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Shaul Magid, Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 296 pp., \$ 35.00.

Meir Kahane, as Shaul Magid remarks at the start of his new book published with Princeton University Press, “was more than a militant rabbi and gadfly in American and later Israeli society,” and although he is probably not as popular or well-known as other figures of America’s Jewish history, according to Magid he “represented a particular kind of reactionary and radical critique of the liberal establishment of postwar America that has gone largely unexplored” (p. ix). Kahane founded the Jewish Defense League (JDL) in New York City in 1968 and became a well-known anti-left Jewish radical in the United States before he moved to Israel in 1971, where he turned into a racist politician and figurehead of his Kach party – for which he was elected to the Knesset in 1984, before the party was banned in 1986 due to racism – until he was assassinated in New York in 1990 as probably one of the first victims of an Al-Qaeda terrorist (p. 192). This figure “seems on the one hand to be a persona non grata in American Jewry, and yet on the other hand a figure whose presence remains ubiquitous, almost like part of the subconscious of a certain slice of American Judaism, especially Modern Orthodoxy” (p. 1). In contrast to the “classic” Jewish radical of the Left, like the famous socialists or anarchists who shaped the American radical tradition during the long 19th century, Kahane in a way represented a new struggle for Jewish identity at a time in which the assimilation of the Jewry to the American way of life of the upper class and antisemitism from the Black community threatened and worried young Jews who were looking for an identity. Kahane, who “represented Jewish pride” (p. 3) and who “clearly had aspirations of grandeur” (p. 4), and the JDL offered them an alternative, a way to be “New Jews” who could be proud about their own Jewishness.

Magid’s very intriguing and well-written book presents Kahane’s story in its relation to the history of Jewish radicalism in the United States, linking it to the political context of the 1960s and 1970s (ch. 1–4), and also offers some insights into the thoughts Kahane developed while in Israel (ch. 5–6). The author provides many interesting insights into the “colorful and controversial” life of Kahane and tries to integrate it into the “history of American Jews and Judaism,” which, according to Magid, “cannot be told without him” (p. 5).

The author does not offer “a biography in any conventional sense” (p. 7) but rather intends to “interweav[e] accounts of his life, activities, and activism with close analysis of his writings” (p. 9). This important book thereby links the life of a right-wing Jewish radical to the political and social spatialities that created Kahane and consequently offers an intriguing account of a period of American (Jewish) history that was in many ways contested by different forces all struggling for a future that was different, especially with regard to social structures and questions about equality and justice. Magid discusses Kahane’s position toward and consideration of American liberalism in the first two chapters (pp. 1–74) before analyzing the protagonist’s thoughts in relation to the Black Power movement (pp. 75–106), the Soviet Jewry movement, the Vietnam War, and communism more generally (ch. 4).

The founding of the JDL was stimulated by increasing Black antisemitism that was particularly expressed during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike in Brooklyn in 1968 (pp. 88–91). This radical Jewish organization, and Kahane as its leading figure, also expressed a rivalry between Jews and Blacks, as a quote from the latter during a press interview emphasizes: “Most Jews came here in galleys long after the blacks were freed. Blacks deserve nothing from us, and that is what they will get. [...] If anyone is talking about reparations and if anyone deserves it, we Jews are the first in line” (p. 92). The rivalry between the civil rights movement and Black nationalism, however, did not prevent Kahane from using similar ideas and even developing a form of “Judeo-pessimism” that was often inspired by Afro-pessimist ideas (pp. 87, 94). Next to his criticism of liberal American Jewry and Black nationalism, Kahane also expressed radical ideas against communism, which he actively tried to fight by supporting the Vietnam War together with a college friend, the political lobbyist Joseph Chubra, in Washington, D.C. (pp. 108–111). Communism, according to Kahane, presented “two major challenges to the survival of Jews and Judaism: the erasure of Jewish religious difference and the endangerment of Jewish national aspirations” (p. 111). His anti-Soviet positions were consequently an extension of his national struggle for Jewish identity to the international arena. Kahane therefore remained very American, something that would impact his eventual failure in Israel because, as Magid’s book argues, “while Kahane left America [...], America never left Kahane” (p. 191). He remained an “American Jew” and failed to overcome the boundaries of his own national radical identity (p. 191). However, Kahane and his ideas remain alive

today, as he “constructed his own countercultural Judaism,” and as a Jewish radical as such, he is still a “vexing, disturbing, and compelling product of postwar America” (p. 201).

Magid’s masterfully crafted and incisive work allows the reader to follow the genesis of Kahane as an intellectual radical and the transformation of his ideas during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and the 1980s in Israel. The book, as Magid intended, thus does not offer a classic biography but rather a highly recommended study of right-wing Jewish radicalism in the context of post-WWII America.

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