

# *Jewish Culture*

**in AMERICA**

*Weapon for Jewish  
Survival and Progress*

*by*

**NATHAN AUSUBEL**

20 CENTS

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*Weapon for Jewish Survival and Progress*

By **NATHAN AUSUBEL**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Ausubel is the author of *The Story of Yiddish Literature* (published serially by the *Morning Freiheit*) and *Superman: the Life of Frederick the Great*. He has compiled and edited an anthology of Jewish folklore for publication this year. He has translated Sholem Asch's *Mother* and has edited several volumes of the annual *Voices of History*. He was for some years a contributing editor of *New Masses*.

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# Jewish Culture in America

By NATHAN AUSUBEL

We Jews are called upon today to play a double role in the tragedy of our time: it is as Jews as well as Americans. By what acrobatic rationalizations can we avoid recognizing that we have that dual identity? Even if we wish to forget it the anti-Semites are sure to remind us of it. Of late the moral climate in our country has become hideous and even alarming. Jew-baiting, always the smoke-screen of reaction, is becoming more brazen and aggressive from day to day. Is that why the sleep of so many Jews has become troubled? Out of the bitter affliction of their people they have learned to recognize the leprous face of fascism even if it modishly tries to drape itself in unsullied democratic garments.

Today, on the broad stage of the world, is being enacted the drama of life and death for mankind. The two principal protagonists are reaction and social progress. It is the lust for profits pitted against human freedom—the atom bomb against civilization.

Reaction does not sleep; it has been busily mobilizing its intellectual lackeys, all its molders of public opinion. Can we afford to underestimate its alertness and resourcefulness? It has discovered, for instance, that like the atom bomb, bacterial warfare, and jet-propelled rockets, culture

too can serve as a weapon and that perversion of its spirit and functions can make it just as deadly. For the seductive price of safety in conformity and for the security of their incomes many scholars, teachers, artists and writers have allowed themselves to be mobilized to sound the knuckle-bone castanets and crash the brazen cymbals for the Dance of Death. Instead of serving as the teachers of mankind they are now planning to act as its grave-diggers.

Progressive cultural workers must not allow themselves to be intimidated into silence because so many of the glittering names, so many of the intellectual hirelings are now chanting the fascistic "Ja!" to the man-devouring Moloch of Wall Street. Fortunately, culture has exalted traditions. It is not a harlot ready to pander to the criminal vices of reaction for a price. Thousands of honest intellectuals in all cultural pursuits today remain loyal to it and to the belief in the free advance of mankind. We too, progressive Jewish cultural workers, must be in that goodly company. It is our only validity in reason, our only moral justification.

### **What Is Jewish Culture?**

But what is Jewish culture? Unfortunately the subject has been wrapped in a fog of confusion and misconception. The better to understand its character, and particularly of progressive Jewish culture, it will serve us well if we first define our conception of who the Jews are. Do they represent a race? A religion? A nation?

The progressive individual with a scientific viewpoint cannot regard the Jews as a race because, ethnologically speaking, there is no such thing as a pure race and the Jews too are a co-mingling of a variety of known as well as unknown ethnic strains. Nor can we consider Jews as

belonging to a religious confraternity because probably just as many Jews are unbelievers as are believers. Lastly, no one can call the Jews a nation because for almost two thousand years they have been scattered over the earth, living as distinctive groups among the nations, yet differing widely from one another and lacking the homogeneity of a nation. What astonishingly varying culture-patterns do we find among the Jews of the world! The American-born *Jewish* worker in Detroit, the *Jewish* cave-dweller in Tripoli, the *Jewish* Falasha hunter in Abyssinia, and the *Jewish* farmer in Birobidjan—all Jews, and yet so different! We, progressive people, hold to the scientific view of the social anthropologist with regard to race and culture. We consider the Jews a people composed of a constellation of ethnic culture groups having much in common with one another yet showing marked cultural variations on account of different historical experiences and cultural fusions that have taken place in the various countries where they have lived ever since the Dispersion.

We are primarily concerned with the Jews of America, and especially with those Jews whose language is English. Therefore, we will be putting matters in their proper perspective if we examine several of the major concepts of Jewish culture as they occur among large sections of our people.

What is the concept of the American religious Jew? To him Jewish culture is theocratic. It all began in Biblical times when Jews lived in Palestine. The Jewish state was then a priest-state, a theocracy in which every aspect of life, including the secular, was centered in religion or supervised by it. To the religious Jew then the corpus of Jewish culture is contained almost exclusively in his sacred literature: in the Bible, Talmud, the Midrash, and many related works of a later date that are of a liturgical, devo-

tional and exegetical (interpretive) nature. Anything outside of that, i.e. the secular, they usually deem not to be of fundamental worth, or they consider it the product of alien cultural influences.

Then, of course, there is the liberal, and sometimes "radical," Jew with a nationalist philosophy. While he may not be actually very religious, he has a sentimental, nationalistic attitude toward Judaism because to him it represents the Jewish past. For that reason, religious ceremonies, customs and rites are, in his estimation, very valuable because they represent the unchanging symbols of Jewish identity and thus act as the cement of solidarity holding the many segments of the Jewish people together. And he teaches his children to take pride in Israel's martyrs, heroes and sages, and helps weave an aura of "The Chosen People" glamor about them. Alike with the religious Jew, the not-so-religious nationalist works for the restoration of Palestine as a Jewish state in which he expects his people to coalesce into a nation. With that end in mind, the modern Hebrew language and its literature take an ascending place in his scheme of cultural values.

