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# MENORAH REVIEW



NUMBER 20 • THE JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • FALL 1990

## For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

### ABBA HILLEL SILVER, THE HOLOCAUST AND AMERICAN POLITICS: 1943-1944

By Marc Lee Raphael

*The following article is excerpted from the lecture presented by Dr. Raphael for the Selma and Jacob Brown Annual Lecture held last March. The annual lecture is sponsored by the Judaic Culture Advisory Committee and the Center for Judaic Studies of Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Raphael is Gumenick professor of Judaic Studies at the College of William & Mary.*

Abba Hillel Silver's rise to the heights of American Zionist political leadership during the critical years immediately preceding the birth of the State of Israel (1943-47) had its genesis in the 21st World Zionist Congress. Although the delegates met in Geneva's splendid Opera House, the mood in mid-August of 1939 was anything but festive. The British Parliament had approved Secretary of Colonial Affairs Malcolm Macdonald's White Paper — a document which limited Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 in the next five years — but three months earlier announced an end to Jewish immigration after 1 March 1944, and greatly restricted the purchase of land by Jews in mandatory Palestine. Added to this, the several hundred delegates at the Congress knew war was imminent, Jewish life in Europe was in serious jeopardy and passage home to their respective countries might be seriously threatened.

Silver's close friend and Zionist leader, Emanuel Neumann, took Silver aside after a Geneva session and urged him to aspire to national leadership when political decision-making would, inevitably during the impending war, shift to America. Silver found this suggestion to his liking, and immediately after Geneva he and Neumann began to lay the groundwork for Silver's rise to the top of American Zionist politics. It

took a few years for the Silver-Neumann campaign to unfold and triumph, but in August 1943 the representatives of 48 Zionist organizations unanimously elected Silver chairman of their Executive Committee and, according to his defeated rival Stephen S. Wise, "concentrated all the political power in (his) hands."

Silver, already a celebrated orator across the nation and rabbi of the (sometimes) largest synagogue in the country, had dazzled more than 500 delegates (some of whom were anti-Zionist and many of whom were non-Zionist) at the American Jewish Conference in New York with one of the two or three greatest speeches of his career. He denounced, in the strongest possible words, anything short of complete concentration on Jewish statehood, and his bitterest rival, Nahum Goldmann, called the speech "oratorically brilliant and revolutionary."

Goldmann meant several things by "revolutionary": the speech challenged American Jewish rescue efforts; challenged American Jewish faith in President Franklin D. Roosevelt; and added a religious dimension to national Zionist oratory. Although the oral version of this paper discussed all three, I wish here to discuss only the two challenges — the manner in which Silver radically redirected the energies of the Jewish community away from the rescue and toward what he called rebirth when he took over the national leadership in the fall of 1943, and his fierce attacks on Roosevelt and the alliance between Zionist leadership and the Democratic Party.

He felt American Jews faced a situation in Europe they couldn't substantially help (almost all the Jewish communities of Europe, except for the Hungarian, had been deported or exterminated, he had concluded). Therefore, the only serious rescue solution was the opening of Palestine and, eventually, statehood. Several scholars have shown most world Zionist leaders shared similar conclusions (albeit privately) about rescue by the time Silver moved into the Emergency Council for Zionist Affairs leadership. But Silver argued publicly, in addresses at scores of meetings and in dozens of articles in the Anglo-Jewish and Yiddish presses, that the

most significant response to the Holocaust, throughout 1944 and the next few years, was a total commitment to Jewish statehood. A Jewish state was the central position of his rabbinat, and nothing, he believed, not even rescue, should take primacy over the effort necessary to secure such a state. The Nazis were simply another in a long line of atrocities, defeating them won't solve the "Jewish problem," and nothing less than statehood was a meaningful response. Jewish homelessness was an abnormality; statehood was the equivalent of normalizing the Jewish people. Or, as he put it before the United Nations in 1947, the Zionist position is absolute, all else is conditional.

