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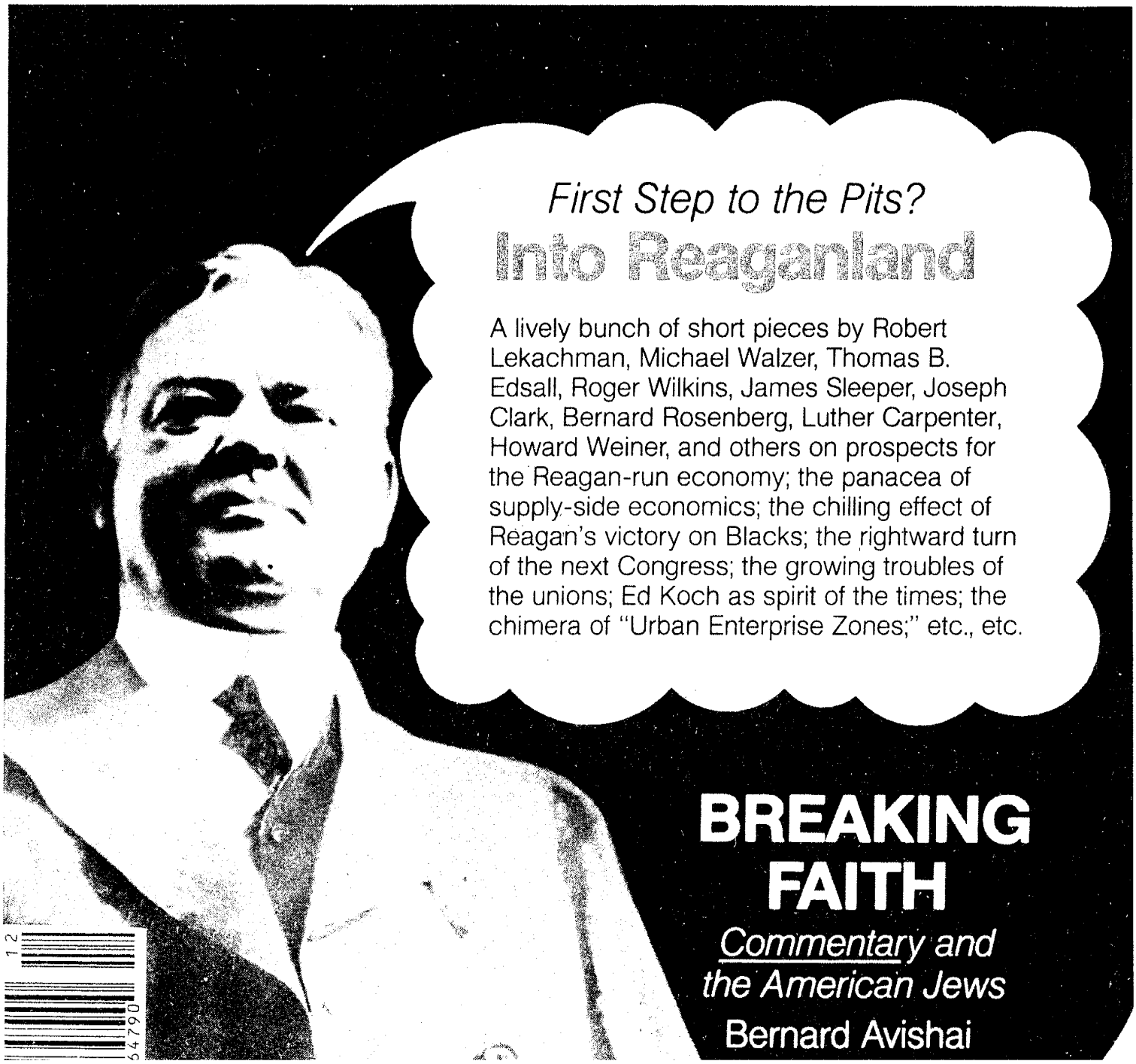

First Step to the Pits?

Into Reaganland

A lively bunch of short pieces by Robert Lekachman, Michael Walzer, Thomas B. Edsall, Roger Wilkins, James Sleeper, Joseph Clark, Bernard Rosenberg, Luther Carpenter, Howard Weiner, and others on prospects for the Reagan-run economy; the panacea of supply-side economics; the chilling effect of Reagan's victory on Blacks; the rightward turn of the next Congress; the growing troubles of the unions; Ed Koch as spirit of the times; the chimera of "Urban Enterprise Zones;" etc., etc.