Both of these concepts, and variations of them, possess one very convenient virtue—they are delimiting by definition, and that of course makes matters so much simpler, but arbitrary. For the main part, both of them are anchored culturally in the past. Like Lot's wife they are constantly looking back and are, therefore, facing the same danger of petrification. However, ever since the end of World War I there has been emerging in the relatively small Palestine *Yishuv* (community) a rich and distinctive culture in Hebrew, based on a secular and enlightened conception of Jewish community life. It is a force that not only radiates outward in its influence upon all Jewish communities in the world, but it is profoundly altering

the character of the previously backward civilization of the Arab Near and Middle East.

While both Zionists and religious Jews have our fraternal wishes, and while we share with them many of our common cultural treasures, we progressives cannot go along with them in quite a few things. Our philosophy of Jewish life and culture differs widely from theirs. We are anchored not in the past but in the present. Unlike them we are not straining wistfully to recapture the magic of a Golden Age that has remained a nostalgic legend among many Jews. Rather, we are determined to create a new and modern Golden Age of Jewish culture in the most advanced spirit of our time. Certainly there is much in the Jewish past, created by the genius of the Jewish people, that is wonderful and timeless, that has helped mankind to advance toward the light through the many centuries. It is precisely these progressive elements that we want to extract from the past, but critically and selectively and not indiscriminately. We reject the mystical and the nationalistic, the sectarian and the parochial, the isolating and the stagnant.

However, we must remain on guard against being too unimaginatively mechanical and facile in dismissing as unprogressive certain aspects of the Jewish cultural heritage. Every cultural achievement must be studied in the frame of reference of the historic period that gave rise to it and of the contemporary stage in the development of society. To exclude, for instance, the exalted social ethics of the Prophets, those embattled tribunes of the oppressed Jewish masses in Bible times, because they were couched in religious terms is to commit a narrow and unpardonable blunder in perspective. Although the main emphasis of Jewish culture in the past has been religious on account of its theocratic origins, underneath it all, like a subter-



anean stream, flowed swiftly and strongly the affirmatively secular, the humane, the rational, and the will to the good and just life for all men.

It was Thomas Huxley who remarked:

The Bible has been the Magna Carta for the poor and the oppressed; down to modern times no state has had a constitution in which the interests of the people are so largely taken into account . . . nowhere is the fundamental truth, that the welfare of the state in the long run depends on the welfare of the citizen, so strongly laid down.

## A Progressive Jewish Heritage

What are some of the progressive features of our ancient Jewish cultural heritage—features that were historically unprecedented in their day and are still universal in their applicability?

1. The conception of life as holy and inviolate, as an affirmative perfectible goal toward which mankind can work—work for a humane and just society on an ethical, rational pattern.

*The world rests on three things: justice, truth and peace. (Simeon ben Gamaliel in the Talmud)*

*The Torah, by beginning with the book of the generations of man, laid down the great rule for the application of the Law: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." (Simeon ben Azzai in the Talmud)*

2. The first attempt in history at a democracy with a social philosophy, one in which, theoretically and juridically at least, the poor, the landless peasants, the workers, the widows and the orphans, and the stranger in the land, were the special concern and the wards of the Jewish state.

*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity: for the land is Mine. (Leviticus 25:23)*

*And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee, then thou shalt relieve him; yea though he be a stranger. . . . (Leviticus 25:35)*

*. . . seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)*

*It is not written "the poor man" but "thy brother" to show that both of them are equal. (The Talmud)*

3. The only humane attitude toward the slave among all the peoples of antiquity, for Jews always remembered that they had eaten once the bread of affliction as slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.

*And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 15:15)*

*And if thy brother be waxen poor with thee and sell himself unto thee, thou shalt not make him to serve as a bondservant. (Leviticus 25:39)*

*Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee. (Deuteronomy 24:15)*

*And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. (Leviticus 25:10)*

4. The conception of the equality and brotherhood of man, and of its corollaries—social justice and universal peace.

*But let justice well up as water, and righteousness as a mighty stream. (Isaiah 5:24)*

*But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the land. . . . And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:4-6)*

*And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:2-4)*

5. The epoch-making view of the dignity of labor and of respect for the worker, so that even the great Talmudic sages and teachers among the Jews worked at manual trades. Rabbi Hillel, who taught the doctrine of love and brotherhood a hundred years before Christ, was a wood-chopper; Rabbi Hanina was a shoemaker; Rabbi Yohanan a maker of sandals; Rabbi Yose ben Halafta a tanner; Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah a charcoal burner, and Rabbi Shammai a land-surveyor.

*Great is the dignity of labor; it honors man. . . . He who teaches his son no trade is as if he taught him to steal. . . . It is well to add a trade to your studies; you will then be free from sin. . . . He who lives by the work of his hands is worthier than he who indulges in idle piety. . . . Flay a carcass in the market-place, receive your wage, and do not say: "I am a priest, I am a great man—this work is beneath my dignity." (From the Talmud)*

6. The high place of the woman, and consequently of family life maintained almost uniformly among Jews at times when other peoples were treating their women as mere chattels and breeding machines.