This second radical dimension of Silver's leadership was his constant challenge to Roosevelt and the allegiance the Jewish leadership felt toward the Democratic Party. Beginning with the Biltmore Conference in 1942, and continuing until the President's death three years later, Silver challenged nearly every Roosevelt pronouncement about rescue and statehood. While carefully avoiding endorsement of the Republicans (he supported neither political party publicly while serving as a national Zionist leader), Silver constantly argued that Zionist leaders were more involved and committed to the Democratic Party than to Zionism, that they blindly believed Roosevelt who, according to Silver, said one thing to the Jews and the opposite (privately) to the Arabs and had little intention of doing anything significant for the Jews and statehood. Silver vigorously criticized Wise (and other Zionist leaders) when they stumped for Democratic candidates; attacked Wise's "backstairs

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diplomacy" with the President, insisting that mass pressure on Congress from the American people, not private conversations with the "Chief" (as Wise called FDR), were needed; and summed up his feelings about Roosevelt in this 1944 message to the Executive Board of the American Zionist Emergency Council:

"The President is not sold on Palestine. He does not understand our movement. I doubt whether he has read a single memorandum which we have sent him. He entertains towards our movement the same attitude of general goodwill and uninvolved benignity which he entertains towards a dozen other worldly causes, but having no intention of pressing for them vigorously on the international scene. Engrossed as he is in a global war, he cannot be counted on to go out of his way for us unless he is goaded and prodded into it by the pressure of public opinion and by a real and earnest insistence on the part of a determined and not easily appeased Jewish community."

Silver felt Roosevelt had done next to nothing for Jewish statehood through 1944, and Zionist leaders should threaten Roosevelt with defection from the Democratic Party in the 1944 elections rather than shielding, defending and apologizing for an Administration with which so many of them were politically entangled. . . .

## Book Briefing

### *Commandments and Concerns: Jewish Religious Education in Secular Society.*

By Michael Rosenak. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. The author provides a new understanding of the challenges inherent in teaching Judaism today. He proceeds from two key assumptions: that "modernity has overwhelmed most Jews and, conversely, that most Jews refusing to be overwhelmed haven't adequately confronted modernity." Consequently, he maintains, we lack coherent, effective theories of Jewish religious education. He develops substantive proposals for an honest, new approach to teaching religion in our contemporary, secular world.

*The Magic We Do Here.* By Lawrence Rudner. New York: Houghton Mifflin. This first novel about a young, blond and blue-eyed Jew living by his wits to survive the Nazi invasion of Poland is a stirring testimony both to history and to its author's narrative skill. It is a book filled with moving and evocative images of a lost world.

## DIFFERENT JEWS — ONE JUDAISM

### *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy*

By Norbert M. Samuelson  
Albany: State University of New  
York Press

A Review essay by  
Earle J. Coleman

Socrates enjoined would-be philosophers to "know thyself." Like all good books on Jewish thought, Samuelson's text invites one to come to a better understanding of his or her self through an exploration of the Jewishness, which is inseparable from every Jew's self. As Samuelson notes, "Who is a Jew?" is a modern question. Until around the 17th century, "there was no problem about what it meant to say that someone is a Jew." Being a part of the nation called Israel or Judea and being in a covenant relationship with the deity called "YHWH" were the manifest and sufficient conditions for membership in the family of Jews.

In recent times, however, several factors have militated against identifying or defining a Jew. First, a formidable obstacle was posed by the rise of secular as well as religious Jews; after all, a Reform Jew who saw the essence of Judaism as residing in the acceptance of divine truths could scarcely consider the purported humanist "Jew" to be a genuine Jew. In the United States, two-thirds of those who classify themselves as Jewish are secular rather than religious Jews. Samuelson speaks to this fact and adds disagreements among religious Jews as a second factor: "In the past, the link that tied all Jews together was their common religion. Today this is no longer binding in a world where most Jews are secular, and the religious Jews are divided along sharp institutional and ideological lines." The third factor, which isn't explicitly addressed by Samuelson, is the timely problem of significantly differentiating between Judaism and other world religions at a period when interreligious dialogue is revealing a considerable overlap in the theological doctrines, institutions, aspirations and practices of all the great traditions.

According to Orthodoxy, if a person has a Jewish mother, he or she continues to be a Jew no matter how the individual lives. This traditional conception, which is descriptive rather than normative, renders

one's beliefs and actions inessential to his or her Jewishness. Of course, subsequent efforts at defining what it means to be a Jew haven't escaped criticism. Recently Emil Fackenheim characterized contemporary Jewish identity in terms of the Holocaust and the rise of the state of Israel, the two events together yielding a fresh way to view the present as well as the future. "A Jew today is one who, except for an historical accident — Hitler's loss of the war — would either have been murdered or never been born." But as Samuelson properly remarks of such a characterization, "it both includes people who should be excluded and excludes people who should be included."

