



CULTURES
of the
JEWS

A New History

EDITED BY

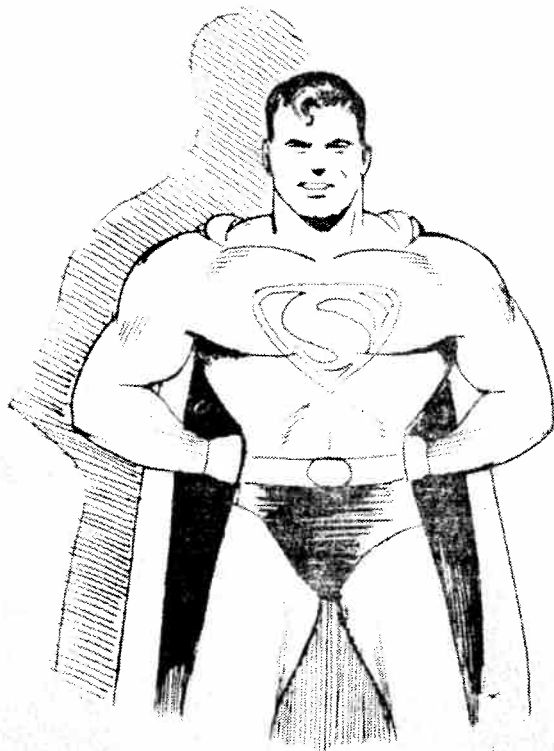
David Biale

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DECLARATIONS OF INDEPENDENCE:

American Jewish Culture in the Twentieth Century

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

"It is only by a study of Jewish institutions and literature that we shall begin to understand the puzzling character of the Jews," an essayist opined in Boston's *Andover Review* in 1888. He was not advancing a very early, disinterested rationale for Jewish Studies, nor was he optimistic that scholarship could succeed in fathoming the Jews: "Comprehend them we never shall. Their character and interests are too vitally opposed to our own to permit the existence of that intelligent sympathy between us and them which is necessary for comprehension."

This statement, splitting "us" off from "them," positing an extreme "alterity" that defeats the hope of any authentic communication, goes less directly against the grain of recent historiography than might be suspected. Indeed, the essay should be treasured by ironists, for its author was a 23-year-old legatee of the Lithuanian shtetl named Bernhard Valvrojenski, who transformed himself into Bernard Berenson—Harvard '87, Boston Brahmin, Episcopalian convert. His 1888 assertion is striking because he himself so brazenly contradicted it; the future master of artistic "authentication" was himself a poseur. In his final years as an expatriate in Italy, he retraced his origins by swapping Yiddish jokes with Zionists like Isaiah Berlin and Lewis Namier, and by admitting some pleasure in "drop[ping] the mask of being *goyim* and return[ing] to Yiddish reminiscences." Berenson called it "an effort . . . to act as if one were a mere Englishman or Frenchman or American,"¹ though that struggle did not stop him from letting the Roman Catholic Church administer last rites.

Such a life inverted the contemporary career of novelist Henry Harland

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to draw upon the following works, which I have previously published, for this essay: "Israel As Reel: The Depiction of Israel in Mainstream American Films," in *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, Allon Gal, editor (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996); "Yentl" in *Jewish Social Studies*, 5, Fall 1998/Winter 1999; and *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1999).—S.J.W.

(1861–1905), who inaugurated the themes of assimilation and intermarriage that would mark American Jewish fiction for the next century. His Jewish and gentile characters were not as mutually incomprehensible as Berenson claimed, and they showed themselves quite capable of falling in love with one another. Although Harland wrote *Mrs. Peixada* (1886) and *The Yoke of the Torah* (1887) under the name of Sidney Luska, he was in fact a Protestant only pretending to be a Jew. He too expatriated himself, converted to Catholicism, and then lied to a reporter: “I never knew a Sidney Luska.”² Shuffling cards of identity, switching and disguising names as declarations of independence in a society that might reward nobodies, putting on masks amid the fluidities of class and status, entertaining audiences by putting on blackface—this flair for adaptability made Jews at home in America, where any barrier dividing them from their neighbors eventually became so easy to surmount that it was sometimes difficult even to notice.

The instability of identity dooms the scholarly effort to separate with any finality what remains Jewish from what is American culture. Such distinctions can readily collapse because the national character has itself been altered under the influence of minorities like the Jews. Culture has been up for grabs in the United States, where English influence could itself be contested and where Alexis de Tocqueville was stunned in 1831 to find “a society formed of all the nations of the world . . . people having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories . . . without common ideas. . . . What makes all of this into one people?”³ To this polyphony, Jews could add their own voices.

This chapter is an attempt to specify what that contribution has been and to suggest answers to the question of what is most noteworthy about Jewish culture in the United States, which became home to the largest, the richest, and probably the most secure Jewish community in the millennia since Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees. American cultural life is different because of what Jews have added to it, just as the nation changed Judaism and its adherents. The evidence can be found in the language they used, in the dreams of integration and democracy that nourished them, in the religious practices and beliefs they revised, and in the creative stimulus that resulted from the encounter with another minority group. Because the cinema is the only significant art to have been largely invented in the twentieth century, and because of the incalculable impact of films, two of them in particular can illustrate an American Jewish ethos in the process of redefinition.

WHAT IS JEWISH ABOUT THIS CULTURE?

The United States makes impossible the description of Jewish culture apart from its context. To ask of an artifact "Is it so authentic and distinctive that no gentile could have produced it?" is to impose too hermetic a standard. If *that* is the criterion, then a Jewish culture in the United States did not exist. Spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual development could not be quarantined from the rest of society. At the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, only one American *shul* is depicted among the celebrated synagogues of Jewish history, and yet the architect of Beth Sholom (1954) in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, was Frank Lloyd Wright (p. 1118). Nor did John Updike show any sign of strain in sending up the postwar Jewish novel by adopting—on three occasions—the voice of the blocked and beleaguered Henry Bech. Between what has been gentile and what has been Jewish, no firewall could be constructed. The larger culture has proved itself to be porous and hospitable, the smaller one often quite fragile and indistinct. No chasm divides the shape that Jews have given their experiences and the operations of the majority culture.

Jewish culture in the United States has not been endogenous, and an acute receptivity to outside forces makes it difficult to locate what is Jewish in American Jewish culture. But what makes that culture special is that values, symbols, and ideals have circulated in *both* directions—not merely from majority to minority, but in an interactive and reciprocal fashion. No historical moment can be discovered in which the Jewish minority was ever so insulated that its own culture could have been created apart from the play of centrifugal forces. Because that symbolic and expressive system was so permeable, because those who worked within it could not be cordoned off from an outside world that itself proved so open to Jewish influence, categorical rigidity is impossible to sustain.

The scope of this Jewish culture nevertheless needs to be specified. Any intellectual or artistic activity that Jews have initiated in the United States, whether or not such work bears traces of Judaism or of ethnicity, is an expression of American Jewish culture, even if that work does not bear directly or explicitly on the beliefs and experiences of the Jews. Whether representing them or not, these works are manifestations of the same intelligence, distillations of the same sensibility. For the historian of Jewish culture, books and plays and paintings depicting Jews may be especially revelatory. But to exclude from consideration whatever does not portray Jews blunts the effort to understand the Jews who created such works, and it would make the task of classification even more difficult than it already is.

Although the word "Jew" is unmentioned in the fiction of Franz Kafka, his status among Jewish writers of the twentieth century is as secure as anyone's (even if the canon itself no longer is). Written in Aramaic and Hebrew, the Book of Daniel is Jewish. Written in German, Martin Buber's *Daniel* (1913) is Jewish too. Written in English, E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) should be similarly classified—and not only because this novel features Jewish dissidents but because Jewish culture ought to be deemed whatever Jews (or those whose conversion to a majority faith was insincere) have added to art and thought. Such a definition means that Jewish culture is not synonymous with Judaism. Because the Enlightenment and Emancipation dramatically shrank the sphere of religion, liturgical and spiritual topics should not exhaust the meaning of cultural expression.

"Content" cannot by itself distinguish what is Jewish from what is not, nor is the historian likely to discern any unifying principle in American Jewish culture. It is too diverse, too fragmented. Take 1934, for instance. Perhaps the most admired novel by any American Jew was published that year: Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*. So was the most important book by probably the most creative thinker in the history of American Judaism: Mordecai M. Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization*. The novelist was then a Communist; the theorist taught homiletics at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Such dissimilarities ought to thwart any attempt to situate their books in the same historical context. (Both authors were New Yorkers. But no evidence has surfaced that either knew of the other's existence, much less that they read each other's books.) In the same year, Milton Steinberg contributed to Judaic thought with *The Making of the Modern Jew*; so did Harry A. Wolfson of Harvard with *The Philosophy of Spinoza*. Also in 1934, novelist Daniel Fuchs published *Summer in Williamsburg*, even as Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* opened on Broadway. The retrospective discovery of a common pattern is improbable. Specimens that could be plucked from the following year—from *Awake and Sing!* and *Porgy and Bess* to *A Night at the Opera* and *Top Hat*—suggest that the Jewish imagination crystallized in many forms. Indeed, the critic Harold Rosenberg was right to deny the existence of a "Jewish art in the sense of a Jewish style in painting and sculpture." But inferences may be drawn from the existence of artists who are Jews. Although they may not have "been creating as Jews, they have not been working as non-Jews either. Their art has been the closest expression of themselves as they are, including the fact that they are Jews, each in his individual degree."⁴

That no single pattern is likely to emerge from scholarly investigation does not mean that certain emphases cannot be found, or that similar themes or ideas are impossible to consider. Clustering in particular fields, disproportionate ex-

pressions of certain interests are themselves signs of the animating power of a culture. The Nazis were wrong to believe in the existence of a “Jewish physics.” But it is not an error to note the impact of Jews upon physics. Humor may be a universal phenomenon, yet a 1978 study calculated that four out of five professional comedians in the United States were Jewish;⁵ the proportion should thus invite reflection on whether something like Jewish humor exists—and, if it does, why its place in Jewish culture is so secure. Mark Spitz ranks as one of the greatest swimmers who ever lived, and Kerri Strug is among the nation’s most astonishing gymnasts. But no one would claim any special Jewish disposition toward aquatic or acrobatic skills or could account for the athletic gifts of these two Olympians in other than fortuitously individual terms. But when Jews are heavily drawn to certain fields, curiosity demands to be satisfied. Attentiveness to ethnicity in the formation of the nation’s culture should not displace other readings, only complement them.

Few such contributions were excellent or influential—much less distinctive—until the late nineteenth century. Autonomy did not characterize the value system of the Sephardim, of the immigrants from German-speaking lands, or of their native-born progeny. Indeed, there would have been little if any American Jewish history had immigration from Germany in the mid-nineteenth century not dwarfed the sparse Sephardic community whose ancestors had come in the colonial era. There would have been little Jewish continuity had immigration from Eastern Europe not superseded the German Jews who created the primary institutions and dominated the community until the twentieth century.

In welcoming such immigrants, Emma Lazarus (1849–87) did more than typify an awakening of Jewish consciousness. “The New Colossus” (1883) remains perhaps the most famous poem an American Jew ever wrote, and its placement on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty aptly suggests the importance of immigration in replenishing Jewish culture. Of Sephardic as well as Ashkenazic roots, Lazarus also happened to be the first Jew Ralph Waldo Emerson ever met, in 1876. His daughter Ellen expressed surprise in meeting “a real unconverted Jew (who had no objections to calling herself one).” How astonishing it was “to hear how [the] Old Testament sounds to her, and find she has been brought up to keep the Law, and the Feast of the Passover, and the Day of Atonement. The interior view was more interesting than I could have imagined.” Although Lazarus’s family was no longer observant, “Christian institutions don’t interest her either.”⁶

That visit to Concord, Massachusetts, coincided with the ceding of cultural authority from the Sephardim to the “second wave,” which defined *Deutschtum* as the vehicle of civilization. “Racially, I am a Jew,” the Reform rabbi Bernhard

Felsenthal acknowledged. "But spiritually I am a German, for my inner life has been profoundly influenced by Schiller, Goethe, Kant, and other intellectual giants." The cultural background that permeated Reform was indeed so Germanic that, in the movement's 1897 *Union Hymnal*, the melody for #95 was lifted directly from "Deutschland über alles." One German-American newspaper, *Der deutsche Pionier*, praised the immigrant Jews because, "without their patronage," German-language theater in the republic "would cease to exist."⁷ Socially the families of German Jewish immigrants and their gentile counterparts sometimes operated in separate spheres, but the cultural institutions they created (such as singing clubs and reading clubs) were remarkably similar. In 1845, German Jews did create an early version of the Jewish Publication Society, but to discern a conspicuously Jewish culture of German provenance is especially frustrating.