*God's presence dwells in a pure and loving home. . . .*

*A man must not make a woman weep, for God counts her tears. . . . He loves her as himself, but honors her more than himself. . . . When his wife dies, a man's world is darkened, his step is slow, his mind is heavy; she dies in him, he in her. (From the Talmud)*

*Strength and honor are her clothing. . . . She opened her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. (Proverbs 31:25-28)*

Also we must not overlook the extraordinary humanist movement among Jews four hundred years before the Christian humanists Erasmus and Reuchlin, which made them the first cultured people in Europe. During the Middle Ages they played the leading role in the revival of learning and in the development of science.

Let us Jews stand abashed before the fact that there have been enlightened Gentile intellectuals who have had greater insight into the progressive features of Jewish culture and its contributions to civilization than most of our own Jewish intellectuals today. It was knowledge of Jewish culture that made the eminent English historian Lecky write in his book, *The Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*:

While those around them were groveling in the darkness of besotted ignorance; while juggling miracles and lying relics were the themes on which all Europe was expatiating; while the intellect of Christendom, enthralled by countless superstitions, had sunk into a deadly torpor in which all love of enquiry and all search for truth were abandoned, the Jews were still pursuing the path of knowledge, amassing learning and stimulating progress with the same unflinching constancy that they manifested in their faith. They were the most skilful physicians, the ablest financiers, and among the most profound philosophers; while they were only second to

the Moors in the cultivation of natural science. They were also the chief interpreters to Western Europe of Arab learning.

Whatever has proven worthwhile, according to progressive standards, in Jewish civilization of the past we must carry over into the continuing stream of Jewish cultural activity. No, to us Jewish culture is not an ancestral graveyard full of the whitened bones of a dead and hallowed past. It is part of the living tissue of Jewish existence which we have inherited from our grandmothers together with the old brass candlesticks and spice mortars. We must build it around the urgent needs of the Jewish people and of all society today.

Progressive Jewish culture consists of all those aspects of the collective Jewish life which express the positive, forward-looking aspirations of the Jewish people. It should serve as a weapon to help it in the struggle to achieve for itself the full rights and opportunities which should be accorded all Americans. Jewish culture should be the weapon with which to fight Jew-baiting, discrimination, the exploitation of the Jewish toiling masses, and the social isolation which aims to make of Jews second-class citizens. Moreover, it should demonstrate to the Jewish people with the impact of shattering truth that by itself it can accomplish little, but in moral and physical alliance with all progressive elements, with all national minority groups, with the Negro people, with organized labor—it can achieve a greater measure of security and well-being.

## **Resistance to Jewish Culture**

Let us now attempt to analyze the various types of resistance, both conscious and unconscious, that American intellectual Jews have hitherto displayed toward Jewish

culture. Only by identifying and understanding these resistances will we be enabled to overcome them in ourselves and in others.

We will refer only briefly to the bourgeois assimilationist chameleon. He is the spineless opportunist whose principal obsession in life is to relieve himself as much as possible of the encumbering heavy baggage of his Jewishness. In a world where it is highly inconvenient to be born a Jew, where he cannot endure the finger of social scorn pointed at him, he tries hard to transform himself into his snobbish conception of an Anglo-Saxon Gentile. This philistine is sometimes even capable of spreading anti-Semitic slanders against his own people because he finds it a lot more pleasant to hunt with the hounds than to run with the hares. While he is to be met with quite frequently in certain fashionable intellectual and artistic circles, this type of Jew is hardly deserving of our attention except to put us on guard against him for he is usually our enemy and throws in his Judas-lot with the reactionaries.

But we are definitely concerned with Jewish assimilationists of an entirely different class. They are progressive individuals with intelligence, character and conviction. If in the past they have chosen to ignore Jewish culture as though it were non-existent, it has been largely from ignorance and from "principle." But this opposition from so-called "principle" has stemmed directly from ignorance. And there can be nothing more grotesque than principles based on ignorance.

Let us for a moment examine this "principle." These progressives are opposed to Jewish culture because, so they say, they consider it to be nationalist-religious culture. Inasmuch as they themselves are non-religious and non-nationalist they maintain that their objection to it is wholly consistent with their internationalist and scientific

scruples. If you will ask them they will tell you that Jewish culture is something dead and static and moldy with the cosmic dust of three thousand years. However, if you will press them a bit they will readily admit that their knowledge about Jewish culture is but a surface impression—whether gained from a slight but unhappy contact with it in Hebrew or Sunday school in their childhood, or from observing those who are occupied with it, or from a casual inspection of works of Judaica.

Although their impressions are false and misleading in more than one way, who can blame these progressives? The American Jewish intellectual notices with alarm that, for the most part, those busy with Jewish culture are the religionists and the nationalists. This should be both a reproach and a challenge to progressive writers, scholars and artists that, by default, they have left the field of Jewish culture to be the almost exclusive preserve of the bourgeois religionist and the nationalist. And it is only natural that they should be interpreting Jewish history and culture their own way.