Not surprisingly, identifying a distinctively Jewish philosopher is hardly less problematic than identifying a Jew. Even a master of abstract thought such as Spinoza, who was excommunicated from the Jewish community, can hardly be for Judaism what Augustine was for Catholicism and Protestantism. Thus Samuelson observes: "Spinoza's Scriptures are distinct from both Judaism and Christianity." Nor can Moses Maimonides serve as a paradigm of all Jewish thought, since Jews such as Samuel David Luzzatto rejected him and Spinoza alike as representatives of "Hellenism" or false religion; i.e., religion that places a premium on reason rather than revelation. To those who would seek the identity of a Jew through her or his citizenship in a nation state, Samuelson aptly replies that modern culture tends to be increasingly international rather than national. Making a related point, Mordecai Kaplan emphasized that democratic nationalism undermines belief in the uniqueness of the Jews as a chosen people and thwarts yearnings for a distinct Jewish political state.

In Samuelson's view, secular American Jewish writers — such as Allen Ginsberg, Arthur Miller, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth — have offered another controversial interpretation of the word "Jew." For these literati, a Jew, who may be a convert to Rabbinic Judaism rather than born of a Jewish mother, is someone from a working class background, living in a Jewish community within a large urban area. Moreover, the person is outside the mainstream of his or her larger society and therefore suffers the pains of being an outsider. Samuelson comments on the relation between spirituality and suffering: "The more perfect a person is the more he/she is like God. This statement means that the more sensitive he/she is to the feelings of others, the greater is his/her suffering." Some writers identified the Jew as "anyone who by virtue of his/her sensitivity was estranged from more base human society. By virtue of this estrangement, the Jew suffered the cruelty of those who were morally inferior

but physically superior." But a sort of literary license appears to be at work, for one might object to this last portrait on the grounds it patently applies to alienated non-Jews as well as to Jews. Samuelson's objection to the secular, American Jewish writers is their denial of the existence of the very God who alone could render their chosenness and attendant suffering intelligible. In effect, these authors affirm themselves as chosen people but reject the reality of any "chooser" or God.

Attempting to bridge the gap between religious and secular Jews, Mordecai Kaplan argued it was simplistic to call Judaism simply a religion or a nation; instead, the complexities of history require that Judaism be best conceived as a civilization, a gestalt, which includes cultural as well as religious aspects. While attractive, his proposal proved to be unilateral since it equated "spiritual" with "conceptual," thereby alienating religious Jews as such. Kaplan endeavored to justify his naturalism on the grounds that since most Jews are non-religious, a religious institution couldn't accommodate them. Defining the nature of a Jew is, of course, a classic sort of philosophical project; i.e., a quest for the common denominator or universal principle that unites members of a class. Having no exhaustive answer follows from the fact that classic questions are just those that represent themselves in every age but are exhaustively answered in no age. Still, there is an enduring call for fresh attempts to cast light on what it means to be a Jew, for although there may be no definition—a commonly accepted essence that pertains to all Jews—there may be an open-ended list of characteristic traits; i.e., features such that one or more must be present before an individual can be regarded as a Jew. This theory of family resemblances, which was propounded by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, implies that two Jews may be linked not necessarily by any single, common practice or belief but because they both possess one or more of the traits, which taken together constitute the list of characteristic properties of Jewishness. Similarly, for Kaplan, no one feature of Judaism is indispensable to its survival. Rather, Judaism consists of a cluster of elements, and only if they were all destroyed would Judaism perish. It is in the terse, illuminating exposition of just such basic elements that Samuelson's primer makes its contribution to scholarship.

But, as was expressed earlier, any 20th century account of Jewishness must come to terms with other world religions. It is here the text often falters—whether the views expressed are Samuelson's or those of other contemporary Jews whom he discusses. Early in the work, Samuelson recognizes that classical reformers, who declared ethical

monotheism as the essence of Judaism, were confronted with the implication that "there was no essential difference among true Judaism, true Christianity and true Islam." Nevertheless, Samuelson then proceeds to present—quite uncritically—a number of facile distinctions, which are intended to mark off Judaism from other world religions. For example, when the text declares that "Asians deny the self," one wonders which Asians. Is not the self or Atman recognized by millions of Hindus who espouse reincarnation? Monistic Hindus go so far as to elevate their self to the level of the deity in the Upanishadic dictum *Tat Tvam Asi* (Thou are That), which asserts that one's self is identical with ultimate reality. Moreover, Taoists and Buddhists often speak of

**... the complexities of history require that Judaism be best conceived as a civilization, a gestalt, which includes cultural as well as religious aspects.**