They did transplant their religion, which they reformed (and then opted to reform further), and they did create permanent cultural institutions. But consider the plight of Mayer Sulzberger. As chairman of the publications committee of the Jewish Publication Society of America, he tried to recruit native-born authors. Unable to locate an American who could write a successful Jewish novel, he asked a London friend to find a British author instead. That is how Israel Zangwill (1864–1926) was recruited to write *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), a best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet, even then, the prospects for a viable Jewish culture did not become more secure. Zangwill feared narrowing his "appeal exclusively to a section" and told Sulzberger that "behind all the Jewish details, there must be a human interest which will raise it into that cosmopolitan thing, a work of art."⁸

Zangwill was at least willing to make literature out of Jewish subjects, however erratic his own consciousness of separateness. Paradoxically, he managed to combine an unflagging sense of allegiance to the Jewish people with the abandonment of Judaism and with marriage to a Christian. Emerson had expected "a new race" to emerge from the American "smelting-pot," and Zangwill dropped that first consonant to exalt the amalgamation of peoples in the New World. In promoting the hope of absorption, *The Melting-Pot* (1908) is a representative text, a melodramatic articulation of the dream of "Americanization" that was widely shared. Even the "imperial wizard and emperor" of the Ku Klux Klan was partly in Zangwill's corner. "When freed from persecution," Hiram Evans observed in 1926, West European "Jews have shown a tendency to disintegrate and amalgamate. We may hope that shortly, in the free atmosphere of America, Jews of this class will cease to be a problem." To be sure, Evans warned against "the Eastern Jews of recent immigration." Those particular "Ashkenasim . . . show a

divergence from the American type so great that there seems little hope of their assimilation.”⁹ For them, the fires of the cauldron might not be hot enough. That is why the third wave of well over two million immigrants would determine the demographic and ideological possibilities of a vibrant Jewish culture; the United States would then harbor the largest Jewish population in the world, but also the one most free to determine its own destiny.

The philosopher who most vigorously challenged the pressures of “Americanization” was Horace M. Kallen (1882–1974). He called his alternative to conformism “cultural pluralism,” and thus the most resonant defense of diversity could be credited to an immigrant rabbi’s son. More eager to validate the Many than to envision the One, Kallen wanted the most irreversible of all human choices—the identity of one’s grandparents—to become the foundation for the enlargement of freedom. An irrevocable fact could be converted into an opportunity for self-realization, a way to honor ancestry. The right to be equal, promised at the birth of the republic, also meant the right to be different. Cultural pluralism resembled an orchestra, and “each ethnic group may be the natural in-



As early as 1909, the Yiddish press satirized as well as exalted the possibilities of an upwardly mobile assault on high culture.

(YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Photo Archives, New York)

strument" contributing to the overall harmony and balance of the symphony. Each instrument realizes itself more fully in the society than it can by "segregation and isolation." Ethnicity need not be dismissed as parochial strutting or as an alibi for obscurantism but could instead promote national cohesiveness. "Plurality is a basic condition of existence," Kallen proclaimed.¹⁰ An ardent secularist, he collapsed the ethical values of Judaism into Hebraism, a modernized variant of the religious civilization he believed had become outmoded. Kallen tried to reconcile the particularism of ethnicity with the general demands of democracy and to show that Hebraism was fully compatible with citizenship, because both, he believed, gave primacy to the ideal of freedom. That ideal would be tested and exercised—and "Hebraism" as well as other conceptions of Jewish culture applied—under conditions that in the twentieth century defied sharp boundaries.

THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

Nothing made authenticity more difficult to sustain than the decline of a separate vernacular. Indeed, the very word "Yiddish" did not become widespread until the end of the nineteenth century, when the threats that English posed were already noticeable. (Until then "Jewish" was the simple name for the language of the Ashkenazim.) As early as the 1870s, such American terms as "boss," "boy," "dinner" and "supper" had been introduced into ordinary immigrant speech, and within three decades at least a hundred other English words and phrases had been inserted—such as "never mind," "poltzman," "alle right," and "that'll do." In *Yekl* (1896), a tale that Abraham Cahan (1860–1951) wrote in English, his eponymous protagonist renames himself Jake and rebukes the "backwardness" of his wife "in picking up American Yiddish." Although deeper causes shatter their marriage, Gitl's annoying error was to have used *fentzter* instead of *veenda*. Of course Cahan knew that Yiddish took on the coloration of wherever its speakers lived. When Mamie introduces herself, Gitl is confused, because Mamie "spoke with an overdone American accent in the dialect of the Polish Jews, affectedly Germanized and profusely interspersed with English, so that Gitl, whose mother tongue was Lithuanian Yiddish, could scarcely catch the meaning of one half of her flood of garrulity."¹¹

The speed with which English insinuated itself should therefore occasion little surprise. To accelerate the prospects of socioeconomic advancement, an "English-Jewish" dictionary was published as early as 1891. Six years later, the *Tageblatt* began providing its readers with a full page in English. Before the outbreak of World War I, the *Complete English-Jewish Dictionary* had been published in 11 editions. No immigrant group was quicker to learn English. In that

language Cahan wrote *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), a novel that calibrated the cost of personal success, even as he was editing the *Forverts* (from 1902 until his death). No wonder a journalistic rival accused Cahan's newspaper of conflating the two languages so badly that its subscribers knew neither Yiddish *nor* English. No wonder that Molly Picon, a star of the Yiddish theater, took an extended European tour beginning in 1911. She sensed a need to improve her Yiddish, which had become "completely bastardized."¹²

For a couple of generations, however, its cohesive if impure force could not be denied. In 1917 the collected works of the Yiddishist and publicist Chaim Zhitlowsky were published—not in Vilna or Warsaw or Kiev, but in New York City. There too Sholem Aleichem had resettled and died in the most populous Jewish city in the world, indeed in a metropolis so huge that its population in the 1930s exceeded that of any other state in the Union (including the rest of the Empire State). Jews loomed so large in the city that Temple Emanu-El seated more worshippers than Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and the tenacity of the tongue the new immigrants spoke is as noteworthy as its ultimate failure to resist the American Way of Life. An anarchist newspaper, *Di Fraye Arbayter Shtimme* (Free Voice of Labor), was founded in 1902 and lasted until 1977. *Der Tog* (The Day) held on from 1914 until 1971. Not until 1983 did the *Jewish Daily Forward* become a weekly, and about a decade later a visitor to its office on East 33rd Street noted that "circulation is sclerotic, fourteen thousand being the official, and highly generous, assessment." The youngest of the four full-time staffers was editor Mordecai Strigler (1921–98), who could enlist so few contributors that he often wrote half the newspaper himself, having used—over the previous four decades—about 30 pseudonyms.¹³

Each census recorded the decline of Yiddish. Its use probably peaked around 1930, when it had about 1,750,000 speakers. But that figure was failing to keep pace with demography. The absolute number of Jews was greater in 1940 than a decade earlier, but half a million fewer of them claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue. Henry Roth (1906–95) was nevertheless right to wonder, near the end of his literary career: "Who would have believed that I would have seen Yiddish disappear in one lifetime?" The trap that its writers could not elude dogged the career of Jacob Glatstein (1896–1971). Over half a year before Kristallnacht would expose the commitment of a nation-state to crush a vulnerable minority, he fathomed the terrible consequences of the loss of isolation. In "Good Night, World," the poet imagined a return to medieval corporatism, so that he might go

*Back to my kerosene, my shadowed tallow candles,
Endless October and faint stars,
To my twisting streets and crooked lantern,*

To my sacred scrolls and holy books,
 To tough Talmudic riddles and lucid Yiddish speech,
 To law, to duty, and to justice,
 To what is deeply mine.

He told the “World, joyously I stride / Toward the quiet ghetto lights.” Yet what did such a vow of renunciation mean? Glatstein’s children were not enrolled in any Yiddish-language school, nor did he teach them the language. Each of his books—eleven volumes of poetry, three novels, six essay collections—revealed with deepening poignancy the reduced estate of Yiddish itself.¹⁴

Elsewhere in the Diaspora, Jews had not commonly been invited to enrich or to influence the host culture, freeing them to establish their own separate cultural space. But in the United States, which encouraged acculturation, the absence of genuine autonomy lengthened the odds of survival. Without a hermetic language, a threat to Jewish distinctiveness is posed, and a definable sensibility, anchored in idiom, runs the risk of disappearance. To command one’s own language does not guarantee continuity and creativity, but it does at least communicate the sense of a peculiar destiny.

The vocabulary of Yiddish did not entirely die. Even Alex Portnoy admits to knowing 25 words—“half of them dirty, and the rest mispronounced!” The *mame loshn* was merely playing possum—in English. In an address at Bryn Mawr in 1905, Henry James feared for the integrity of his native tongue. The immigrants and their progeny were drawing “from the Yiddish even, strange to say,” to “play, to their heart’s content, with the English language, or, in other words, [to] dump their mountain of promiscuous material into the foundation of the American.”¹⁵ His concern was so overprotective that the novelist came across as a bit *meshuga*. But his anxieties were not unfounded. Even as *ganef* and *kibitzer* and *chutzpah* were enshrined in the dictionary, the vernacular was studied with phrases lifted from Yiddish like “Get lost” and “He knows from nothing” and “I should worry” and “Smart he isn’t.” One sign of the permeable and reciprocal features of this minority culture is Yinglish. Linguistic anthropologists have reached a consensus that “Gimme a bagel shmeer” is how New Yorkers order breakfast. The request can be translated as follows: “I wish you a very pleasant good morning. May I please have a bagel with a bit of cream cheese?” In Frank Loesser’s *Guys and Dolls* (1950), Nathan Detroit declares his love to Adelaide in a daisy-chain of internal rhymes:

All right already, I’m just a no-goodnik.
 All right already, it’s true. So *nu?*

So sue me, sue me, what can you do me?
I love you.

Thus the momentum of the musical comedy was propelled giddily far away from the frippery of European operettas.

CROSSOVER DREAMS

When Jews could inject so much of themselves into the cultural life of an unfinished country, when crossover dreams could be realized so early and so quickly, the quandaries that were often posed to European Jewry seemed to dissipate. Take Max Nosseck's 1940 Yiddish-language film, *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* (The Vilna Town Cantor). Later released as *Overture to Glory*, it recounts the career of a cantor who must choose whether to join the Warsaw Opera or remain in the Vilna Synagogue. The dilemma is serious; neither European high culture nor traditional Judaism allowed the protagonist to split the difference. Yoel David Strashunsky realizes too late that he has deserted his people. Emotionally spent, he dies in the shul after chanting *Kol Nidre*. His American counterpart is named Jack Robin and can realize the national ideal, which is to have it all. The "jazz singer" can knock over the Winter Garden audience by singing "Mammy" and honor his dying father by chanting *Kol Nidre* from a pulpit on the Lower East Side. Even as Nosseck was filming *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn*, the American-born cantors Jan Peerce and Richard Tucker were facing no such stark vocational choices; these tenors could please audiences at the Metropolitan Opera, too. They were free to cross cultural frontiers, with little sense that such barriers existed.

America meant autonomy, freedom, even power. Or so might be inferred from the enduring popularity of an icon that two Jews created. Jerry Siegel (1914–96), a thin, bespectacled high school student in Cleveland, was earning \$4 a week as a delivery boy during the Great Depression, helping to support his family. Some of his savings, however, were spent on comic books. One night in the summer of 1934, he imagined Superman. A story came unbidden to the sleepless Siegel of the origins of a figure on a planet that would be destroyed, of the discovery of a child with exceptional strength near a Midwestern village named Smallville, of his assumption of a second identity: a "mild-mannered" reporter named Clark Kent. The next day Siegel raced to the home of his classmate Joe Shuster, the impoverished son of a tailor who had moved to Cleveland from Toronto; with Siegel doing the writing and Shuster doing the drawing, the pair was inspired to complete 12 newspaper strips that day. It took four years for *De-*

tective Comics to accept their work; within a decade or so, Superman had become one of the most familiar mythic characters on the planet.

