

Jewishness helps writer understand life's 'underdogs'

By **MATTHEW BUDMAN**
Of the Bulletin Staff

Anthony Lewis is used to critics calling him a "self-hating Jew."

"I'm perceived by many American Jews as hostile, and that's partly because of what I see as the gradual takeover of American Jewish opinion by the right in Israel, by the Likud," says the *New York Times* columnist in a phone interview. "Because it's the majority opinion in Israel, people here say, 'We'll just go along with it.'"

Lewis has few qualms about criticizing the Jewish state; he readily admits he expects more from Israel than from other countries.

"I expect more in the sense that Jews are people who understand the underdogs of life," says Lewis, in the Bay Area last week on a publicity tour for *Make No Law*, his new Random House book on the First Amendment. "I expect that of Israel; it's a Jewish state. I think the notion that Israel is bound to take over other people's land by force is not a Jewish one."

"I'm very sympathetic toward Israel. On the one hand, I want Israel to thrive, and it faces some very menacing enemies around it. But I'm also very sympathetic toward the Palestinians, who are the genuine underdogs, with no land and no government."

Tall and thin, a spry 64, Lewis is soft-spoken and articulate in front of an audience, apologizing for interrupting himself, and continually taking eyeglasses on and off as he needs to read.

An unabashed liberal — and a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter — he writes a nationally syndicated column twice weekly from his Boston home on a variety of topics.

Most readers, familiar with his widely



Anthony Lewis

publicized views on Mideast politics, are unaware of Lewis' Jewishness.

"As a generality, I don't trumpet it about," he says. "But I don't conceal it. I come from a semi-Orthodox background; we had a kosher home. My son had a bar mitzvah. But I'm not observant."

"I have a Jewish view of life and culture. I have been all my life interested in the fate of the underdog, the person who is abused. I think that is very much a Jewish characteristic."

Though the subject of the Middle East has been "a considerable focus" for years for Lewis, he hadn't written about it for some months. "Recently I didn't have a sure sense that there's anything to say. I have been very discouraged by the stalemate in the peace process."

Recent events have changed balances of power quickly, and last week Lewis was still mulling over ideas for a column on the loan-guarantee crisis that ran this Tuesday. "There's no reason for [Israel] pushing the loan guarantees for right now. The big wave of Soviet immigration is over."

"I think the crisis was forced by the Shamir government to remove any possibility of the administration applying pressure to stop settlement building. There's no effective way that the United States can push Israel into stopping settlement building, and you can't have peace if you go on taking other people's land."

Lewis' column, reprinted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, began, "It is important to be clear about the issue in the dispute between the United States and Israel. It is whether Israel is going to annex the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the years ahead without meaningful objection by the United States."

The pull-no-punches article, he says, is

one of his first to praise President George Bush, calling him "courageous."

During the phone interview, he says that "I think he has done the right thing, from the point of view of Israel's genuine long-term interests, which is not to be masters of another people. The matter could be resolved today — if Shamir said he would stop building settlements,

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Bush would give the loan guarantees today."

Though credited with being one of the country's top opinion-makers, Lewis is unsure how much impact a columnist actually has on public opinion. "You have opinions and you hope you succeed in shaping opinion but it's difficult to see if you actually have any impact. It's a funny business."