

DULL AND MEDIOCRE are two words often used to describe Jewish journalism. The complaint is made most repeatedly and recently in a self-published book by Luke Ford. Mr. Ford, the son of a Christian evangelist, is best known for a website that graphically chronicles the pornography industry. What standing he has as a critic of Jewish journalism is not exactly clear to me, but his book, *Yesterday's News Tomorrow*, (iUniverse, 2004) includes transcripts of interviews he conducted with the editor of *The Jewish Week* of New York, Gary Rosenblatt; with the editor of the *Forward*, J.J. Goldberg; with the editor of the *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Rob Eshman; with a professor of journalism at Columbia University, Ari Goldman; and with a few dozen other figures in the world of "Jewish journalism."

In defense of the Jewish journalists, it has to be said that much of American journalism is also dull and mediocre. And it is not only Jewish journalism that falls into the category of dull or mediocre; one of the complaints about American Jewish communal life — from religious school classes to Shabbat services — is that it is dull and mediocre.

What's more, as Jews in their second and third and fourth generations in America have integrated into the American mainstream, so have Jewish journalists and Jewish journalism. William Safire's regular interviews with Ariel Sharon for *The New York Times* op-ed page, often timed to appear on the eve of Jewish holidays, are good Jewish journalism, perhaps better than anything appearing in papers marketed exclusively to a Jewish audience. Jeffrey Goldberg's coverage in the *New Yorker* magazine of Islamic terrorists in South America and Jewish settlers in Gaza was important Jewish journalism, as is Jacob Gershman's coverage in *The New York Sun* of the furor over antisemitism in the Middle East

studies department at Columbia University. I wrote a story for the *Wall Street Journal* about shenanigans at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Critics of Jewish journalism miss the point when they fail to take into account the fertile nature of this broader field.

In that context, is there still a place and a need for a Jewish press that is aimed primarily at a Jewish audience? Some of the bulletin board and internal discussion functions once carried out by that press can now be filled by email lists. Certain communities, such as the fervently Orthodox or ardently pro-Israel, will have needs that can be filled only by specialty publications like the daily newspaper *Hamodia* or the weekly *Jewish Press* of Brooklyn. Some stories on the internal battles of Jewish organizations are of so little interest to non-Jewish readers that were it not for Jewish publications, the news of the disputes might never be put on the record. But what good is Jewish journalism for non-Orthodox, non-professional, non-semi-professional Jews?

Some Jewish philanthropists and charities who also believe Jewish journalism is valuable subsidize Jewish newspapers and wire services. Sometimes the subsidies reduce the level of liveliness, aggressiveness, and independence. (Ford's book includes what he claims is a copy of an April 7, 1997 memo from leaders of the UJA-Federation of New York to the editor of *The Jewish Week* in which lay leaders propose "one UJA-Federation cover story per month in all editions" and stipulate that the "UJA-Federation will continue to make its donor list available to *The Jewish Week* for subscriptions so long as *The Jewish Week* provides UJA-Federation with the regular 'presence' it needs.") The argument in favor of the subsidies is the claim that in their absence Jewish journalism would die or decline in quality.

Most journalists, and even many publishers, aren't in it for the money; if they were, they'd have gone into more lucrative fields. Most journalists I know are drawn to the work because they are interested in good stories. The story of the Jews and their God is one of the greatest in human history. It can't honestly be assessed as either dull or mediocre. My own faith is that some way or another it will inspire storytellers to do it justice, as it has now for thousands of years.

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## **Sh'ma does not publish in July and August.**

We'll be back in September with an issue on High Holiday liturgy and experience. In October, *Sh'ma* will focus on issues of economic and social justice.

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