He had special meaning for young Jews. Larry Gelbart, for example, would later write television shows, plays, and films. But he claimed that the greatest literary influence upon his Chicago childhood began—and virtually ended—with “Superman, *Action Comics*, first issue, June 1, 1938. Ten cents then, thousands now, but the memories are priceless.” The only other text in Gelbart’s home was the *Haggadah*, and he imagined as “the ideal book” one that had “Superman helping the Hebrews during the Exodus.” Only slightly later, Jules Feiffer grew up in the Bronx, and the future cartoonist and playwright knew exactly what Siegel and Shuster were feeling: “We were aliens. We didn’t choose to be mild-mannered, bespectacled and self-effacing. We chose to be bigger, stronger, blue-eyed and sought-after by blond cheerleaders. *Their* cheerleaders. We chose to be *them*.” Superman thus represented “the ultimate assimilationist fantasy,” Feiffer realized. “The mild manners and glasses that signified a class of nerdy Clark Kents was, in no way, our real truth. Underneath that schmucky façade there lived Men of Steel!”¹⁶ Snubbed by Lois Lane, unglamorous in his business suit, Clark Kent is a *schlemiel*, a weakling who does not fight back. Even as Arthur Miller’s protagonist in the 1945 novel *Focus* puts on the eyeglasses that cause him to be mistaken for a Jew, the disguise of Clark Kent hints at the actual identity of his creators.

Superman is a foreigner in a country composed of foreigners; he is, in the phrase of one literary critic, a “Krypto-American immigrant.”¹⁷ On Krypton his name was Kal-El, the Hebrew phrase for a “god that is light” in weight—that is, a deity who does not oppress and is so light that he scoffs at the laws of gravity. Omnipotent and beneficent, Superman is like a god. In America the man of steel is an outsider who succeeds in a new world. He does so by applying his superhuman powers in a way that Jews typically wished others to behave—by helping the weak. Superman is an idealized gentile who honors his elderly foster parents’ pleas to use his awesome, heroic potentiality “to assist humanity,” to rescue the oppressed rather than dominate them (see p. 1098). He is episodically engaged in repair of the world. Superman is no Nietzschean *Übermensch*; instead, he is a sort of New Dealer. Conceived during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, to whom Jews showed deeper loyalty than did any other ethnic voting bloc, Superman signified the yearning to protect the vulnerable and to stimulate the confidence-building efforts at nationalist recovery. That is why he reliably fights for “truth, justice, and the American way.” In his humanitarian acts, he is more effective than the golem who protects the Jews of Prague; the benefactor whom Siegel and Shuster fantasized into being is less parochial and thus more democratic as well.

The fulfillment of crossover dreams eluded other talented and creative Jews, however, such as Sholom Secunda. His career was paradigmatic. Born in Russia in 1894, Secunda was groomed to be a cantor. In 1906 his family immigrated to the United States, where the prodigy billed as the “Crown Prince of *Hazonim*” seemed destined for stardom. He exuded such promise that, in 1915, the Yiddish theater impresario Boris Thomashefsky introduced him to another kid who had demonstrated a flair for composition. But Secunda was shocked to learn that his potential collaborator had no formal classical training; he would be a drag. Later, George Gershwin would express his appreciation to Secunda for having made his own success possible: “If he had agreed to write with me, I, too, would now be writing music [only] for the Yiddish theater.” In 1932, Secunda was inspired to write the music for “Bei Mir Bistu Shein” (To Me You Are Beautiful). Jacob (Joe) Jacobs wrote the lyrics, and in the Yiddish musical theater and at Catskills *simchas* (celebrations) the song was a hit. No one expected any wider national interest; in 1937, the team sold the rights to the song to a Yiddish music publisher and split the \$30 proceeds.

The alluring vitality that a minority culture could nurture was not to be suppressed, however. The Catskills resort owner Jennie Grossinger claimed to have taught the song to two Negro entertainers whose stage names were Johnny and George. Maybe so, because songwriter Sammy Cahn insisted that he heard two black performers do the song in Yiddish, as early as 1935, in Harlem. Cahn was astonished to observe the crowd at the Apollo Theatre rocking with delight, so he asked himself: “Can you imagine what this song would do to an audience that understood the words?” He persuaded the three Andrews Sisters to record it for Decca. Its president, Jack Kapp, went along—but only if Cahn and his collaborator Saul Chaplin would translate “Bei Mir Bistu Shein,” which they did. English was the precondition of popular interest. Cahn kept the title exotic by refusing to Anglicize it but elevating it into German: “Bei Mir Bist Du Schön.”

It was released in late 1937, and, within a month, a quarter of a million records had been sold, along with about 200,000 copies of the sheet music. The Andrews Sisters’ single became the number-one hit of 1938 and drove America wild. *Life* reported customers rushing into record stores asking for “Buy a Beer, Mr. Shane,” and “My Mere Bits of Shame.” Not until 1961 did Secunda regain copyright of his hit. Upon his death, 13 years later, he left behind a huge list of Yiddish and liturgical musical works. Perhaps because his oeuvre was “too Jewish,” Secunda worked mostly in obscurity. Shortly before his death at 79, he had gone to Tokyo and, in the baths there, asked a masseuse to sing to him any American songs that she might know. She complied with a Japanese version of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schön.”¹⁸ The song had circumnavigated the globe.

Yet the ascent of Jewry in America was hardly frictionless, and the problems

of adjustment confronting the uprooted were often searing. So quickly did Jewish immigrants and their progeny take to their new home, however, that the newcomers weakened, altered, and abandoned what had historically divided them from their neighbors—religion. Their piety would be tested in a society that was Christian (though the state was not), and, though American Jewish history cannot be satisfactorily recounted as a *Heilsgeschichte*, the holiness that was expressed in the United States merits analysis.

THE FATE OF JUDAISM

The scattered, tiny, and independent congregations formed prior to the Civil War were little more than burial societies that occupied buildings where prayers were uttered—though very rarely by rabbis (who, if they existed, were unaccredited and foreign-born). The first rabbi to brandish formal training, Abraham Rice, immigrated to Baltimore, where he was obliged to “dwell in complete darkness, without a teacher or a companion. . . . The religious life [of Jewry] in this land is on the lowest level, most people eat foul food and desecrate the Sabbath in public,” he complained in 1849. “Under these circumstances . . . I wonder whether it is even permissible for a Jew to live in this land.”¹⁹ Coordination among Jewish institutions was limited, and the transmission of knowledge to the young was spasmodic and ineffectual. Less than a century later, Reform and Conservative synagogues were providing a diverse range of activities for adults and children alike; worship services were being conducted by rabbis who were professionally trained and attuned to the nuances of American culture; and religious schools were using curricula that were centrally developed and nationally propagated.

The historian ought to pause at that mid-century moment to suggest the conditions under which Judaism was then operating. In 1954, its adherents celebrated their tercentenary in the New World and injected their own upbeat mood into the triumphalist spirit of a moment in which national power and prosperity were at their peak. At the National Tercentenary Dinner that fall, the keynote address was delivered by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose most distant predecessor had pledged “to give bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance”; that promise to this religious minority had mostly been kept. There were innumerable blessings to be counted, and the path to full absorption into American society seemed unobstructed. A synoptic history of American Jews was published that year by Harvard’s Oscar Handlin, who entitled his account of the experience of his coreligionists *Adventure in Freedom*. One year later, a self-trained theologian, Will Herberg, published a classic of religious sociology:

Protestant-Catholic-Jew elevated his fellow Jews to the status of equal partners in the piety that he claimed was the correlate of American citizenship. The claim amounted to the nifty feat of bestowing on the tiny Jewish population a role equivalent to the Taiwanese who occupied one of the five permanent seats in the United Nations Security Council.

In 1957, social scientist Nathan Glazer published what remains the most incisive analysis of the evolution of American Judaism. It did not disparage the feelings of satisfaction that permeated the Jewish community; there was much cause for contentment. But what lifted his volume out of the inevitable constrictions of its era was an awareness of the unacknowledged tensions, the unaddressed problems that were also integral to the communal condition. One dilemma could be said to dwarf—and perhaps even to determine—all the others, and Glazer expressed it with lapidary power: “There comes a time—and it is just about upon us—when American Jews become aware of a contradiction between the kind of society America wants to become—and indeed the kind of society most Jews want it to be—and the demands of the Jewish religion.” He then mentioned three of those demands: the need to practice endogamy; the need to live as “a people apart”; and the need to consider the Diaspora as Exile—until the divine restoration to the Holy Land.²⁰ Jewish religious life could be recounted largely in terms of the difficulties its adherents faced in reconciling their lives in the United States with these “demands of the Jewish religion.”

So soon after an anniversary drenched in collective pride, Glazer held up a mirror that was cracking. He revealed just over the horizon the troubles that would stem from success and from promises fulfilled. He specified the difficulty that the goal of an unmodulated integration would produce, which is that the American adjective would excessively modify the noun Judaism, leaving religion drastically reduced and distorted and risking obliteration. What might make the fate of American Jewry precarious was that the very ethos that permeated and inspired this minority group could not in any logically satisfactory way be reconciled with Judaism.

Would it become simply Reform Judaism? That had been the hope of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900), the master builder of the institutions of Reform in Cincinnati. His expectations were dashed. However, the impulse to modernize and to adapt to the New World would become commonplace. The proof of the triumph of Reform Judaism was not only that it had contrived to attract second-generation Americans, whose parents had come from Eastern Europe, but also that both the Orthodox and Conservative wings of Judaism felt compelled to imitate much of the institutional pattern that the rationalists of Reform had established. Beliefs and practices that had emerged in German

principalities after Emancipation were transferred to the circumstances of a voluntaristic and rambunctious society. A *bet midrash* became a temple that sometimes became a center where secular activities were also conducted. A rabbi ceased to be (only) a legal scholar authorized to adjudicate disputes; he often became a pastor and a formally educated professional as well as an organization man, a fundraiser, and an emissary to the gentiles. (Such virtuosity was sometimes well compensated. The 1900 census revealed that the average Protestant minister was earning \$731 annually. To cite an extreme case, Sinai Temple in Chicago was then paying Emil Hirsch over \$12,000 a year.) The mandates of sisterhoods and brotherhoods were also altered, from social service in the slums to enhancements for participation in synagogue life itself. The “rule of thumb” that so often defined the pedagogy of the *melamed* (teacher) yielded to a bureaucracy that developed textbooks and other educational materials and devised and revised prayer books as well. All such adaptations were designed to satisfy particular needs, above all to retain the interest and membership of the young in a society in which all sects and denominations competed for souls.

To win—or at least to retain market share—meant accommodation to the nation’s prevailing ideals. Freedom and happiness, Jefferson even boasted (prematurely), had been realized; America had therefore passed the test of civilization. When Freud later argued that freedom and happiness needed to be curtailed *for the sake of* civilization, his tragic view should be acknowledged as closer to the interdictions and commandments of traditional Judaism. Although the conflict between its obligations and American hedonism and individualism is hardly unique, no other religious group has been less pious than the Jews. Only a minority has been affiliated at any one time with a synagogue; by the end of the twentieth century, one in five Jews answered “none” to pollsters who asked them to specify their religion. By 1989, the Shoah ranked first as a marker of identity for American Jews. Second in shaping their sense of themselves were the two High Holidays, followed by domestic antisemitism. Chugging along in distant fourth place was God.²¹

How the Holocaust came to assume such importance is itself something that could not have been anticipated in 1945, or even 15 years later. Indeed, the more the murder of six million European Jews inevitably receded in time, the more overt did the claims to remember their extinction become. Consciousness of the Shoah did not become central to Jewish communal life any earlier than the 1960s; indifference and omission were far more characteristic of the community than the injunction: never again! In 1961, when *Commentary* conducted a symposium on the topic of “Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals,” only 2 of the 31 participants emphasized the imprint of the Holocaust on their lives. In his introduction to the symposium, the editor of the magazine, Norman Podhoretz,

mentioned half a dozen factors impinging on the changed self-definition of the American Jew since World War II. He ignored the horror perpetrated by the Third Reich. Five years later, when he monthly conducted a symposium on "The Condition of Jewish Belief," very few theologians were willing to confront the implications of the Final Solution.

Several events and cultural moments were to make it decisive to the evolution of American Jewish culture. In 1961, Israel put Adolf Eichmann on trial for having organized the transportation of Jews to the extermination camps, and the judicial proceedings in Jerusalem tapped turbulent emotions that were presumed to have been buried. They were not. Then, in 1967, the Six Day War—especially as the noose seemed to be tightening around Israel prior to the conflict—raised fears that an entire Jewish community was once again imperiled. The very existence of the state seemed to be at stake; Israeli diplomat Abba Eban called it "politicide." Finally, the Holocaust shadowed the fate of the largest surviving Jewish community in Europe. The Soviet regime designed policies that promoted utter assimilation and also engaged in political and religious persecution, and a movement on behalf of this community was inaugurated in the United States, Western Europe, and Israel by the 1970s. That struggle was often animated by an awareness of what rescuers had failed to do in the 1930s and 1940s, and the movement slowed down the diplomacy of *détente* with the Soviet Union.