American Jewish intellectuals who ponder with gloom on the poverty of contemporary Jewish culture in English can study with profit to themselves the progressive trend of Jewish culture that has been created in the United States in Yiddish. Ever since the early 1880's, with the arrival of the first mass waves of immigrants from Russia and Poland, such a progressive tradition has taken deep root in the life of the Yiddish-speaking masses. A distinguished body of literature in Yiddish, beginning with the working-class poets, Edelstadt, Bovshover, Wintchevsky and Rosenfeld, is in existence to prove this. The only barrier between English and Yiddish speaking Jews is that of language; it can and must be surmounted by talented and discriminating translators who recognize the enor-

mous social significance of their task. Upon them devolves the duty of constructing a bridge between the two language divisions of American Jewish culture. Jewish culture in Yiddish is a vital seminal stream which is capable of stimulating life and movement in the hitherto unfertile field of progressive Jewish culture in English. Each can enrich and fructify the other in the process of working side by side. There must be no artificial separation between them for both are equally the recorders and interpreters of Jewish life in America.

There is still another reason for this allergy to Jewish culture. Ever since the French Revolution recognized the principle of the natural equality of man, including Jews, there has been evident on the part of enlightened Jews an inclination to turn their backs on the entire Jewish cultural past, connected as it is, by the power of unpleasant association, with a stagnant ghetto-life. It has been their idea, a very persuasive one superficially, that by becoming thoroughly assimilated into the bloodstream of general Western culture they would be released at last from their isolation as Jews in a hostile world, would thus remove from themselves the yellow circle stigma belonging to their pariah people.

How often have we heard the remonstrance: "What do I know about Jewish culture? All my life I've been busy with American culture. . . . I'm an American!" This rationalization represents only half a truth, for this Jew is trying to forget that, besides being an American, he is also a Jew. Hard as he may try, it is not possible for him to escape the impact of his ethnic group culture. Culture is not distinguished by identifiable labels only. There are a thousand subtle threads, visible as well as invisible, that connect even the most assimilated Jew with his people. There are ethical values and social attitudes, folkways



and folkwisdom, a Jewish folksong sung by grandmother, a humorous anecdote told by father, a Jewish legend vividly remembered from childhood—all these are derived from the collective life of a people and become a part of the living fabric of its culture-pattern.

The following is the testimony of a great writer who was also an honest man:

In my early youth I read—I have forgotten where—the words of an ancient Jewish sage, Hillel. . . . “If you are not for yourself, who will be for you? If you are for yourself alone, what are you?” The inner meaning of these words impressed me with their profound wisdom, and I interpreted them for myself in the following manner: I must actively make of myself that my life should be better, and I must not impose the care of myself on other people’s shoulders; but if I am going to take care of myself alone, of nothing but my own personal life, it will be useless, ugly, meaningless. This thought ate its way deep into my soul; and I say now with conviction: “Hillel’s wisdom served as a strong staff on my road, which was neither easy nor even.” I believe that Jewish wisdom is more all human and universal than any other; and this not only because of its immemorial age, not only because it is the first-born, but also because of the powerful humaneness that saturates it, because of its high estimate of man.

Who wrote this—a Jew? No, it was Maxim Gorky. If he were a Jew he would be accused no doubt of chauvinism by other Jews. Now it is reasonable to assume that if the Gentile boy, Gorky, could be so profoundly influenced by a casual and accidental contact with progressive Jewish culture how infinitely more exposed to its influences are Jewish children even if they later choose to deny their birthright.

## American and Jewish Culture

The following question is frequently raised: Is there any inconsistency in pursuing the course of Jewish culture *as a Jew* and at the same time pursuing the course of American culture *as an American*? How could there possibly be any? Jewish culture adds—not subtracts—to one's American culture. It integrates—it does not dissolve. Despite what the cultural "purists" say, it enlarges, rather than narrows, the vision. It is an historical phenomenon deserving of our utmost attention that the intersemination of cultures has resulted *always* in the increase and the revitalization of culture. In the tragic history of the Jews it has been a compensatory blessing that circumstances have enabled them to be at least bi-cultural, if not multi-cultural. This fusion, whenever it took place, resulted in a rich and significant culture in new and advanced forms. Thus, among the most fruitful epochs of Jewish culture in the last two thousand years have been those designated as Hellenic-Jewish, Babylonian-Jewish, Arabic-Jewish, Spanish-Jewish, and Renaissance-Jewish.

May I remind the purists among Jewish progressives that there is no such thing as a "pure" culture, just as there is no such thing as a pure race or a pure language. Certainly American culture is not pure, no matter what chauvinistic nonsense Americans of the dominant Anglo-Saxon tradition may claim. American culture is the product of the total cultural heritage of all the national groups that make up the American people. For instance, when Samuel Ornitz wrote *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl* and Mike Gold his *Jews Without Money*, both being novels about Jewish life in America, they made significant literary contributions to both American culture and to Jewish culture. Similarly with many of the paintings and drawings by Max

Weber, Ben Shahn, William Gropper, and other progressive Jewish artists who have consciously attempted to translate Jewish life in terms of American culture. Their works represent two cultures, the one Jewish—the other American, yet both harmoniously integrated and each the richer in content for the other.

In the Soviet Union it is not considered that Jewish culture, in its progressive forms, is antithetical to an internationalist philosophy of society. They look upon Jewish culture as *national* in character and not as *nationalistic*. There is a world of difference between these two conceptions. In the Soviet Union the Jews, together with every other ethnic culture group or people, are encouraged to develop their national culture, not on previous religious-nationalist lines, but on the socialist pattern which is the basis of Soviet society.