BREAKING FAITH

Commentary and the American Jews

Bernard Avishai

SUMMER 1985

dissent

Jim Sleeper

Ed Koch & the Spirit of the Times

It's not a bad idea to remember that there are New Yorkers politically to the right of Ed Koch, a fact often obscured by the mayor's own penchant for flailing his erstwhile liberal allies. Watching him savage Bella Abzug, you could forget that he really isn't the Lester Maddox that Jody Powell thought he was. Koch is more complex than that, in ways we'd do well to understand.

Watch him, for example, fielding questions at a community meeting of politically conservative Orthodox Jews who oppose his affirmative-action policies, his support for gay rights, and, *sotto voce*, his stinginess with patronage. A man is complaining about new hiring standards designed to increase female and Hispanic representation in police ranks. "Mr. Koch, why do you lower height requirements just to include these people? We need policemen who are big and tall and command respect. . . . "

The speaker is barely finished before the mayor raises his eyebrows in mock astonishment and amusement and quips, "Have you ever seen a five-foot-four Puerto Rican with a gun?" The audience roars appreciatively as aides wince; happily for them, the media aren't present, sparing liberal New Yorkers the curious spectacle of a mayor using racism to defend affirmative action.

Of such shabby paradoxes is Ed Koch's mayoralty built. By assuring frightened "outer-borough" ethnics that he shares with them a tissue of visceral understanding, Koch has won their grudging acquiescence in one of the more socially liberal, corruption-free, and, yes, even racially integrated administrations in the city's history. That may not be saying much; one can quibble about statistics and abuses of power; but the fact remains.

The cost to the civic discourse is tremendous. Koch's wisecracks only temporarily defuse racist fear by stroking it, draining the political nervous system of resiliency in the long run. Koch might counter that the city's white ethnic and middle-class nerves were so far gone by the time he took office in 1978 that only his vaudeville holds the body politic together at all, coupled as it is with his traditional reformer's probity in appointing capable judges and administrators who are generally more liberal than he. Typically, Koch refused to grant official holiday status to Martin Luther King's birthday, except as a $23-million trade-off against municipal union give-backs at the bargaining table, while giving away that much every month or two to developers and corporations taking advantage of his tax "incentives." Yet he has conscientiously hired back most of the minority workers laid off during the 1975 fiscal crisis.

Koch has been accused, with some justice, of sowing the wind that left the city reaping the whirlwind of ghoulish applause for Bernhard Goetz. "Ed Koch *is* Bernie Goetz," said a political consultant recently, also with some justice. Koch danced in and out of Goetz's cheerleading line in a shameless series of flip-flops that aped the public's reactions to the contradictory disclosures. But while history won't absolve him of some responsibility for the gathering storm, he remains triumphant in its midst. It may even be that such triumphs have devastated his opposition far more

than the opposition's self-destruction has assured his triumph in September.

For the truth is that Koch's public discourse appeals to a broader spectrum of voters than his critics admit. Minorities were as vocal as whites in the early returns for Goetz. And most of the city's minority residents accept the paradigm of individual responsibility for success that the mayor sincerely if abstractly holds out to all New Yorkers, regardless of race. They know Koch went South in the 1960s to fight for that paradigm against the Lester Maddoxes of the world. And when the social agenda shifted from civil rights to economic redistribution, he wasn't alone in digging in his heels on the ground of individual responsibility. Accept the parameters and constraints of capitalist urban development, and you're led inexorably to his conclusions; the dirty little secret on the left is that not a few minority New Yorkers have followed him.

Local government is limited, Koch has convinced them; as Charles Morris has written, a city antipoverty program makes about as much sense as a municipal space program, and there is a difference between cleaning the streets and siting a public housing project in a middle-class neighborhood. With just a few gestures borrowed from Boston's conciliatory mayor, Ray Flynn, Koch could have more minority support and more liberal white backing than he wants. He won't bother, and he'll win anyway.