Two American films were especially influential in making the Nazi destruction of European Jewry central to the consciousness of Jews in the United States. The first was NBC's mini-series titled *Holocaust* (1978), which was produced by Herbert Brodtkin and written by Gerald Green. No television program devoted to a Jewish subject had ever before registered such an impact; none has done so since. Director Steven Spielberg's Academy Award-winning *Schindler's List* (1993) probably occupies a similar niche in the history of the cinema, and his movie invited meditation on the rarity of rescue and on the mystery of goodness. Remembrance of the Shoah, observers of American Jewry have widely acknowledged, has helped to shore up faltering identity. With the decline of ethnic distinctiveness, with the gradual disappearance of cohesive working-class neighborhoods and kinship and friendship networks, with the failure of synagogues to extract membership dues from the majority of those who describe themselves to pollsters as Jews, nothing matched the Holocaust in entwining a fragmented and integrated community into one. Consider one contrast. The largest collection of Judaica in Washington, D. C., is assembled at the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum. In 1998, it welcomed about 50,000 visitors while two million were flocking to the nearby United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In the tension between a historic faith and the temptations of liberal society,

no extra credit should be awarded for guessing the outcome. Indeed, American Jews tended to entwine their religion with their politics, which was distinctly liberal. A progressive vision of social justice has been pivotal to their sense of what Judaism mandates; *tikun olam* (repair of the world) has been widely held up as an imperative. What is a “good Jew”? a team of sociologists asked along Chicago’s North Shore in the late 1950s. Two-thirds of the suburbanites replied by claiming that they considered it essential to “support all humanitarian causes” and to “promote civic betterment and improvement in the community.” Nearly a third considered such activities merely desirable. To be a “good Jew,” nearly two-thirds claimed that it was at least desirable to be “a liberal on political and economic issues.” A generation later, this proclivity was largely intact. A national survey disclosed that, when asked, “as a Jew, which of the following qualities do you consider most important to your Jewish identity . . . ?,” half of the respondents answered: “a commitment to social equality.” The other replies, two other sociologists reported, “were equally divided among religious observance, support for Israel, and miscellaneous other responses.” Nearly half of those asked in one national survey agreed with the statement that “Jewish values . . . teach me to be politically liberal”; substitute the word “conservative” and 58 percent disagree. (Only 13 percent agreed.)²² God is presumably still a supporter of the New Deal and its heritage of social reform.

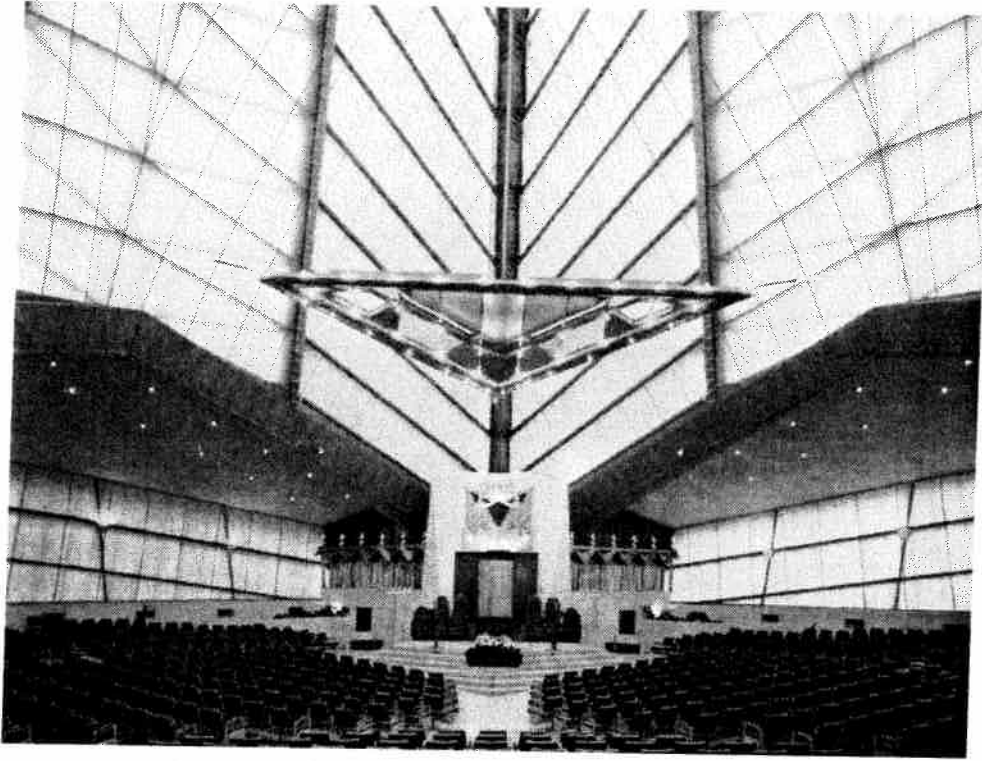
Jews have been more likely than other American social groups to go to the polling booth but have been far less likely than their neighbors to attend houses of worship; synagogues have therefore been built accordingly. “Let them make me a sanctuary” is a divine request, “that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). But however exact some of the specifications, the Lord preferred to defer some decisions to architects, who concocted what historian Rachel Wischnitzer termed the “flexible plan.” It was first used consciously on a large scale by the German-born and -trained Eric Mendelsohn (1887–1953), who arrived from Palestine in 1939. The layout that he devised for St. Louis’s B’nai Amoona, completed in 1946, doubled the seating capacity for the High Holy Days, with folding walls joining the sanctuary, foyer, and auditorium. To be sure, Albert Kahn’s Temple Beth El synagogue in Detroit had used folding walls four decades earlier, and in the 1920s the *American Hebrew* suggested an accordion shape to accommodate divergent seating requirements for the Sabbath and for the High Holy Days. In the year that B’nai Amoona was finished, architect Percival Goodman published a paper recommending the “flexible plan.” But Mendelsohn pioneered in perfecting it, because suburbanization facilitated the use of horizontal space that dense ethnic neighborhoods had not allowed.²³

Architectural history is an ideal demonstration of the difficulty—if not

impossibility—of separating Jewish worship from osmotic influences. In Newport, Rhode Island, Peter Harrison's Touro Synagogue (1763) boasted a façade like the Congregational meeting houses of the colonial era, and the basilica and the high steeple of Congregation Beth Elohim made it resemble the Georgian churches of Charleston, South Carolina, where, after a destructive fire, the new synagogue (1841) was built in the Greek Revival style. In the same era, the Egyptian Revival that was popular for prisons and monuments led William Strickland to design Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel (1825) in that style. A little over a generation later, the Gothic Revival could be seen in the first two synagogues built in San Francisco, although the nation's first Jewish architect, Prague-born Leopold Eidlitz, used Romanesque for New York's Congregation Shaaray Tefila (1847). Having been commissioned to design showman P. T. Barnum's home (nicknamed "Iranistan"), Eidlitz put Moorish decoration atop a Gothic plan for New York's Temple Emanu-El (1868). When Kahn revised his Temple Beth El in Detroit in 1922, the resemblance to the Lincoln Memorial, which was dedicated that year, was undeniable.

Nor did modernism impose a distinctive style on synagogues. Some of the most brilliant modernist achievements were by non-Jews, like Wright's Beth Shalom. Minoru Yamasaki designed North Shore Congregation Israel in Glen-coe, Illinois (1964), as well as Temple Beth El in Birmingham, Michigan (1974), and Paul Rudolph was responsible for Congregation Beth El in New London, Connecticut (1973). But the most popular architect of synagogues in American history was in fact a Jew. Percival Goodman designed more than 50 synagogues. Yet he rarely drew on historical references or symbolic preferences, and whether he found an apt and unique aesthetic for Jewish worship is dubious.

No wonder then that, after surveying synagogue designs in the first three postwar decades, one art historian tabulated such a multiplicity of styles that he despaired of locating anything "singularly expressive of a Jewish architecture." What revealed "the specifically Jewish activity within" was elusive. No clear answer emerged to the question posed by the critic Lewis Mumford in 1925: "Should a synagogue be in harmony with the buildings around it, or should it stand out and proclaim the cultural individuality of the Jewish community?" That meant resolving a larger problem—"the general relation of Jewish culture to Western civilization."²⁴ Such categories may be too broad; that dichotomy obscures too many variations. What worked in Eastern Europe could not be duplicated in America, though both are part of "Western civilization." The house of prayer, study, and much else that brimmed with communal life could not be reconstituted where an innovation like the "flexible plan" represented perhaps the most American feature of synagogue architecture.



Interior of Beth Shalom Congregation, a synagogue in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. (Photo: David DeBalko)

Ideological pressures would enfeeble a distinctively Judaic notion; American democracy would affect the divine election of Israel. To believe in it could seem incongruent with egalitarian and pluralist ideals, and therefore what happened to chosenness reflects how an ancient faith confronted rationalism after the Enlightenment. The kiddush expresses gratitude to a deity “Who has chosen us from all peoples by giving us His Torah,” and the *aleinu* (a prayer in praise of God’s supremacy, recited at the conclusion of the service) acknowledges that God has granted Jews a unique destiny. Journalist Hayyim Greenberg (1889–1953) insisted that election “must not be taken to signify a superior *race* but a superior *faith*, destined to become the faith of the entire world. . . . The Jew, through his faith, is merely *advanced*, while the rest of the world is *retarded*.” Jews can see the divine light more sharply than Christians. But because they too have eyes, Christians will come around eventually. This argument is not taut, however. If all human souls are indeed spiritually worthy, then Greenberg’s defense makes non-Jews look morally backward. It is difficult to affirm chosenness without offending against both liberalism and rationalism; a champion of both,

publicist Leonard Fein, conceded that such “a declaration [is one that] almost none of us can take literally, and few of us can take seriously.” Not that a counter-argument is inconceivable. “No people, race, or tribe is without ethnocentricity,” Greenberg rebutted. “A certain degree of narcissism is requisite for the survival of an ethnic group.” But election “never constituted a theoretical basis for Jewish domination over other, ‘inferior,’ races or peoples.”²⁵

After emancipation, election had to be reinterpreted as mission, or as Israel choosing God instead of the other way around. The notion nevertheless remained problematic, because it circulated in a society that endorsed the ideal of equality. Because rabbis were expected to vindicate Judaism among gentiles, public relations required that election be explained (or explained away). It “legitimated and even demanded an exclusivity” that most Jews “had repudiated,” historian Arnold Eisen surmised. “It presumed a covenant with a personal God in whom they for the most part could not believe.” Jews became understandably uneasy about a particularism based on holding a monopoly on truth. Although their destiny was prescribed directly from heaven, they wanted to be considered good citizens, which commonly meant repudiating whatever smacked of ethnocentrism. This dilemma Eisen phrased crisply: “Jews wanted to be part of America, and yet apart.”²⁶

Some of them were willing to abandon election if feelings of exclusivity and arrogance adhered so closely to it. Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881–1983) added an objection that was pragmatic; so powerful an affront to democratic sensitivities could not be a worthy idea. “From an ethical standpoint, it is deemed inadvisable, to say the least, to keep alive ideas of race or national superiority, inasmuch as they are known to exercise a divisive influence, generating suspicion and hatred,” he wrote in 1934. “The harm which results from upholding the doctrine of ‘election’ is not counterbalanced by the good it is supposed to do in inculcating a sense of self-respect.”²⁷ The founder of the Reconstructionist movement thus wanted to drop chosenness from the liturgy. Such omissions represented one response to the communal quandary of choosing between separation and inclusion.

If any prayer became more problematic than the daily thankfulness for not being born a gentile, it was the expression of gratitude every morning for not being born a woman. Such a sentiment—and the rigidity of sex roles the prayer reflects—would inexorably yield by the late twentieth century to the claims of feminism. Female independence in the United States had struck Tocqueville as emblematic of egalitarianism. As *De la démocratie en Amérique* was being published, Rebecca Gratz was inventing the Jewish Sunday School movement in Philadelphia and, by making women responsible for educating the next

generation, was enlarging their role. The Reform movement quickly asserted a goal of sexual equality insofar as it was feasible, and the indomitable Rabbi Wise interpreted the Torah as requiring the fulfillment of that goal. In the centennial year of the Declaration of Independence, he thundered in the *American Israelite* that, "according to Moses, God made man, male and female both in his own image, without any difference in regard to duties, rights, claims and hopes." Resenting the confinement of the Jewish woman to "a garret in the synagogue, isolated like an abomination, shunned like a dangerous demon, and declared unfit in all religious observances," Wise did much to honor such professions besides introducing the family pew.²⁸ In substituting confirmation for the bar mitzvah ceremony, he ensured that girls and boys would achieve parity.