**--Mordecai Kaplan**

cultivating one's real self or Buddha nature; and Zen Buddhists, such as D. T. Suzuki, distinguish between the lower self and the higher self. Again, the student of Chinese thought might be puzzled by assertions such as: "The Ideal of Confucius is an ideal of an ordinary man, viz., a man without excellence, i.e., without character," since a turn to the *Analectics* of Confucius demonstrates the antithesis. Here the Confucian ideal is the *Chun-Tzu*, a man of superior character and behavior, someone with the intelligence needed to avoid extremes. In fact, "superior man" and "wise man" both have been used to translate *Chun-Tzu*. Discussing Franz Rosenzweig's critique of Asian religions, Samuelson writes "no aught appears in the thought movement. Asia's religious thought posits a negated naught, a nay-nay, as essence of deity." Again, no specific religions are mentioned. Neither the Taoist-Buddhist concept "wu," which literally means "nothing," nor the Hindu-Buddhist term "sunnyatta," which literally means "emptiness," is a mere "negated naught." Nor can either be understood apart from its positive or "ought" dimension in that it refers to an ineffable, ultimate reality, which is no thing among things but the primordial ground of all things.

Islam fares no better in the assessment of Rosenzweig, whom Samuelson represents as believing that "Islam's seekers become active seekers and not passive receivers of God's word." But such a simplistic dichotomy— as if the two were mutually

exclusive or either the "diastole" or "systole" could be absent from any viable religion—is falsified by the fact that passivity or receptivity is as crucial to the religious life as it is to the artistic. Samuelson's remarks culminate in an evident non sequitur: "In Islam there can be divine mercy but no love, since man receives faith through his own works." By what inference does it follow that human effort and divine love are incompatible? Other dubious claims include: "In this Muslim structure, man has no freedom because he is only part of a community." The author's efforts to differentiate between Jews and Christians also prove to be unsatisfactory: "As the meal in Judaism becomes the focal point, so in Christianity the focal point is the environment. The most important thing you notice in a Christian worship service is the church building; it is the ultimate expression of the worship service." But the communion meal of Christianity, especially with the dramatic preface of transubstantiation in Catholicism, whether performed in a tepee or an august cathedral, is arguably the centerpiece of the religious service. Who remembers the architecture of the room in Leonardo's "Last Supper?" Indeed, were Samuelson's assertion the case, Christians would have substantial grounds for reopening something like the iconoclastic controversy of eighth century Christendom.

According to Nahman Krochmal, Jews can be distinguished on two grounds: "The Biblical faith of the Jewish people is unique in its purity and in the universality of its images." Unfortunately, Samuelson leaves these arresting claims unsubstantiated. In addition, when Samuelson credits Cohen with holding that "everything that we recognize as ethics has its source in Judaism; ethics are a unique and distinctive Jewish concern," these quite controversial assertions are not justified. For him, Judaism is "the one religion whose core ideal is ethical monotheism." But how would one distinguish between Judaism and, say, the theistic schools of Hinduism in which the moral concepts of dharma and karma play such foundational roles? Cohen himself sees religion and ethics as coalescing; thus, he translates "God is wise" as "Seek wisdom" and "God is not ignorant" as "Avoid ignorance." But how does this outlook differ from that of non-Jewish, non-cognitivists, such as R. B. Braithwaite and J. H. Randall Jr. who likewise understand theological propositions as moral injunctions? In discussing Martin Buber, Samuelson states that "for non-Jews ethics is a sub-topic of philosophy." Christian existentialists would pose a counterexample to this sweeping contention. Indeed, if the primacy and excellence of one's ethics is the touchstone of religion, one wonders what Samuelson

would say about the religion of Socrates for whom morality took precedence over cosmology.

Samuelson does mention thinkers, such as Solomon Formstecher, who hold that eventually "Christianity will purge itself of its pagan elements at which time Judaism and Christianity will become identical." Whether Formstecher projected such a sanguine fate for Hinduism, Jainism, Confucianism, Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism and Taoism isn't mentioned. But a contemporary British philosopher of religion, John Hick, offers just such an ecumenical forecast in which he sees a growing convergence in philosophy and theology among the world faiths as each undergoes purgation, which is required to achieve a post-Darwinian, post-Einsteinian, post-Freudian perspective. Following such an encounter, should we not expect greater doctrinal agreement among the world religions on, for example, the status of women? While thinkers such as Kaplan warn that modern scientific thinking tends to disintegrate the Jewish people, thinkers such as Hick ask: May not the scientifically-precipitated reconstitution of religions lead to greater dialogue, accord and integration among peoples? Of course, greater harmony among the world religions need not entail the loss of one's own tradition any more than communion between individuals diminishes the uniqueness of each. In fact, just as to truly know one's self entails meeting the other, one way for a Jew to discover his or her Jewish identity is by engaging in dialogue with the non-Jew. Even if one cannot identify what a Jew is conceptually, perhaps she/he can realize her/his Jewishness existentially in the I-Thou encounter.