PEOPLE HAVE OFTEN REMARKED that Koch is the beneficiary of a liberal-left hubris in John Lindsay's mayoralty that botched the last real opportunity to renegotiate the urban social compact. *New York Times* editor Roger Starr has written that Lindsay and followers were comfortable only with those who had so little money that they needed more of it just to survive, or with those who had so much that they needed to give it away. The broad mass in the middle, including hard hats who clubbed antiwar demonstrators, homeowners protesting new public housing, and schoolteachers terrified of community control, were . . . well, grubby and uninspiring.

Ed Koch has made himself that broad middle's avenger, but he did not acquire that honor without sojourning awhile in Lindsay's "silk-stocking" congressional district and, indeed, in his congressional seat. Unlike Philadelphia's Frank Rizzo and Boston's Louise Day Hicks, Koch did not come roaring out of the bowels of Bunkerville. His complex odyssey is the secret of his success at translating fiscal constraints into a New York idiom that cows even liberals and their clients. His most well-known campaign pitch in 1977 wasn't the death penalty—Herman Badillo was and is for capital punishment too—but, "After eight years of charisma, and four years of the clubhouse, why not try competence?" He is generally thought to have lived up to it.

Koch came blinking into the sunlight of postwar Greenwich Village with others in flight from everything stunting in their outer-borough immigrant family past. Eagerly he and his new friends merged their own struggles to break free with the period's larger struggle for civil liberties. The Village was the ideal crucible: rents could be covered by part-time work, the remaining hours given over to the pursuit of some art or political possibility. Modest prosperity came almost despite themselves. And as the proud liberalism of their time in the sun opened paths to professional advancement, they marched to Montgomery and summered on Fire Island.

Ed Koch became the *Village Voice*'s lawyer. He joined a Reform Democratic club and gave street-corner speeches to defeat former Tammany boss Carmine DeSapio in a 1962 race for local party leader. Many remember him as affable, open, at times almost diffident. And yet whatever was best in the promise and vision of the Village movements of those years seems to have eluded him. Before he could get the bruised, grasping mentality of the hard-pressed Bronx and Newark hat-check clerk out of his system, he decided to return to it, catering to those he'd left behind and who'd moved up a bit themselves. In 1973 Koch, the liberal Manhattan congressman, tried to float a mayoral candidacy by marching with the most demagogic opponents of the now successful public housing in Forest Hills. Shaken like other New Yorkers of his generation by crime, the welfare- and poverty-program battles, the white Canarsie school boycott, and minority demands for community control of the schools, he denounced elitism in liberal social engineering, nowhere more evident than in the Forest Hills plan itself.

But Koch overplayed his courtship of the outer-borough burghers while a mediator appointed by Lindsay, one Mario Cuomo, soothed and cajoled frightened fellow homeowners back to civilized discourse. Cuomo is not without his deceits, but he has generally played to the decency of those New Yorkers who can do without divisive hysterics. His compromise plan was adopted; Koch's mayoral bid fizzled.

Since even the most modest liberal redistributive compromises are often extracted disproportionately from the struggling middle class, they are ultimately no more successful than demagoguery.

In 1977 Koch was back, marketing the death penalty to voters more burdened and frightened than before, but still the earnest, sensible liberal to a Village and broader constituency that had itself begun to change. As Manhattan rents rose, the lockstep descended; artists and visionaries were working full-time with the words and symbols that consolidate corporate power. Reformers now dabbled in real estate, their social agenda narrowing to those liberties protecting their own peculiar upward mobility.

Koch's new politics accommodated this too. The death-penalty mayor's first executive order banned discrimination based on sexual preference in city government as he straddled his old Manhattan and new outer-borough constituencies, a creature of both and of neither, an enigma to the excluded minorities, working stiffs, and unemployed—at least some of whom, together with upstate residents Koch also ignored, provided Cuomo's margin of victory in the 1982 Democratic gubernatorial primary.

The tragedy Koch tried to escape by running for governor is that he doesn't *really* like the lower-middle-class people he has played to so well. Yet he is trapped representing them to themselves, bodying forth their most intimate hurts with a penchant for self-parody some of them share. He is an ethnic comedian bored with his material but unable to transcend it. "Remember," he warns them in his shrill, pedantic sing-song, "you can always vote me out. I'll get a better job, but you'll never get a better mayor." A lot of them love it. They know what they've become—and failed to become. He gives them the theater of their bitterness.