The boundaries of the female within Judaism were stretched in other ways. Take the androgynously named Ray Frank (ca. 1861–1948). Born in San Francisco, she may have been (possibly in 1890) the first woman in history to preach from the pulpit on the High Holy Days. That event happened in Spokane, Washington, and launched the singular career of the "girl rabbi." The "female messiah" delivered sermons, primarily in the West, and published essays on Jewish women and on the Jewish family. Her commitment to female emancipation was qualified, however, because she opposed the suffrage and praised domesticity. Invited to deliver the invocation at the Jewish Women's Congress during the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, Frank was closer to a revivalist than to a learned sage. But by 1910, feminism would become sufficiently implanted to be parodied in a musical that Thomashefsky wrote and staged, *Di Sheyne Amerikanerin* (The Beautiful American Girl): "*Vayber, makht mikh far prezident*" (Women, Make Me President) does not seek to attract the votes of men, who are dismissed as "*mamzeyrim*" (bastards) and "*hazeyrim*" (swine) who are fit for washing diapers ("*Zoln di mener daypers vashn*"). No wonder that Reb Smolinsky, the insufferable patriarch of Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925), laments: "Woe to America where women are let free like men." In such a democracy, his ambitious daughter Sara insists on pursuing happiness, despite the curses he inflicts upon her. Smolinsky "could never understand," she realizes. "He was the Old World. I was the New."²⁹

So was Judith Kaplan Eisenstein (1909–96), who would marry a rabbi whose grandfather, Judah David Eisenstein, had translated the Declaration of Independence into both Hebrew and Yiddish. The milestone in her life occurred on the eighteenth of Adar, 5682 (three years before *Bread Givers* was published), when she became the first bat mitzvah in history. Her father was no Reb Smolinsky. Indeed, though Mordecai Kaplan and Yezierska's fictional patriarch were each granted four daughters, the Jewish Theological Seminary professor claimed that

Judith and her sisters were the four reasons for instituting the ceremony. The services on March 18, 1922, featured one small step for a woman. But one big step mankind was not quite ready to take; Judith stood below the pulpit and recited from her own printed copy of the Pentateuch, following the regular service in which men read from the Torah scrolls on the pulpit. The first girl in the Reform movement to imitate Judith Kaplan apparently did so in 1931. Another two decades would pass before the bat mitzvah ceremony became common.

Even then it mattered most to the Conservative movement, because Reform had depreciated the bar mitzvah ceremony and Orthodoxy discouraged gender equality. As late as the 1960s, many Conservative synagogues scheduled the celebration on Friday night to avoid reading the Torah, but by the 1980s few distinguished between bat and bar mitzvah ceremonies. The egalitarian logic of the bat mitzvah celebration could not be evaded; the claims of the Conservative movement to respect halakhah proved vulnerable to a democratic faith in the spiritual worthiness of women as well as men. What was the point of asking a 13-year-old to read from the Torah but then of denying her an *aliyah* (blessing the Torah) the rest of her life?

Consistency dictated only one answer. The right to equal treatment, Mordecai Kaplan believed, was accorded the female in American civilization. "There is no reason why the Jewish civilization should persist in treating her in this day and age as though she were an inferior type of human being."³⁰ Beginning in 1951, his Society for the Advancement of Judaism gave women aliyot as well as the right to be counted in the *minyan* (quorum); four years later, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly first confronted the issue of granting women aliyot. That gave impetus to the fuller equality of the 1970s and thereafter, as feminism swept through the nation itself. Some Orthodox congregations acknowledged the force of feminism with a special *seudat sh'lisht* (third meal) on Saturday afternoon, or on a Sunday morning, when a 13-year-old girl was expected to deliver a *d'var Torah*, a homiletic speech marking her maturation. By 1960, roughly 250 nominally Orthodox synagogues had reported instituting some sort of mixed seating, though a backlash was mounted against the feminization of Jewish culture. The momentum, however, could not be stopped.

The effect of the rising status of women was formidable. Because girls were widely expected to become bat mitzvah, the gender gap that had long marked Jewish education was largely closed. (Judith Kaplan Eisenstein would earn a doctorate and join the faculty of the Teachers' Institute as a specialist in Jewish music.) "Before the bat mitzvah became popular, one-third of American Jewish women used to receive no formal Jewish education whatsoever," sociologist

Sylvia Barack Fishman reported. But by the end of the century, "bat mitzvah preparations have brought Jewish girls into supplementary schools and day schools at nearly the same rates as their brothers."³¹ By the end of the 1970s, the family pew and female participation in worship had become nearly universal features of the Reform and Conservative branches. The ease with which barriers fell cannot be explained without some reference to the incontestable authority of egalitarian ideals. In 1972, a group named Ezrat Nashim presented a series of demands at the annual meeting of the Rabbinical Assembly. The group sought female inclusion in the requirement to fulfill all ritual obligations; membership in synagogues; incorporation in the minyan; participation as equals in religious observances; eligibility to be witnesses in Jewish law; the right of women to initiate divorce proceedings; enrollment in rabbinical and cantorial schools; and encouragement to serve as leaders and professionals in synagogues and in Jewish communal organizations. Most of these goals were soon attained, and in 1973 the declaration that women had become eligible for the minyan was front-page news in the *New York Times*.

That inclusion was newsworthy because it meant an equal responsibility to pray. Historically exempt from the obligation to do so, women who had invoked a right to be counted in the quorum were dramatically shattering the rigidity of sex roles normative Judaism had prescribed. Because Reform required no minyan, and because Orthodoxy insisted on gender division, Conservatives again registered feminist struggles with greatest sensitivity, including the ineluctable challenge of female ordination. In 1903, Henrietta Szold (1860–1945) sought to enroll at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the rabbinical academy of the Conservative movement. As editor of the Jewish Publication Society and of the *American Jewish Year Book*, she exemplified a life of scholarship even before she had committed herself to a life of Zionist service. Nonetheless, Szold had to assure seminary president Solomon Schechter that she desired only to study and did not want to become what her father had been: a rabbi. With that understanding, admission to the seminary was assured.

In 1921, the prospect of female ordination was raised at the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, which refused—though not in principle—to countenance so drastic a break with tradition; only the renaissance of feminism in the 1960s would reignite the demand to enter the professions. The intervening four decades were not barren of a sense of injustice, however. The president of the HUC-Jewish Institute of Religion was the archaeologist Nelson Glueck (1900–1971), who was married to hematologist Helen Glueck, a full professor at the Medical College of the University of Cincinnati. Her rank fueled conjecture that her husband's consciousness was fairly easy to raise. Shortly before his

death, he expressed the hope of living long enough to ordain a woman. But he passed away shortly before Sally Priesand, who had been admitted to HUC-JIR in 1968, officially became the first female rabbi in history. Reconstructionist Sandy Eisenberg Sasso joined her two years later, and Amy Eilberg became the first Conservative rabbi in 1985. By 1992, about 280 women had become rabbis; the figured jumped to about 400 two years later.

What suggests the insinuating power of the national ambience is the plasticity even of Orthodoxy. A few of its rabbis even recognized the legitimacy of separate women's *tefilot* (prayer services). Increasingly, Orthodox women recited the kaddish in synagogues, and legal authorities found themselves devoting more attention to issues on which women were especially vocal, such as divorce rulings and reproductive rights. By the end of the century, so many girls were studying the Talmud in Modern Orthodox day schools that the chasm in formal education between the sexes became quite narrow. When the national propulsion toward greater equality reinforced a traditional reverence for learning, misogyny could gain little traction. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of Boston was not alone in endorsing female study of the Talmud. So too did the Lubavicher Rebbe of Brooklyn, Menachem M. Schneerson, who turned out to be a pragmatist. Women who explored the Talmud, he argued, would be more effective in helping their own children learn and would be better able to resist the temptation of secular studies.

Within American Orthodoxy, the delivery of sermons in English and the appreciation of decorum in worship had once been innovations too, thanks to Joseph H. Lookstein of Manhattan's Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in particular. He admired the tranquillity and tastefulness of Reform and Conservative worship, which he wanted Orthodoxy to emulate. According to his son, Lookstein "strove to combine warmth with dignity, the enthusiasm of Orthodoxy with the aesthetics of Reform, the tradition of four thousand years of Jewish practice with the modern active tempo."³² In 1937 he founded the Ramaz School (and thus pioneered the day school movement) and scheduled no classes on Sundays or at Christmas—designated a winter break. Such redefinitions of sanctity helped to blur any sharp distinction between Judaism and American culture.

To claim that national values have somehow infiltrated a religion whose history can be autonomously traced is misleading. One of the strongest signs of how Jews have helped shape the larger culture—and one of the most convincing illustrations of reciprocity—is the rise of feminism itself. Since the 1960s, Jewry has disproportionately supplied the best-known activists, ideologues, and theorists in behalf of women's causes. Literary scholar Carolyn Heilbrun claimed

that “to be a feminist[,] one had to have an experience of being an outsider more extreme than merely being a woman.”³³ Indeed, the sense of marginality may have been something of an independent variable in the equation of activism. During the failed struggle for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, pollsters learned that Jewish men were more likely to favor the Constitutional revision than were gentile women. The explanation may have been found in sociology more than in religious ideology. But the fate of feminism suggests that Judaism—far from constituting an impregnable barrier to the ideal of gender equality—could *become* consistent with it.

A DEMOCRACY OF TASTE

The democratic tendencies of American life, which promoted egalitarianism, were congenial to a minority that, though mostly urban in its geography, has not been typically urbane in its style. Gentility was for gentiles, and civility was an ordeal to which Jews were somewhat reluctant to submit.

For example, Julian Rose’s vaudeville routine early in the century, “Lipinsky at the Wedding,” poked fun at the standards of the well-heeled. Invited to “please come in evening dress,” Ikey Blatt shows up in his pajamas. An item served to guests as “tomato surprise” is no surprise to Levinsky: “I ate ’em before lots of times.” When his friend Lipinsky is scolded for having grabbed an entire roast chicken “all alone to eat,” he reacts by rushing to grab some potatoes to put on the plate too. And so forth. The title of Richard Feynman’s memoirs came from an incident on his first afternoon as a physics graduate student at Princeton, where the dean’s wife asked him whether he took cream or lemon in his tea. The future Nobel laureate replied with a gauche “both,” which startled her: “Surely you’re joking, Mr. Feynman.” He wasn’t, though he delighted in puncturing pretense, in ignoring the rules of etiquette Emily Post had codified. (An earlier physicist, Albert Einstein, liked to read her famous manual of propriety—for laughs.) Attuned to the social conventions that he made a political point of repudiating, the impish radical Abbie Hoffman mocked “the notion of ‘modesty’ as something invented by WASPs to keep the Jews out of the banking industry.”³⁴

To believers in human uniformity and cultural homogeneity, an ingenuous document can also be cited: a letter to the editor of *Der Tog* in 1915. The English-language play that the writer had attended was deemed “passable, but the theater! It is not like our Jewish theater. First of all I found it so quiet there,” this groundling reported. “There are no cries of ‘Sha!’ ‘Shut up!’ or ‘Order!’ and no babies cried—as if it were no theater at all!” Nor were fruits or sweets for sale. The formalities of the Anglophone theater reminded this kvetch of “a desert.

There are some Gentile girls who go around among the audience handing out glasses of water, but this I can get at home, too."³⁵ The *heimish* dimension of Jewish culture was also manifested in Allen Ginsberg, who was listed in the telephone book through the 1960s, after he had become perhaps the nation's most famous poet. Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–91) also kept his name in the Manhattan directory for a while, even after winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1978. Until the demands of fame grew exponentially, Singer often invited callers over for lunch, or at least for coffee. It is hard to imagine other eminent European-born novelists—even those who, like Thomas Mann or Vladimir Nabokov, were married to Jews—offering such unassuming hospitality.

Jews took so quickly to America because their culture was, if anything, an exaggeration of tendencies already evident in the society itself. Arriving en masse when the nation was moving from the countryside to the city, Jews were ahead of the curve. The Constitution required of new citizens the renunciation of aristocratic titles, which meant that nobility was less cherished than mobility, and an up-from-the-bottom scrappiness was so widely admired that the Jewish disregard of politesse did not appear peculiar. The apparent fluidity of the class structure, however, could not conceal what made America so different, which was that Jews occupied the advantageous side of the color line. Even as immigrants, they were elevated into the racially superior position. For blacks, equality was a cruelly distant, elusive ideal. Still systematically persecuted long after the Civil War, blacks nevertheless exerted an inescapable influence on the nation's culture, and their presence distinguished the culture of American Jews from other parts of the Diaspora. Sensitive to that impact, Jewish popular artists reworked it with such intensity that the entire culture was energized. Jews helped it to become mulatto.