Apart from their active participation in the general cultural life of all the Russian peoples, the Jews of the Soviet Union run their own cultural institutions in the Yiddish language which is the mother tongue of the great majority of them. There are hundreds of special Jewish cultural enterprises—schools and colleges, state publishing houses, theatres, museums, newspapers, and research institutes for the study of Jewish folklore and history, a work in which also many non-Jewish scholars participate. Yiddish in the U.S.S.R., unlike in other countries, has not the mark of a pariah tongue on it but is considered an official language like any other. Judges on the bench, children in the kindergarten, lecturers in the universities, scientists in their laboratories, use it as a matter of course. Writers, actors, artists, musicians and scholars are encouraged and supported by the State in the pursuit of their labors in the Jewish cultural vineyard. In the space of only ten years before the outbreak of the war, four million copies of

Sholem Aleichem's works were sold, not only in their Yiddish original but in Russian and a score of other Soviet languages. There is, for instance, a Peretz Institute in Leningrad which is devoted to the popularization of that Yiddish master's writings among Jews and non-Jews alike. Nor do Soviet Jews have as sectarian a view of Jewish culture as is often the case among our own progressive Jews in America. It can serve us as an object lesson in clear thinking that only recently there appeared in the Soviet Union an anthology of the ancient Midrash which, despite its religious character, is recognized to be an inexhaustible treasure-house of Jewish folk-wisdom and ethics. A Talmudic anthology is also about to be published.

Now let us ask ourselves the question: Do Soviet Jews injure in any way their status and value as Soviet citizens by participating in Jewish cultural life? On the contrary, by sharing their cultural riches with non-Jews, by contributing their intellectual gifts to general Soviet culture they earn the respect and esteem of all the Russian peoples. Jewish culture adds to non-Jewish understanding of the Jewish people and thus works as an antidote against the scourge of anti-Semitism.

While we cannot in the foreseeable future expect in America a government-sponsored Jewish cultural movement, such as is going on behind the dread "Iron Curtain" today, we, nevertheless, have both the cultural workers and the will to initiate one by our own efforts. With this in mind, let us examine the situation today among our creative workers of Jewish origin—the writers, artists, musicians, scholars, etc. Until quite recently most of them were giving Jewish themes a wide berth. Rightly or wrongly they believed that all other themes, except recognizably Jewish ones, afforded them a better market for their wares, and of course a wider field for their talents and influence.

For many of them there were, to be sure, the usual temptations and rewards—the savory fleshpots of Broadway and Hollywood, the handsome prices of the art collectors, a permanent place in the academic daisy-chain, the diamond-studded crown of thistles bestowed by the Pulitzer Prize Committee and the mammoth book-clubs. All these, no doubt, had something to do with the allergy some Jewish writers showed toward Jewish themes.

Somehow, by a mysterious process of reasoning, these writers had come to the conclusion that Jewish collective life was not *really* American, that it represented the ghetto with all its unpleasant connotations of being parochial, isolated and, therefore, culturally isolating for the Jewish creative worker and thinker. Consequently, as in the "Song of Songs," they appointed themselves watchmen over other people's vineyards, but their own vineyard they did not keep. So they wrote about *real* Americans which meant every other group except Jews. . . .

However, ever since the popular success of Sholem Asch's novels and of Sholem Aleichem's *The Old Country*, of Arthur Miller's *Focus*, Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland*, and Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement*, there has been a striking change of attitude on the part of Jewish writers toward Jewish themes. It has come suddenly as a heart-warming realization to all serious, social-minded writers that the taboo against a positive treatment of Jewish life and problems has been largely a figment of their own distrustful imagination. Furthermore, they are at last beginning to recognize that the Jewish problem is not to be considered as something special and isolated affecting Jews alone but as an urgent national problem which concerns the whole American people. However, what is actually cooking in the literary pots of these Jewish writers is yet to be seen.

## **Jewish Life in American Literature**

It is undeniable that for the past three decades there have been quite a few gifted Jewish writers who, in one work or another, treated of Jewish life in America. After all, writers are not a bit different from other people—occasionally they too suffer from a guilty conscience. The more sensitive of them, therefore, nourish at least one "Jewish" book in their literary womb. But once the Jewish novel, play, short-story or poem is "delivered," the moral imperative for any further delineation of Jewish life ceases. They feel that with their token work they have amply done their duty to the Jewish people.

It is a matter of infinite wonder, and a subject worthy of clinical study by the psychoanalysts, why so many of our talented and otherwise progressive writers, whenever they do write about Jews become preoccupied with only the negative aspects of Jewish life. The positive ones, by default, they leave to the totally sincere but slightly hysterical religious nationalists like Ludwig Lewisohn and Irving Fineman with their interminable shofar-blasts, their "Hear O Israel!" cries and their back-to-the-Sabbath-candles incantations. It is curious how often, whenever one of our serious playwrights or fiction writers gets down at last to write about Jews he does not write with ink but with venom. He pounces upon his subject like a tiger upon its prey and tears its vitals to shreds. Most of the time his dominant mood is gloom, his guiding emotion—loathing. He writes as if he feels personally aggrieved by the undeniably negative features in Jewish life. He acts as if he were being let down by his fellow-Jews before the chilling stare of the anti-Semites. Yet he seems to forget that all this that offends him represents only one of many aspects of Jewish life. It is like an artist painting the portrait of

a man who has a wart on his face—he paints the wart and leaves the face out.