KOCH IS TIRED OF HIS JOB for another reason. He knows that he cannot transcend its principal contradiction, the disparity between the promises he must make to improve essential services and the fiscal impossibility of improving them, even with a budget surplus fueled, in the city's capital-sensitive economy, by the elusive glow of foreign investment. He knows this precisely because he's a good administrator who stretches his resources well.

This is not to excuse Koch's failure to test the political limits of badly needed municipal tax reform by using his popularity to curb outrageous give-aways to developers and firms that don't need them. Nor is it to excuse the hypocrisy of his rationalizations for inaction on real-estate regulation in the face of the unchecked, unscrupulous disinvestment schemes and upscale conversions that cause homelessness. He has tolerated a far too free-wheeling politicization of the city's housing agency's awards of subsidies to developers and contracts to "community" groups, and he has been slow to correct systemic abuses of those subsidies and contracts.

When all is said and done, however, 70 percent of the city's budget is mandated for expenditures from welfare to debt service that are utterly beyond the mayor's control. And much of what scandal there's been in the delivery of social services reflects a decimated supervisory staff overwhelmed by increasing demand. The real scandal remains the way Ed Koch covers for these scarcities by diverting attention from them or blaming their victims. But it is precisely that diverting and blaming that seems to have lost its savor for him. He is insecure enough to continue to resort to it, but good enough to know better.

Some people counter that Koch is just vicious. He has acknowledged as much and given us chapter and verse in *Mayor*. In this, however, he is much less different from some of his most vociferous critics than might be supposed; we may even be better off with him on that score than with them. More to the point is that the increasingly insurmountable contradictions of the mayoralty leave it attractive only to those deluded enough to believe in magic, or cynical enough to believe in the worst sort of manipulation, or desperate enough not to know the difference. People sense this. Koch may be a bit crazy, they say, but after him, the center cannot hold. Just look at the opposition. At its fitful best, it would pass some regulations hamstringing capitalist development, without demonstrating either the intention or ability to press convincingly for real alternatives—leaving us, in effect, with the worst of both worlds. Koch may disprove his own notion that one can be a liberal with sanity, but there cannot be Socialism in One City, either.

Nor can there be much democracy and justice; sensing this, Koch vents his frustrations against academics in "the battle of the studies." When New York University's Emanuel Tobier projected that the 25 percent of New Yorkers living below the poverty line might swell to 30 percent by the end of the century, the mayor called him an "arrogant, ivory-tower academic."

When Professors Ray Horton and Charles Brecher noted in 1981 that the whole complex of decisions emanating from the fiscal crisis had balanced the budget on the backs of the poor, and a *Daily News* story inaccurately reduced the whole mix to Koch's own budget priorities, he summoned them to City Hall where, in the presence of all seven of his deputy mayors, he demanded they come to a press conference to set the record

straight. The professors, feeling muscled toward a little more apologetics than they felt appropriate, demurred; Koch and all his commissioners have boycotted Horton and Brecher's annual "Setting Municipal Priorities" conference ever since.

What's interesting, perhaps redemptive in all this is that it hasn't much to do with the political calculus guiding Koch's post-1973 career. Whether it reflects some special vulnerability to the judgment of professors or a genuine concern for the deserving poor, one should not be too quick to say. Perhaps both.

SHAKING THEIR HEADS after the publication of *Mayor*, some of Koch's defenders found in the book the disconsolate rantings of a tragic hero who'd squandered virtue and good fortune in the hubris of his own 1982 gubernatorial bid. All that was left to him now, it seemed, was to bring down the curtain with an agonized confession of error that set the universe to rights.

Koch even pretended to do this. "I had said I loved them and no one else," he wailed, referring to the city's voters, playing dutifully according to his part. "Then I told them that I no longer wanted to live with them, that I wanted to take a new lover in Albany." In the white heat of that awful recognition, the chastened hero is permitted to speak terrible truths about others.

BUT THE CONFESSION is suspect, the curtain does not fall, and the audience is embarrassed by the continuing self-absorption of a political hypochondriac too comfortably distant from death. A poor parody of Evita, Koch remains on stage and is running again, saying he's kept his promise. "Don't cry for me, Pelham Parkway," he croons. No one on the Bronx's Pelham Parkway was about to. Ed Koch's is not a classical tragedy, but a Bronx one—the unresolved, festering hurt of a generation of New Yorkers whose liberal social compact is coming undone. And he is going to keep on unraveling with it for four more years. □