When Irving Berlin (1888–1989) wrote "Alexander's Ragtime Band" in 1911, he was still such a greenhorn he was unaware that it wasn't in ragtime. Berlin's sensational international hit was a barely syncopated slow march that owes little to ragtime composers like Scott Joplin but does make explicit an indebtedness to a black style that was already pronounced on Tin Pan Alley. In any event, syncopation, or "ragging," may have been congenial to the remote descendants of the subjects of King David, the sweet singer of Israel. Rooted in and routed from the Mediterranean, their music exhibited the "complex rhythms and preference for the minor keys" that, according to one cultural historian, resembled what was considered the Negro sound.³⁶ Yet the Russian-born composer of "Alexander's Ragtime Band" remained oddly unsure of what he was adapting and unable to describe what he had been doing. "You know," Berlin later admitted, "I never did find out what ragtime was."³⁷ His excruciatingly limited formal training, and

therefore his dependency upon an associate to make the notations, sparked the false suspicion that a black composer must have ghosted Berlin's hits. Such rumors paid tribute to his uncanny power to reproduce the frisson of black musicality.

He could satirize Jewish life and paint it black, too. In Berlin's "Sadie Salome Go Home" (1909), Mose strenuously objects to the decision of his girlfriend, Sadie Cohen, to become a strip-tease *artiste* instead of the dramatic actress she once wanted to be. So Yiddish-inflected is the song that Berlin rhymed "glasses" with "dresses," without abandoning a ragtime effect.³⁸ Versatile enough to write for both races (indeed for anyone), Berlin easily slipped the traces of his own ethnicity. He was closely associated with performers like Al Jolson and Fanny Brice, but also with others who were ineligible for a minyan, like Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire. Although a Jewish vaudevillian named Harry Richman introduced "Puttin' on the Ritz" as a "coon song," it was Ella Fitzgerald who made it famous when she advised strutting along "Park Avenue" as a remedy "if you're blue." For another black singer, Ethel Waters, Berlin wrote three songs in the musical *As Thousands Cheer* (1933): "Heat Wave," "Harlem on My Mind," and "Supper Time." The last one is sung by a woman whose husband has just been lynched by a white Southern mob; somehow she must tell her children that their father will not be returning home, ever. Though Berlin was no racial progressive, he insisted on an integrated cast of entertainers for *This Is the Army* (1942), which he organized and staged. The troupe was the only U.S. military unit to be desegregated during the war against the Axis.

Berlin's marriage in 1926 was reported by the *Times* with a headline identifying him as a "Jazz Composer." In fact he hated such music. The previous year, jazz had been linked exclusively with Jews like Berlin in Samson Raphaelson's preface to his play *The Jazz Singer*, which was based on his 1922 short story "Day of Atonement." Jazz is what the cantor's son is supposed to be singing in the film that broke the sound barrier. Blackface was featured, blacks themselves effaced. In following the rise of an American-born and -bred entertainer, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) made a point of excluding the minority that had created such music. "I have used a Jewish youth as my protagonist," Raphaelson explained, "because the Jews are determining the nature and scope of jazz more than any other race—more than the Negroes, from whom they have stolen jazz and given it a new color and meaning." Performers who exemplified "the rhythm of frenzy," like Jolson and Sophie Tucker, had "their roots in the synagogue. And these are expressing in evangelical terms the nature of our chaos today." Raphaelson thus promoted the transvaluation of values: "Jazz is prayer. It is too passionate to be anything else." And the fervor aroused in the nightclubs and dance halls could



The Jazz Singer, 1927. Patriarchal tradition stands between the mother and the son who is going to assert his rights as a product of the New World.

Left to right: Eugenie Besserer, Al Jolson, Warner Oland.

(Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research; WCFTR-2672)

be compared only to the emotions tapped in evangelical churches or in shul on the Day of Atonement.³⁹ Thus Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent* reported on the craze with the following headline: "Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music."⁴⁰ Ford's weekly erred as obtusely as Raphaelson did; jazz was not only Jews. But jazz was *also* Jews, who brought something to what blacks had invented.

A Jolson performance in 1917 had inspired Raphaelson to write "Day of Atonement" and then *The Jazz Singer*. "My God, this isn't a jazz singer," he had murmured. "This is a cantor!"—with his "tortured, imperial call." When the movie opened, the reviewer for the *Forverts* saw no "incongruity in this Jewish boy with his face painted like a Southern Negro singing in the Negro dialect." On the contrary, what was obvious was "the minor key of Jewish music, the wail of the *hazan*, the cry of anguish of a people who had suffered. The son of a line of rabbis well knows how to sing the songs of the most cruelly wronged people in the world's history."⁴¹ Al Jolson (1886–1950) was fluent in Yiddish but at-

tained renown as “the uncrowned king of minstrelsy.” His coronation took place during his Broadway debut in 1910, when he applied burnt cork to belt out “Paris Is a Paradise for Coons.” *The Singing Fool*, which Warner Brothers released a year after *The Jazz Singer*, earned more at the box office than any Hollywood film until *Gone with the Wind* 11 years later. Enough of the magic lingered after World War II to make *The Jolson Story*, starring Larry Parks, the biggest grossing film of 1946.

An assimilationist, Jolson was not assimilated, not quite house-broken. Indeed there was something demonic about him. The performer was unprecedented in his rawness and his lack of restraint. “The fury and the exultation of Jolson is a hundred times higher in voltage than that of [Theodore] Roosevelt,” wrote an early critic of mass culture, amazed at “this galvanic little figure, leaping and shouting,” eagerly responding to demands for his encores, happily returning to the stage. Having just “done more than any other ten men,” Jolson would nevertheless announce, “You ain’t heard nothing yet,” and then do even more. Something about him could not be contained within the thin membranes of Edwardian order, which is why it is fitting that he was so indelibly associated with blackface—even more so than was Fanny Brice or Sophie Tucker. Yet the cultural meaning of applying burnt cork remains somewhat mysterious. Perhaps blackface was a way of conveying emotions too deep to be expressed directly, too melancholy to be confronted in a promised land. Perhaps only when hidden behind a veil could the sadness that is endemic to life be weighed, which may be why critic Gilbert Seldes once observed that Jolson, despite his compulsive buoyancy, “created image after image of longing.”⁴²

By cavorting in blackface, he and other Jewish entertainers may have been taking out citizenship papers. By laying claim to the most enduring manifestation of nineteenth-century popular culture, perhaps these performers were invoking their right to be Americans. The allure of blackface was that, through its artifice, such performers could separate themselves from the Old World. By walking and talking like Negroes, Jolson and the others could transform themselves—and the masses they represented—from outcasts into Americans. Or something more sinister could have been operating. The Jews who inherited the conventions of minstrelsy were also blocking the entrances through which blacks might somehow have come and won a chance to speak for themselves. Their absence gave Jews a chance to ascend, by masquerading as a more despised minority. That was the price of national inclusion, through the avenue of upward mobility that show business provided. Blackface was a way of deepening the humiliation of blacks, because the mimicry that white performers cultivated injected painful reminders of enforced silence and civic inferiority. That other

groups were also mocked in popular culture offered little consolation, because no other people was so victimized. On stage, the imitation was conscious, a projection of blackness so caricatured that these gestures of racial impersonation could be made fun of, as Jolson himself did with Yiddish inflections. If it was a joke, it was a cruel one.

Perhaps no other white composer showed a more intuitive appreciation of black music—especially the blues—than George Gershwin (1898–1937), whose indebtedness was deep. The first time he tried his hand at a major instrumental work, the result was a veritable evocation of the jaunty go-get-'em aura of the Jazz Age: *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). His early idols were jazz pianists James P. Johnson and Luckey Roberts; his good friend was Fats Waller. As the ebullient composer of “I Got Rhythm,” Gershwin did not seem out of place in Harlem’s nightclubs and parties; nor did he have any trouble substituting himself for the leader “shouter” in a black church in South Carolina, while preparing for *Porgy and Bess*. For *George White’s Scandals of 1922*, he inserted a Harlem operetta saturated with spirituals, ragtime, and the newly fashionable blues. So deeply had he turned black by plunging into Charleston’s ghetto that the handful of white characters in *Porgy and Bess* (such as cops and lawyers) utter only a clipped speech that does not unfold into song. In the story of the cripple, Porgy, one critic has speculated, Gershwin discovered a moving “parable about oppression, alienation, corruption and the inviolability of a radical innocence of spirit.” Whatever the psychic wound from which the composer suffered, this “folk opera” was difficult to categorize. The 1935 premiere provoked the music critic for the *New York Herald-Tribune* to call *Porgy and Bess* “a piquant but highly unsavory stirring-up together of Israel [and] Africa.”⁴³

But mixture did not mean equality, which musicians of African ancestry were denied for the most of the twentieth century. The systematic discrimination that penalized them required recourse to “cultural management.” Talented and ambitious blacks could succeed in the music business only with the aid of Jews whose entrepreneurial skills made them indispensable intermediaries with the music publishers, the studio executives, the booking agents, and the operators of theater chains, who were usually *also* Jews. Six companies controlled 95 percent of the recording industry in the early 1940s: Columbia, Victor (later RCA), MGM, Decca, Mercury, and Capitol. In all, executives of Jewish origin were dominant. Until the civil rights victories of the 1960s, black musicians had precious few chances of controlling their own careers or working with black managers, and only Jews were willing to do for such jazz musicians what other whites would not stoop to accepting. These “cultural managers” did not work pro bono. But they too helped make the nation’s arts mulatto.

Norman Granz performed that role for Ella Fitzgerald; so did Bob Weinstock for John Coltrane and Miles Davis. Louis Armstrong submitted his professional career to the business judgment of Joe Glaser, who was allowed to hire and fire members of the band, to decide which gigs to accept or reject, and even to pay the trumpeter whatever the cultural manager deemed appropriate. No witnesses ever came forth to insist that Glaser had taken a vow of poverty. But "Satchmo" is not buried in a potter's field, and his manager could share some credit for ensuring that Armstrong gained the international acclaim and earned the rewards to which his unmatched musical abilities entitled him. Could he have achieved as much fame and fortune without Glaser? Would Armstrong have wanted to make his own business decisions? The answers are not obvious. Other jazz greats, like King Oliver or Jelly Roll Morton, resented the exploitation that cultural management made possible, and they refused to pay the cost to their self-respect. Both of them died destitute and in oblivion.

The complicated relationship of the composer and bandleader Duke Ellington and Irving Mills suggests how the black-Jewish affiliation helped enlarge American culture. Mills had been born in such obscurity that 1894 represents only a guess, and he started out—like Berlin and Gershwin—as a song-plugger, trying to generate hits. In 1919 Mills founded, with his brother Jack, Mills Music, and they hit the jackpot with their second song, "Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Shean." When the blues became fashionable, Mills Music jumped in quickly, hiring such black songwriters as Shelton Brooks ("Darktown Strutters' Ball") and Henry Creamer ("Way Down Yonder in New Orleans"). Beginning in the 1920s (which F. Scott Fitzgerald named the Jazz Age), Irving Mills did for Ellington—and vice versa—what Glaser and Armstrong were doing for each other. Mills certainly cheated his client of his earnings and compounded such sins by giving himself credit as Ellington's collaborator, with both of their names attached to his songs.

Those celebrated ornaments of the nation's culture may have existed, however, because Mills Music was in the business of publishing songs. Stressing how much income could be derived from royalties, Irving Mills pushed his biggest client to *write* songs as well as play them. "Mood Indigo," "Creole Love Call," and "Solitude" were composed to meet the pressure of recording deadlines, and these works were sometimes finished in the studio. Because Ellington's manager was also the head of Mills Music, the incentives were weighted toward the composition of Ellington's own music over anyone else's, and this stimulated Ellington to keep writing and recording. (Because Glaser was not a music publisher, Armstrong had no such incentive.) Irving Mills had enough musical taste to advise Ellington on what kinds of work would become popular, to propose titles and themes, to hire lyricists to provide words, and to compensate for his tendency to over-arrange. The composer whose reputation may now exceed any

other American's was gracious in praising his cultural manager for having "always preserved the dignity of my name . . . and that is the most anybody can do for anybody."⁴⁴

The complications of musical appropriation and the mutual creativity of blacks and Jews can also be briefly traced in the career of Paul Robeson, whose rendition of "Ol' Man River," the show-stopper from Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern's *Show Boat* (1927), the baritone had made famous in London. "Musically it is a complete miracle," Robeson remarked, "the creation of a tone of the Negro spiritual by an alien to the Negro's traditions." He could prove such a claim by "sing[ing] it between two spirituals, and it is not a false note. There is no change in the emotional response of the audience." "Ol' Man River" proved how adroitly Jews could imitate the black sound and style, just as Robeson himself seemed to validate the Jewish faith that accidents of birth bore no relation to the aristocracy of talent. He also enjoyed a special status among Jews because his own emphatic leftism harmonized so smoothly with their political culture. In 1930, the social-democratic *Forverts* paid tribute to Robeson, who personified

the cry of an oppressed people . . . the cry of an insulted and driven race. The cry of pain of a race through the mouth of an artist, through the musical lines of a performer. The cry was directed to the world, the appeal was made to all of mankind, but the first country that must listen should be—America.⁴⁵

He reciprocated nearly two decades later—in Moscow. After World War II, Robeson could not help sensing the noose tightening around Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. When he performed the final concert of his 1949 tour, he said nothing about how Stalinism—to which he adhered, at the price of pariahdom at home—was extinguishing Yiddish literature. But in such an atmosphere, Robeson knew the political implications of Jewish music, and his single encore, he explained, was an expression of faith in the cultural relations between American and Soviet Jewry. After translating into Russian the lyrics of the Jewish partisans' song, "Zog Nit Kaynmal," he sang it in Yiddish:

*Never say that you have reached the very end,
When leaden skies a bitter future may portend.
For sure the hour for which we yearn will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: we survive!*⁴⁶

The effect was electrifying, as Muscovites broke down, sobbed, and rushed the stage to touch and to hail "Pavel Vasilyevich."