The wonder naturally arises: why are so many Jewish writers oblivious of the existence of other features in Jewish life that are decent, and sometimes even noble? What makes them choose the negative and ignore the positive? Perhaps the answer lies in the keen observation Jeremy Bentham once made about a famous colleague in the English Reform movement. He said: "James Mill's creed sprang less from love to the many than from hatred to the few."

In her only Jewish novel, *Fanny Herself*, Edna Ferber has one of her characters remark bitterly:

I tell you, Fanny, we Jews have got a money-grubbing, loud-talking, diamond-studded, get-there-at-any-price reputation and perhaps we deserve it. But every now and then, out of the mass of us, one lifts his head and stands erect, and the great white light is in his face.

The negativism, the abysmal ignorance, the vulgar perversion of truth about the Jewish character which this passage reveals is appalling. From Edna Ferber's observation one would have to conclude that there are only vulgarians and "allrightniks" among Jews, that in fact there are no poor Jews at all, and furthermore, that the good Jew with "the great white light in his face" is as rare as a four-leaf clover. This specious plea of exceptionalism for the "good" Jew, this revilement of all other Jews, the "bad" ones, all ostensibly done in the name of artistic objectivity, is merely a hideous Jewish expression of anti-Semitism sprung out of an empty head and—may I add—of an empty heart!

But let us not hastily conclude that Edna Ferber alone

stands remiss in this respect. It is certainly no overstatement that during the last three decades the majority of so-called serious "Jewish" novels, short-stories and plays—exclusive, of course, of the repulsive, comic dialect-caricatures and the glorifying religious nationalistic ones—have been about the most unattractive Jewish characters: finaglers, humbugs, money-grubbers, go-getters, hypocrites, lechers and short-changers. Now it is not possible to say that many of these portrayals have been unskilful or even untrue. On the contrary, it is precisely the skill and fidelity with which they have been drawn that makes them so dangerous.

Why then this one-sided preoccupation with the warped and the corrupt? Some writers maintain with Baudelaire that wickedness makes the best literary copy, that there is genuine excitement in it. As for ordinary good people—they are supposed to be flat and colorless and lead uninteresting lives. Those who think so ought to reread Zola's *Germinal*, Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, Andersen-Nexö's *Pelle the Conqueror*, or Gorky's *Mother*.

Let us ask the question: Is there no goodness or nobility in Jewish life? Are only the money-grubbers and the vulgarians to occupy our best writers—yes, even so many of our progressive writers? What about the decent hard-working masses who constitute the great majority of Jews? What about the hundreds of thousands of organized Jewish workers who struggle for a better life for themselves and for all society? What about the thousands of Jewish intellectual and cultural workers who live upright, purposeful and socially useful lives?

At the risk of sounding ironic I could suggest that Jewish writers ought to profit from the example set by some Gentile writers in their attitude toward the Jewish characters they portrayed. In a letter dated October 29,



1876 George Eliot tells Harriet Beecher Stowe in America what prompted her to write *Daniel Deronda*:

As to the Jewish element in *Deronda*, I expected from first to last in writing it, that it would create much stronger resistance, and even repulsion, than it has actually met with. But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians toward Jews is—I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles—I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. . . .

Perhaps the most honest view intellectually, and artistically the most sound, was the literary canon adopted by James Joyce in depicting Leopold Bloom, the Jew in *Ulysses*. "I see him from all sides," says Joyce, "and therefore he is all-round in the sense of your sculptor's figure. But he is a complete man as well as a good man. At any rate that is what I intend that he should be."

It is more than high time for the Jewish writer to give up his neurotic compulsion to beat the daylight out of his Jewish villains and to turn his gifts to the portrayal of the affirmative, the wholesome, the socially constructive in American Jewish life. Does this mean that he must only write about admirable Jews? Only the most chauvinistic, or the artistically obtuse, would dare suggest such a perversion of truth. The writer, if he wishes to be convincing, must delineate life in all its truthful aspects. This does not mean the good alone, or the bad alone, but a well-balanced representation of both, for together they form the harmony of light and shadow which resides in all peoples.

The question might be asked: Must a Jewish writer, and for that matter an artist, a composer, a scholar, occupy himself solely with Jewish materials? How can we possibly overlook the fact that the Jewish writer happens also to

be an American writer, and that he is also the product of general American culture as well as of Jewish culture? The raw stuff out of which art is made is life itself, and it is also the vast sea of American life that is a part of the Jewish writer's universe of experience, knowledge and perception. It is therefore only natural, and also desirable, that he should contribute of his talent to both. Being creative in both fields only means that he is twice as rich culturally as so many non-Jewish writers. Instead of considering his Jewish culture a hindrance, an unsightly appendage tying him to his people like an uncut umbilical cord, he should accept it unequivocally and joyfully because it is a door that opens into new vistas of knowledge and beauty.

### **Contributions to American Culture**

In the field of the fine arts many progressive Jewish creative workers are indeed in a dilemma; they do not quite know how best and most honestly to make their contribution to Jewish culture. There has been a Babel of confused tongues on the subject. The belief has been widespread among Jewish artists that the only time they can be really and identifiably Jewish is when they portray religious ceremonies and customs, Biblical subjects, synagogue interiors, and Jews with patriarchal beards studying the Talmud or clasping the Torah in their arms.

