The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State, by **Benjamin Ginsberg**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. 286 pp. $22.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-226-29665-2.

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Benjamin Ginsberg, director of the Washington Center for the Study of American Government and professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, is the most recent (and among the most learned) of a long line of prophets of doom who have warned American Jews against the sin of complacency. Like all the rest, he thunders against the belief that America is different, and that anti-Semitism cannot happen here. He draws frightening lessons from the past, points to portentous signs in the present, and raises the specter of "a fire bell in the night." The worst hasn't happened yet, he admits, following a time-tested formula, but "perhaps next time."

At the heart of this gloomy analysis lies the theory of the "fatal embrace." Following Hannah Arendt, Ginsberg argues that

> Jews have played a major role both in the strengthening of existing states and in efforts to supplant established regimes with new ones. Their relationship to the state has often made it possible for Jews to attain great wealth and power. At the same time, however, relationships between Jews and states have also been the chief catalysts for organized anti-Semitism. (P. 10)

No Jewish historian would have the slightest problem defending this theory (indeed, it is not new), and rummaging through 700 years of Jewish history, Ginsberg doesn't either. What he fails to demonstrate, however, is that those who stood apart from the state and resisted its importunings were any better off. At one point, in fact, he concedes that Jews are trapped in "a dilemma that has no solution." While they require the protection and opportunity that only the state can provide, these conditions inevitably give rise to anti-Semitism on the part of those who invoke anti-Jewish hatred to win power for themselves.

Turning his attention closer to home, Ginsberg seeks to apply his theory to the experience of America's Jews. Ignoring early American Jewish history, where (his theory notwithstanding) one finds anti-Semitism without much evidence of close Jewish ties to the state, he focuses instead on the late nineteenth century, when, he unpersuasively argues, "Jews had become identified with the worst excesses of the nineteenth-century industrialist order." Here, and not for the last time, he confuses image with reality. It was not that late nineteenth-century Jews actually enjoyed so much power, only that anti-Semites ascribed so much power to them. In fact, as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the well-known phenomenon of "anti-Semitism without Jews" demonstrate, real Jewish power in a particular era matters much less than *perceptions* of Jewish power—a very different matter. Where Ginsberg implies that Jews are themselves responsible for their fate, history in many cases suggests otherwise.

Ginsberg is at his best in his analysis in "Blacks and Jews," a chapter that stands alone and warrants wide reading. He demonstrates that anti-Semitic rhetoric is a weapon wielded by some younger black politicians to serve three main purposes: to oust an older generation of black leaders who made common cause with liberal Jews, to wrest power from Jews through terror and intimidation,

and to open the black community to new coalitions with groups other than Jews. One need not accept his surprisingly pollyannish conclusion—"Black anti-Semitism probably does not represent much of a *direct* threat to American Jews"—to be persuaded that his analysis of this problem, at least, is correct.

The rest of Ginsberg's analysis, however, is far more problematic. Of course, no one would deny that from the very beginning of diaspora history, going all the way back to the days of the Israelites in Egypt, the Jewish lot has been precarious; even the biblical Joseph's "embrace of the state," to use Ginsberg's language, proved "fatal" just a few generations later. Anticipating Ginsberg's findings (although not in a way he would recognize), Zionists have argued for years that the one truly effective answer to "the dilemma that has no solution" is for Jews to abandon their inevitably precarious life in the diaspora for a state of their own. Yet, to lump uncritically the American Jewish experience with the history of Jews from medieval Spain to postrevolutionary Russia, as Ginsberg does, is to obscure highly significant political, cultural, social, and economic differences that numerous scholars (most notably the late American Zionist historian Ben Halpern) have carefully articulated and that Ginsberg almost completely ignores. Nor does he explain why, if the threat of anti-Semitism is so real, the foremost contemporary problems on the American Jewish scene are intermarriage and assimilation, which seemingly reflect not hatred of Jews but its very opposite.

Ultimately, then, what may be most significant about this jeremiad is not its political theory, which is somewhat simplistic, nor its conclusion, which is thoroughly predictable, but rather its appearance at this particular moment in time and under the imprint of so prestigious a university press. As a wide range of recent volumes published by an array of important presses demonstrate, pessimism concerning American Jews and their future has now become pervasive in American culture, a stunning reversal from the celebratory optimism of just a few years ago. Why this has happened and what it portends warrant careful scrutiny. Perhaps next time. . . .