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

So recurrent are the shadow and presence of blacks in the formation of American Jewish culture that the universalistic ideals so common to Western Jewry further reinforced a repudiation of whatever smacked of a particularist past. The cosmopolitan ideal, which was hardly unknown elsewhere in the Diaspora, was easily accommodated to a special consciousness of racial injustice and other forms of prejudice and to appeals to brotherhood that would transcend the artifices of birth. The injection of race as an impediment to romance, for example, suggests an enduring theme on Broadway, which is the yearning to overcome social barriers for the sake of love. This has been a topic of special interest to Jews.

One pivotal text is the musical version of a Shakespearean tragedy about star-crossed lovers who are Italian Catholics. Late in 1948, Jerome Robbins (1918–98) fielded a plea from an actor who was preparing to play Romeo and was having trouble getting into the role. When Robbins imagined updating the Elizabethan classic into the present, “that clicked in.” He thought of “Romeo’s passions” as “so extreme, so intense, so adolescent. It’s all new and fresh.” The choreographer telephoned Leonard Bernstein, whose diary early in 1949 noted:

Jerry R. called today with a noble idea: a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in slums at the coincidence of Easter-Passover celebrations. Feelings run high between Jews and Catholics. Former: Capulets, latter: Montagues. Juliet is Jewish. Friar Lawrence is the neighborhood druggist. Street brawls, double death—it all fits.⁴⁷

From conception to opening night took another eight years. The Brooklyn-born Arthur Laurents, who wrote the book, changed the composition of the gangs. The Sharks were switched from Jews to Puerto Ricans, who are swarthy and speak with accents and are exotic strangers, in contrast to their lighter adversaries. But the “PRs” in *West Side Story* (1957) should not be taken for surrogate Jews, who historically tend to leave neighborhoods when trouble comes. The Sharks are different; with no suburbs to escape to, they fight (back). They are overtly resentful and cynical too.

What survived of Robbins’s original conception was the hope that ancient rivalries and prejudices might be spurned for the sake of love. Such a theme has intrigued Jewish dramatists and librettists, who gave it a kick that consciousness of their own status might well have heightened. Nothing else raised more clearly the possibility of the Jews’ absorption into the larger society, or testified more

fully to the belief that the confinement imposed on their ancestors might be superseded. Intermarriage is probably the most sustained theme in cinematic images of Jews as well. Neither on Broadway nor in Hollywood was there concurrence with Bernard Berenson's view of "too vitally opposed" a set of "interests" between gentile and Jew to allow even for "intelligent sympathy." On the contrary, the nuptials uniting them would prove that America is different. The rejection of one's father has meant above all the freedom to choose one's spouse. The ultimate sign of accommodation has been the chance to marry outside the faith. The Hollywood happy ending requires that Jew and non-Jew be joined in matrimony, or at least in love, triumphing over the narrowness of particularism. Movies became so addicted to this theme that, even when Herman Wouk's 1955 best-seller concludes with Marjorie Morgenstern becoming Mrs. Milton Schwartz, her celluloid self (Natalie Wood) in *Marjorie Morningstar* (1958) manages to end up with the only gentile character in the picture.

But what if Jewish life cannot easily be understood in terms of overcoming prejudice and superstition through romantic love? What if Jewish destiny is imagined in nationalist rather than cosmopolitan terms? What if the framework is expanded beyond the Diaspora? Such questions were raised with "a novel of Israel" published in 1958 and with the film adaptation two years later. The answers revealed the ideological and artistic constraints of a vernacular culture.

AN IMAGINARY ISRAEL

The impact of Leon Uris's *Exodus* was extraordinary. For over a year it remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list, including 19 weeks perched at #1, and was a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate selection. For the rest of the century, the hard-cover edition did not go out of print. Although propaganda novels have a few times punctuated the history of mass taste, *Exodus* was unprecedented. It was not intended to arouse indignation over a domestic issue, such as the moral horror of slavery (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), or the ugliness of urban conditions (*The Jungle*), or the plight of migrant farmers (*The Grapes of Wrath*). *Exodus* was published when interest in Israel was slight and when levels of philanthropy and tourism were—by later standards—low. Only a year earlier, Nathan Glazer had mentioned how slight was the effect of the new state on "the inner life of American Jewry." He argued that "the idea that Israel . . . could in any serious way affect Judaism in America" was "illusory."⁴⁸ When ethnicity was suppressed or disdained as a vestige of the immigrant past, no one could have suspected that Jewish identity might be susceptible to the Zionism *Exodus* promoted.

It was therefore astonishing that an American would write a Zionist epic that

would become one of the publishing sensations of the era. The year that it was published, former prime minister David Ben-Gurion asserted: "As a piece of propaganda, it's the greatest thing ever written about Israel."⁴⁹ The popularity of *Exodus* was not just a tribute to the expanding hospitality of the majority culture; success in the bookstores was also evidence that Jewry was now permitted to view its own experience through American mythology, to think of itself not only as virtuous but as courageous, tough, and triumphant as well. Uris pulled off such a feat by outflanking or evading the customary concerns of the ethnic novel—the tension between Old World authority and tradition vs. New World promise and freedom. Ignoring such conventional literary issues as the peril posed to the family, or the crises of belief, he drew heavily on the exploits of Yehuda Arazi, a Mossad agent who operated "illegal" ships in the Mediterranean under the British Mandate and had drawn considerable press attention to the plight of Jewish refugees.

Uris thus transposed to the Middle East the adventure formulae that middle-brow American readers already expected. In making Jewish characters into heroes adept with guns, he knew how to keep the action flowing. One critic therefore was obliged to lodge a protest against the "stereotype-inversion" of *Exodus*, which "merely substitutes falsification for falsification, sentimentality for sentimentality." Uris's novel represented "a disguised form of assimilation, the attempt of certain Jews to be accepted by the bourgeois, philistine gentile community on the grounds that, though they are not Christians, they are even more bourgeois and philistine." This interpretation is mistaken. *Exodus* tapped a subterranean Jewish nationalism when the path toward full assimilation seemed unobstructed, and represented a detour for countless readers. "I have received thousands of letters in the last quarter of a century telling me that *Exodus* has substantially changed their lives," Uris noted, "particularly in regard to young people finding pride in their Jewishness. Older people find similar pride in the portrait of fighting Jews in contrast to the classical characterization as weak-spined, brilliant intellects and businessmen." One sociologist found it "virtually impossible" after the 1950s to visit a home of Reform Jews without seeing a copy of *Exodus*.⁵⁰ It undoubtedly awakened pride in the fulfillment of a dream that was democratic and humane as well as nationalist.

The romance between a Sabra and a gentile nurse from Indiana (the only important American character in the novel) was in the foreground of this saga of the genesis of Israel. The love story seemed to reiterate the staples of earlier popular works, in imagining how primordial hatreds might be abolished. But *Exodus* shattered that convention when the nurse, the incarnation of the majority culture, decides to join the Jewish independence fighters. That choice

broke with the assimilationist impulses that previous American Jewish fiction had registered. Kitty Fremont, who is inducted or seduced into the turmoil of Middle Eastern politics and the Zionist cause, is a surrogate for American readers. She absorbs the shocks that wrench her out of a position of innocence and is led to understand the fundamental justice of Jewish claims for survival. As a woman, she comes to accept the masculine validation of the instruments of violence and realizes that words need not be the Jews' only weapon.

Producer-director Otto Preminger adapted the forthrightly Zionist novel into a film that fully shares that political perspective. *Exodus* therefore spikes the most durable theme in U.S. films (and fiction and plays) about Jews, which is their impulse toward intermarriage. At the center of *Exodus* is a short-circuited love affair between Ari and Kitty. Intermarriage has not been an especially pressing issue among Israelis, but it bedevils the assumption that minority survival meshes with the ideals of an open society like America. How *Exodus* resolved this dilemma became a breakthrough.

Overlooking the Jezreel Valley, Kitty proclaims that "all these differences between people are made up. People are the same, no matter what they're called." But Ari disagrees: "Don't ever believe it. People are different. They have a *right* to be different. They *like* to be different. It's no good pretending differences don't exist. They do. They have to be recognized and respected." Yet Kitty nourishes the hope that, if Ari can briefly forget that he is a Jew, she will no longer feel so much a Presbyterian. "There *are* no differences," she whispers as they kiss. She later realizes, however, that he is right and thus *isn't* Mr. Right: "We *are* different." After meeting his parents at Yad El, she sees something in "the way they looked at me, the way your sister talked to me." Ari meets her halfway: "I'd feel the same way in Indiana."

But what, after all, *is* so different about Ari, especially when the thrust of *Exodus* is to equate Zionism with Americanism? Earlier films and novels exalting intermarriage had minimized the contrast between Jew and gentile in the United States. When Ari tells Kitty "I'm a Jew," the meaning of that identity, however, is not elaborated. Ari's secular Jewishness seems limited, as though he were really a Canaanite, a man of the land more than a Jew of history. Yet both the film and the novel on which it was based helped to legitimate pluralism and to honor diversity. *Exodus* contributed mightily to the visibility of Israel on the American Jewish communal agenda and helped many of Uris's and Preminger's coreligionists to live vicariously in Israel, without the inconvenience of actually having to move there and have such heroes as neighbors. Indeed, one might argue that, by strengthening Jewish feelings and enhancing ethnic pride in America, *Exodus* helped to perpetuate the Diaspora.

Especially in the decade that began in the year of the film's release, a shift in American public culture could be detected. The respect paid to the ideal of diversity permitted not only an empathy with Jewish nationalism but also the right to champion the interests of Israel vigorously. Especially after the Six Day War of 1967, support for Israel became the *sine qua non* of Jewish communal affairs and leadership, so that an agnostic or even an atheist became more acceptable as an attribute of, say, a synagogue president than an anti-Zionist. Yet even the enormous popularity of films like *Exodus* among American Jews probably did little to narrow the cultural gap between them and the Jews of Israel. (The demographic gap has been rapidly shrinking, from 10:1 right after World War II to 3:2 in 1990.) Preminger's film had failed to depict state-making as a response not only to a legacy of hate but also as the fulfillment of a people's emerging sense of its own sovereignty. Zionism was designed not only as an antidote to antisemitism but as a realization of Jewish culture and destiny. The birth of *that* nation the film scarcely showed.

ADAPTATIONS

What Hollywood did more effectively was to reinforce what America itself promised, which was a happy ending. The tragic choices presented in the Middle East could be avoided; the grim closures characteristic of the Old World could be eluded. At the funeral rites for Jolson at Temple Israel in Los Angeles, comedian George Jessel eulogized him for "a gaiety that was militant, uninhibited and unafraid. [Jolson] told the world that the Jew in America did not have to sing in sorrow," and he should be credited for "the happiest portrait that can be painted about an American of the Jewish faith." His coreligionists could easily summon sentiments of gratitude, because America was supposed to put Jewish history out of its misery. When Sigmund Freud doubted that happiness was integral to "the plan of 'Creation,'" ⁵¹ this "godless Jew" had the weight of tradition behind him. Such stoicism might be contrasted with the New World, where Jews too felt entitled to stroll "On the Sunny Side of the Street" (lyrics by Dorothy Fields, the daughter of vaudevillian Lew Fields).