How did this happen? The first Jewish artists to concern themselves with Jewish themes during the Nineteenth Century were the enlightened religious nationalists. It was they who set the pattern, and in time it became a fixed stereotype, so that even today progressive Jewish artists are still at it tirelessly, convinced that that is what constitutes Jewish art. However, where the progressive element enters in work of this character is hard to see.

It surely is not necessary to affirm that Jews with patriarchal beards are also Jews and that synagogue interiors and religious rites and ceremonies are also an aspect, even an important one, of Jewish life. Nor can one deny the artist the right to depict them. However, if we are agreed that progressive Jewish culture consists of other than nationalistic religious elements then we must consider that every aspect of Jewish life which expresses the socially advanced and enlightened trends among the Jewish people provides an inexhaustible number of themes for the creative artist. Certainly it is not possible to object against portraying bearded patriarchs and synagogue interiors, but is it not more important to turn to the vital fabric of modern Jewish life in America with its myriad, contemporaneous facets? Must we have obvious identifiable labels and the hackneyed traditional symbols in our Jewish art? We cannot freeze life into changeless immobility, nor can we stultify art, which is the most profound expression of life, with sanctified clichés.

The Jewish composer finds himself in an even more difficult position than the Jewish artist. The Jewish elements in his case are more elusive and intangible. If he tries to produce a work of a Jewish character his intentions are entirely lost sight of unless he employs traditional Jewish folk-motives and folk-idioms. Let us imagine, for example, that a composer, stirred by the heroic battle of the Warsaw Ghetto, sits down to write a symphonic tone-poem or a choral work about it. It is inconceivable that he would fail to employ, in whatever modified form or musical style he chooses, the idiom of Jewish folk music. Without it it is bound to lack truth and the impact of reality. It will sound like unconvincing musical rhetoric without any relation to the flesh-and-blood Jews who fought the battle of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Jewish folk music, regardless of the imprint upon it of many national musical cultures, gives utterance to the deepest impulses of the Jewish individuality. It is not without significance that the Gentile Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakoff said to his Jewish pupils, Gniessin and Rosovsky, who had organized the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St. Petersburg: "I am very glad to see your interest in the music of your own people. The Jewish race possesses a vast melodic treasure; Jewish music is waiting for its genius."

It is indeed an ironic commentary on the self-distrust of a great number of Jewish composers when we consider how many of the leading Gentile composers did not hesitate to employ Jewish folk-themes and idioms in their music. Johann Sebastian Bach, it is well-known, used to trudge for miles to villages outside Leipzig where there were Jewish communities just to listen to "the pretty little tunes" played by the bands of *klezmerim* (Jewish folk-musicians). Nor were Beethoven and Schubert averse to incorporating Jewish traditional melodies in their works. The Kol Nidre theme appears startlingly in one of Beethoven's last great quartets, the one in C# Minor, opus 131. It is a matter of record that about that time he was making a study of Jewish music in preparation for composing a musical service for the Jews of Vienna, a project which for unknown reasons never materialized. Schubert, however, wrote an entire Sabbath service to a Hebrew text for the Vienna synagogue in honor of his intimate friend, the chazzan-composer Sulzer. He employed therein a number of traditional Jewish themes modified to his own taste and style. Then there was Moussorgsky; he introduced a Yiddish folksong into his Biblical cantata, *Joshua*. There is also present a satirical version of the Jewish folk-idiom in his musical vignette, "Goldenberg

and Schlemiel," in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Prokofiev has arranged a number of Jewish melodies and Ravel harmonized an old Sephardic *Kaddish* (memorial prayer for the dead), yet neither composer is Jewish.

Naturally, there are quite a number of modern Jewish composers who, at one time or another, have dipped into the treasure of Jewish folk-music and have employed it according to the requirements of their own style and esthetic philosophy. Thus the founder of the atonalist school, Arnold Schönberg, several decades ago wrote instrumental variations on the Yiddish lullaby, "Shluf mein feigele, mach tsu dus eigele," (Sleep my birdie, shut your little eye). Saminsky, Milner, Engel, Achron, Darius Milhaud and Castelnuovo-Tedesco have created a considerable body of Jewish music. George Gershwin, Isidor Freed, Aaron Copland, Samuel Morgenstern and Leonard Bernstein have attempted, although too infrequently, to transmute the Jewish folk-song and folk-idiom into their musical art. And this is as valid raw material for American music as are, for instance, Negro spirituals and blues.

Of course, the outstanding example of a Jewish composer rooted in Jewish musical tradition has been Ernest Bloch. His instrumental works, *Shelomo* and *Baal-Shem*, and his musical service for the synagogue, are consistent with his own philosophy of devout religiosity. But there is no reason why the progressive Jewish composer of today should not employ Jewish *melos* for secular and social ends in the most advanced spirit of our time.

It is not enough for the progressive Jew to study Jewish history, ethics, literature and folklore, as fundamental as this body of knowledge may be to his understanding of the Jewish people and its culture. Let us say it boldly—as important as knowledge is, if it does not simultaneously flow into the consciousness of the individual from the

vital stream of contemporary Jewish life it remains artificial and superstructural. For instance, you may study Yiddish and its wonderful literature but if you do not have your knowledge fertilized by the living reality of the Jewish masses you remain only a "closet scholar," an antiquarian.

