewishly underdeveloped* area for the close to thirty years (1940–circa 1970) when that group constituted a substantial presence in the neighborhood.

While the YIP made its limited facilities available to all Jews in the neighborhood, its lay leaders had a grander goal in mind. They wanted to raise up a cohort of children drawn from within their own small circle of committed and observant families whom they hoped would not only sustain the congregation in the decades that would follow, but who might also become leaders of the overall Jewish community of New York. They wanted these youngsters to have more than simply an ethnic identity. They desired them to be exemplars of substantial religious commitment. Known euphemistically within the synagogue as the “whiz kids,” these boys and a few girls rode the subways and the buses to day schools in Manhattan and other localities in the borough where they were exposed to extensive Jewish education.

There was no interest among their Parkchester Jewish neighbors in supporting Jewish parochial schooling even if the curriculums in these American-style schools did not smack of European-style separatism. Almost all other Jewish kids attended the local public schools which their parents heartily supported. On the weekends, the YIP boys were trained to lead the Orthodox services—a source of pride to their elders. (At an Orthodox synagogue, the young women of that era were not given a chance to serve as cantors or Torah leaders.) Suffice it to say, these whiz kids—some of whom eventually did make their Jewish marks beyond the reaches of Parkchester—reached their majorities as dedicated outliers, before the efflorescence in the last half century of day school education, as a popular option in the city and eventually in suburbia

too, where more traditional Jews challenged the denominational hegemony of Conservative Judaism.³¹

Notwithstanding these variegated attitudes and behaviors toward continued Jewish identification in and out of town, ultimately it cannot be ascertained whether, in the end, during the first generation after World War II, suburbia or Parkchester was a greater incubator of assimilation. In other words, did the aggressive Synagogue Center advocates succeed in stemming the tide of dissociation from Jewish belonging while in the Bronx congregations, passivity and—in the case of the YIP—a touch of parochialism undermined identification? What is evident—as far as Parkchester was concerned—was that the worries of intermarriage, a marker of young people moving away from Jewish pasts, did not characterize that group's life in the East Bronx neighborhood. There were limits to the “get-along” spirit in the community, in its buildings and parks, where overt anti-Semitism was uncommon.

The deepest of friendships generally did not obtain between Jews and gentiles, with very few eventually becoming brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. American writer Peter Quinn, who grew up in the East Bronx community in the 1950s–1960s, offers us an Irish perspective on the limits of inter-group camaraderie. He has written that there were no “Irish pogromists” around like those whom Jews feared in other neighborhoods. And he has asserted that he “never heard anti-Semitic professions by teachers or clergy.” Perhaps Vatican II's absolving Jews from the canard of killing Christ quieted expressions of hatred in the Bronx. At the same time, Quinn also noted that while he picked up familiarity with Yiddish street terms like “kibitz” “smuck [*sic*] and mensch,” he had “no Jewish friends” and even more significantly, “no acquaintances with Jewish girls.” In his view, “we lived separately together.” Closer relationships and the possibility of intermarriage would characterize the behavior of Parkchesterites in the generation that followed when these early youngsters and their own children moved to new neighborhoods in the city and suburbia.³²

What is abundantly certain is that when it came to “harmony,” the Jews and gentiles of Levittown and Parkchester lived unchallenged and unperturbed in a segregated city enclave and suburb in a country where the issue of “getting along” with a minority race was yet to be a constant source of concern and turmoil. In the years that followed the forced integration of Parkchester in 1968—as mandated by New York's Human Rights Commission—Parkchester's Christian and Jewish communities would be tested to determine if the “get along” spirit would apply to the new arrivals in their bucolic development.

Although many of the long-standing residents of Parkchester would be drawn but not pushed to new city areas or to suburbia, those who stayed generally accepted their new neighbors. Levittown homeowners did not protest the integration of their enclaves and got along with their minorities. But for decades—almost to the twenty-first century—very few Blacks bought into Levittown.