In measuring the distance from an Old World patrimony, in revealing how American Jews have adapted it, and in assessing the affiliations between high and popular culture, one index might be what Barbra Streisand did to and with Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" (1962). *Yentl* (1983) can serve as a parable of individual ambition, of ethnic assurance, and of the female yearning for emancipation. Just as the eponymous protagonist defies the rigidity of gender roles and denies that her cherished texts prohibit study for females like her-

self, Streisand challenged the ideal of fidelity to the text itself: her Yentl need not be only what Singer meant her to be. The cinema differs enough from books to honor its own aesthetic and historical imperatives.

In such differences might be noted not only a clash between the Old World and the New, or between the seriousness of the literary vocation and the prerogatives of box-office stardom. How a work of fiction was transformed into *Yentl* is an instance of Jewish culture manifesting itself. That transformation is exemplary because of the disorder—of something out of joint—that Singer's story itself recounts. Like any unsettling story or folktale, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" entails transgression; its protagonist is so fine a student that her father liked to say to her: "Yentl—you have the soul of a man." "So why was I born a woman?" "Even Heaven makes mistakes." She is portrayed in masculine terms, with her flat chest, her narrow hips, and her upper lip even betraying "a slight down."⁵² This "yeshiva boy" is entangled in a web of duplicity so that she can satisfy an illicit passion for knowledge, and, to bring that story to the screen, Streisand risked charges of betrayal to Singer's original tale—and even to the distinctive ambience from which it had sprung. Indeed, the dangers of transgression against the authority of the Judaic past seem unavoidable in a culture that has propelled itself so far from the austerity of talmudic study. The refusal to be confined—either by the religious norms a deceitful Yentl violates or by the genre in which her fate was first imagined—is one way of summarizing the individualism and experimentalism of the national ethos that so affected Jewish immigrants and their descendants.

The conclusion that Singer gave his tale is suffused with entrapment and estrangement. At Avigdor's suggestion, Hadass learns, from a messenger bearing papers, of her divorce from Anshel, who has vanished. Now free to marry her, Avigdor divorces his own wife, Peshe, to marry Hadass, igniting much gossip among the townspeople. When a son is born, "those assembled at the circumcision could scarcely believe their ears when they heard the father name his son Anshel."⁵³ Though "he" is in effect reborn, the transvestite herself must wander. She needs to escape detection, but she cannot get rid of her disguise (and become merely Yentl) because she remains desperate to continue her talmudic studies. Singer's ending is so bleak as to foreclose any attractive options.

"Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" is set in a shtetl called Pechev, and *Yentl* was made in Hollywood, where heroines wriggle out of traps. Streisand's Yentl crosses an ocean in an effort to separate past from present, and on the ship is back to wearing female attire. She is herself again. But "was going to America Miss Streisand's idea of a happy ending for *Yentl*?" Singer asked. Why couldn't the protagonist have found numerous other yeshivas in Lithuania or in Poland that would

have harbored "Anshel"? He inquired further: "What would Yentl have done in America? Worked in a sweatshop twelve hours a day when there was no time for learning? Would she try to marry a salesman in New York, move to the Bronx or Brooklyn and rent an apartment with an ice box and dumbwaiter?"⁵⁴ For an impoverished talmudist of any gender, he suggested, the United States was no promised land.

But because movies must at least *move* their characters forward (or backward), a logic to Yentl's trajectory can be traced: from a shtetl to a larger but still obscure town, then to Lublin, and finally across the Atlantic to another continent, where at its other end a new industry would master the techniques of retelling such stories. She would have immigrated just before the moguls, who had themselves come from Eastern Europe, were elevating their medium from "such non-literary amusements as travelogue and natural-history lectures, live musical entertainment, circus performances, [and] vaudeville acts," film historian Joel Rosenberg pointed out, and were adapting literary and dramatic works to privilege narrative.⁵⁵ Nor should Streisand's ending be read as unambiguously happy. By revealing herself to Avigdor, she has, after all, lost him. Her study partner is a conformist unwilling to challenge the rigidities of gender ("This is crazy: I'm arguing with a woman"), nor can he fathom why Yentl would still need to pore over the Talmud with the other alpha males of Jewish religious culture (though he offers her a furtive syllabus). Avigdor cannot foresee that he (or halakhah) might change, nor does he consider booking passage to America as well. Yet what better place to find individual fulfillment, "to see myself, to free myself, to be myself"? The choice of the United States was neither eccentric nor senseless for a woman who seeks a wider sphere for her own piety than what the Old Country appears to offer. It was, after all, where Singer himself found refuge as well.

What is exceptionally rare about *Yentl*, however, was its portrait of an internally complete Judaic cultural and religious life. So singular an ambience did not need to define itself under the pressure of a host society. That nowhere is the word "Jew" mentioned is a sign of the classiness of *Yentl*, which is so thoroughly Jewish in its subject matter and spirit that it barely hints at an external world that serves as a source of fear or of allure. In its indifference to the larger society, Streisand's film was thus something of a breakthrough in Hollywood. Another way of suggesting the singularity of *Yentl* is to note the utter absence of the theme of intermarriage. Several other films in which she starred (from *The Way We Were* to *A Star Is Born* to *The Prince of Tides*) highlight such relationships. In *Yentl* the impediments to true romance are not barriers between Jew and gentile but, rather, the tragicomic dilemma that both Avigdor and Hadass happen to

"love" a study partner and a groom who is praised for having no secrets to hide. Such a triangle is entirely internal to the community.

Yet the very presence of *Yentl* implicitly defies the binarism so integral to Judaism, which divides sacred from profane, the Sabbath from the rest of the week, kosher from unfit, and—ineluctably—Jew from gentile. *Yentl* is ensnared in the mystery of what a category is and what function it serves, and as Anshel she challenges the viability of the distinctions upon which the Judaic system was founded. When Anshel exposes herself to Avigdor and becomes *Yentl*, she urges him to accept who she is. "There's no book with this in it," she pleads. Though no single artifact of the American Jewish imagination can be taken for an archetype, her monosyllabic plea is a credo, a declaration of independence. *Yentl* asks not to be joined at the hip with *Short Friday and Other Stories*, and demands that a film not be judged only by its deviations from a text. Indeed, despite the intense bookishness of the East European Jewish cultures Streisand celebrates, her movie aptly portrays the fate of *Yentl*, who doubts that the future is foreclosed in the book of life. The belief that history itself is something still to be written constitutes a supremely American contribution to Jewish culture.

THE NOVEL AS HISTORY

Although *Yentl* announces that novelties should not be sought only in novels and short stories, literature itself has been among the supreme expressions of American Jewish culture. The work of Singer, Saul Bellow, and Joseph Brodsky was recognized in Stockholm with Nobel Prizes; another American-based Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel, won a Nobel Peace Prize as well. Because all of them were born abroad (in Poland, Canada, the Soviet Union, and Romania, respectively), they embody the cosmopolitanism (or "extraterritoriality") that is characteristic of modern Jewish expression. Singer wrote in Yiddish, Brodsky wrote at first in Russian, and Wiesel has continued to write in French. No literary critic could discern in the tales and poems of these luminaries any common themes, preoccupations, or styles; on the spectrum of Jewish concerns and knowledge, these laureates diverged as well. Such variousness suggests that the literature of Jews in the United States resists easy summation.

Nevertheless, some generalizations can be offered in the form of a conclusion to this account of American Jewish culture. It was tilted noticeably to the left. That is why novelists of Jewish origin have been almost painfully aware of the price that material success has exacted in a land of opportunity. In novels ranging from Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* to Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934), from Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941) to the Canadian

Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1957), and down to Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold* (1979) and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), the American dream of upward mobility is shown to be tarnished with disastrous moral and social consequences. The bigger the bank account, or the longer the résumé, or the more impressive the success, the more doomed the soul, the more poignant the pursuit of loneliness. Plays like Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* (1937) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Price* (1968) raise doubts about that dream as well. Cahan's protagonist, a wealthy cloak-manufacturer, can at least think back to the Old World of his pious childhood, to the austere intellectual standards (but limited economic horizons) of Judaic learning. Other characters have no such baseline against which to weigh their disquietude and unhappiness. But such literature represents a gesture of resistance, from within Jewish letters, to the celebratory individualism that has permeated American society.

A moralistic strain also pulsates through much of the fiction of American Jews, who have not only exhibited an interest in the waywardness of human conduct but also expressed the hope of correcting it. In Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), the military psychiatrist knows that something is terribly wrong with protagonist John Yossarian (an Assyrian-American who was Jewish in the original draft of the novel), because: "You don't like bigots, bullies, snobs or hypocrites. . . . You're antagonistic to the idea of being exploited, degraded, humiliated or deceived."⁵⁶ The senseless, endless cruelty of human existence is what faces the anonymous newspaper columnist, dispensing advice to the lovelorn, in West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), for which a classic remedy is proposed at the end of Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants* (1971): "mercy." The word is recorded 100 times on the page—in addition to the Yiddish *hab rachmones*. In *The Assistant* (1957), Malamud's brooding portrayal of an embattled grocer was inspired by memories of his own father. Here the remedy offered is stoic duty, of submission to social decay without yielding a sense of integrity.

The novelist's ethics of *menschlichkeit* do not derive explicitly from Judaism; there is nothing particularistic about the fortitude of the grocer. Indeed all human beings are Jews, Malamud believed, because our species is destined to suffer. Bellow's Arthur Sammler, a Holocaust survivor, "was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract."⁵⁷ The desire to reduce injustice could have political ramifications, driving Cahan to democratic socialism, Henry Roth to communism, and other writers—from Samuel Ornitz, Michael Gold, and Daniel Fuchs to Allen Ginsberg and Grace Paley—to various versions of leftist dissidence and liberalism. Neither neutrality

nor moral indifference is a hallmark of American Jewish fiction. But for most of the twentieth century, the ethical criticism of life upon which Jewish writers drew rarely stemmed directly from Judaism itself.

Only recently have the literary possibilities of religion been explored, and a heritage of faith may now be the only way of sustaining the American Jewish novel in any serious way. Because it is closing time for ethnicity and for the prospects of a viable secular identity, writers who have emerged from the varieties of orthodoxy or who are haunted by spiritual dilemmas may be the only plausible successors to the Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners of a previous generation. Only the observant—or those who were once observant—constitute the pool of talent from which the keenest observers of the Jewish experience might be drawn. Chaim Potok and Cynthia Ozick pioneered the fiction of faith. But the promise of the former, shown in *The Chosen* (1967) and *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), has not been realized. The latter is so powerful as an essayist and polemicist that critical appreciation of fiction such as *Trust* (1966) and *The Pagan Rabbi* (1971) may have been stymied. The future of American Jewish fiction may belong to younger writers like Rebecca Goldstein, Allegra Goodman, and Nathan Englander, who have confronted the intricacies of Judaism in a way that no earlier generation could match. Whether mysticism or ritual observance can be effectively cultivated as subjects of sophisticated fiction, and whether these and other younger writers can exercise the impact that earlier Jewish authors enjoyed, remains uncertain. But it is difficult to envision any other sensibility—besides religion—that might stimulate the imagination of the Jewish novelist in America.

For most of the twentieth century, however, the energies of such art were directed elsewhere and resembled the national yearning for autonomy. Indeed, a formidable list of major works could be compiled that have limned the struggles of sons and daughters for emancipation. Such books have been declarations of independence—from the intense pressure of the nuclear family, from the starched tyranny of patriarchy, from the suffocating ambitions of mothers, from the rigidities of religious tradition, and from the demands of duty, collective destiny, Jewish history itself. The ease with which the national ethos of liberation was internalized is recorded in Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*, when Sara Smolinsky defiantly tells her authoritarian father: "I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country. I'm American!"⁵⁸ She is hardly unique. "I don't care for nobody," Jake declares in *Hester Street* (1975), director Joan Micklin Silver's cinematic adaptation of Cahan's *Yekl*. With an every-man-for-himself insouciance, Jake proclaims: "I'm an American fella."

Yet individualism does not fit snugly with *k'lal yisrael*, an ideal that subordi-

nates the promotion of self-interest to communal claims. Radical freedom does not mesh smoothly with historical Judaism, which works out a covenant between a deity and a people. Nor is the goal of self-satisfaction consistent with acceptance of the yoke of the Torah. But the yearning to breathe free animates *Call It Sleep* and *Catch-22* as well as Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965), Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Singer's *Enemies, a Love Story* (1972), and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973). Written by Jews, these novels all explore the possibilities of casting off restraints, of achieving personal independence, of becoming an American Adam (or Eve) unbounded by the strictures of the past and the weight of institutions. Such books transcend whatever barrier might have distinguished the particular from the national, or what is Jewish from what is American. These works therefore testify to what is intriguing, inspiring, and problematic about the culture that a tiny but creative minority has forged—without feeling itself to be in exile.

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