The cultured Jew must make a calculated identification with the Jewish people in its progressive struggles and aspirations by becoming active in some Jewish mass organization or cultural organ. The close association with *people*, Jewish people, is bound to be fruitful to the individual. To be a convincing teacher, artist, composer, historian, and writer in matters Jewish one must get down first to the grass-roots of Jewish life and not regard it from the outside looking curiously in, like a visitor at an aquarium, but to become a throbbing part of its living organism, its flesh and blood and cries of pain and impulses of joy.

## **Toward a Progressive Jewish Culture**

Let us admit it frankly: progressive Jewish culture in the English-speaking Jewish orbit is still in its swaddling clothes. To be sure, a number of artists and writers through the years have been contributing to the creation of a progressive Jewish culture—some of them, it must be said, tentatively, and in a way that is full of ideological contradictions. Nevertheless, it still remains a poor relation, although in the past year or two an upsurge of interest in Jewish problems and culture has actually brought about a conscious Jewish cultural movement among progressives. Periodicals, like *New Masses* and *Mainstream*, although they are non-Jewish in their approach, have been sensitive to this vital interest and are

giving their readers thought-provoking short-stories, articles, poems and book-reviews on Jewish themes.

Then there is the English section of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order. It has been publishing books on significant Jewish themes in English, such as Morris U. Schappes' work on the poet Emma Lazarus, Philip Foner's historical study, *The Jew In America*, and the small volume of short stories by the Yiddish master Peretz which Henry Goodman translated. If any criticism can be leveled at that splendid organization it is that it does not publish enough of such valuable works, since most commercial publishers are allergic to books on Jewish themes. Neither must we overlook the *Jewish Fraternalist*, the monthly publication of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order. It too is trying to stimulate in its many thousands of readers an enlightened interest in Jewish culture.

Of genuine cultural importance is the School of Jewish Studies, the only Jewish educational institution of a progressive character in the country. Despite some heart-breaking financial and physical difficulties, in its two years' existence it has re-educated more than a thousand students in the many branches of Jewish culture. It is the only Jewish school in America which arms Jewish parents with that knowledge and understanding which they must have if they are to prevent in their children those terrifying neuroses caused by anti-Semitic experiences inevitable in our morally sordid society.

Lastly, there is the monthly publication, *Jewish Life*, which is now celebrating its first anniversary. In a surprisingly short time it has become the most significant single force in the movement for progressive Jewish culture in America. It has been attracting an ever-growing circle of talented, thoughtful and socially imbued artists, writers and scholars who possess the intellectual courage required

to reevaluate old Jewish cultural values sanctified by tradition, and to restate them in a fresh and significant way for our times.

I repeat—a heartening beginning has been made in the field of progressive Jewish culture, but only a beginning. It is poor indeed compared to the needs of the hour, feeble indeed when we consider the great historic opportunity that is placed within our reach. If only we have the requisite vision, strength and the will for it! Moreover, we must draw to ourselves new forces and employ them to infuse a new hopefulness and meaning into American Jewish life.

In this time of most terrible crisis in the history of our people, when unity is so desperately urgent for its defense, for its physical and moral survival, progressive Jewish culture can serve as the catalyst to bind together all Jews in sympathy and understanding. It is also a weapon. In the hands of our enemies culture is a weapon for destruction, for the enslavement of mankind; in the hands of those who work for progress it can serve as an instrument for the liberation of mankind and for its advancement. That too must be the role of Jewish culture.

As progressive Americans we naturally take our place among those who are fighting for the preservation of American liberties and world-peace against the Wall Street despoilers of mankind. At the same time let us not hesitate either to stand up and be counted as Jews. Today Jews are in the gravest danger in many parts of the world. What happens to the Jews in the DP camps in Germany or in Palestine affects all Jews. None but fools can fail to realize that the destinies of all the Jews in the world are inter-linked irrevocably.

Let me tell you a parable out of the Midrash. It must be at least fifteen hundred years old but in its folk-wisdom it is timeless. It is a message reaching out to us through the



weary centuries full of tribulation and grief to the Jewish people, but its words are full of hope and courage with which we can face the future:

The waters were rising until they almost reached the Throne of Glory. Thereupon, the Almighty cried out:

"Be still O waters!"

But the waters became vainglorious and boasted:

"We are the mightiest of all creation—let us flood the earth!"

At this God grew wrathful and rebuked the waters:

"Do not boast of your strength, you vain braggarts! I will send upon you the sands and they will raise up a barrier against you!"

When the waters saw the sand and of what tiny grains it consisted they began to mock:

"How can such tiny grains stand up against us? Our smallest wave will sweep over them."

When the grains of sand heard this they were afraid. But their leader comforted them:

"Do not fear, brothers! True enough, we are tiny and everyone of us by himself is insignificant. The wind can carry us to all the ends of the earth, but if we all only remain united then the waters will see what kind of power we have!"

When the little grains of sand heard these words of comfort they came flying from all the corners of the earth and lay down one on top of the other and against each other upon the shores of the sea. They rose up in mounds, in hills and in mountains and formed a huge barrier against the waters. And when the waters saw how the great army of the grains of sand stood united they became frightened and retreated.

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