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### Balancing

*"According to the effort is the reward."*

Is there any greater reward than knowledge of your own self-existence:

working requiring no more effort than to wake up each morning

and for which if necessary you are even willing to put in overtime?

*-- Carol Adler*

## RESCUING JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

*When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*

By Nechama Tec  
New York: Oxford University Press

A Review essay by  
Robert Moses Shapiro

Nechama Tec, a professor of sociology, was an eight-year-old girl in a middle-class Jewish family in the ancient Polish city of Lublin when the Germans invaded in September 1939. Remarkably, she, her older sister and both her parents survived the occupation together. They survived because they were able to obtain shelter with non-Jews. After three years of living as a Christian in mortal terror of discovery by the Germans or by anti-Semitic neighbors, Tec and her family emerged from hiding in liberated Poland. A generation later, she wrote a restrained but moving memoir of her family's experiences during the war (*Dry Tears: The Story of a Lost Childhood*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Having written her memoir, Tec decided to look into the entire question of Christian rescue of Jews in occupied Poland. What was it like for Jews to pass as Christians? What moved some Christians to overcome their fears of German retribution and the anti-Semitic atmosphere in Poland to risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones to save Jews?

In the vast and growing literature on the Holocaust, Tec found little that dealt systematically and scientifically with the issue of aid for Jews in occupied Poland. In addition to examining published memoirs and collections of unpublished testimonies by both surviving Jews and Poles who rescued Jews, Professor Tec conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 34 rescued Jews and 31 Polish rescuers whom she met in the United States, Canada, Poland and Israel. From all of her sources, Tec gleaned data on hundreds of rescued Jews and several hundreds of Poles who aided Jews in various ways. This permitted the development of statistical data, which has been intermingled with descriptions and quotations, as Tec sought to achieve "a certain balance between [being] an observer and a participant, between objectivity and involvement."

There is no way of knowing just how

many Polish Jews attempted to evade the Germans by passing into the Christian "Aryan" world. Estimates have run as high as a hundred thousand out of Poland's prewar Jewry of more than 3.3 million.

The decision to escape from the ghetto into the Christian part of town or to a village was a difficult undertaking for most Polish Jews. To be found outside the ghetto, without authorization, meant death for Jews and anyone aiding them. Moreover, the Jews couldn't count on receiving aid from most Poles. To leave the ghetto meant abandoning some family members, while Jewish parents were reluctant to part with children who might have been placed with foster families.

To survive on the "Aryan side" required daring, money, a good Polish appearance and good documents. However, most Jews lacked significant resources, particularly after the German confiscations. Few Jews were sufficiently familiar with common Catholic ritual and prayers, while most Polish Jews spoke Polish with an accent or tell-tale Jewish expressions and idioms. A carelessly uttered "nu" (well) instead of the Polish "no" could be fatal.

And yet thousands of Jews made the attempt to pass as Christians or to find a hiding place outside of the ghetto. To hide required the aid of a Christian prepared to act despite the German reign of terror, which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish Poles. Such Christian rescuers coped with a combination of physical, psychological and social barriers and pressures.

A major obstacle was what Tec calls the "diffuse cultural anti-Semitism" that permeated Polish society where any and all negative traits were attributed to Jews, portrayed as creatures to frighten small children. Tec writes that "Poles were reminded at every turn that Jews were unworthy, low creatures and that helping them was not only dangerous but also reprehensible." Poles aiding Jews often feared reprisals by fellow Poles, even after the end of the German occupation.

Tec found, in most cases, the Polish rescuers didn't initiate the aid to Jews but responded to sudden pleas for assistance, often from complete strangers. There were numerous instances where an act of rescue wasn't a matter of days but lasted for months and even years.

Some Jews with a "good appearance" could pass as distant relatives. Others had to be concealed, often in specially constructed hideouts. Food was scarce and rationed, while large purchases on the black market were both costly and dangerous as they invited the curiosity of neighbors. A gruesome dilemma arose when a hidden Jew died of illness or injuries: How to dispose of the body? The stress endured by the sheltered

Jews and their rescuers can hardly be imagined. Yet those who already sheltered Jews tended to take in more, although Jews often were compelled to move to other accommodations to evade suspicious neighbors or German patrols. In some instances, family-like relationships formed between Jews and their rescuers.

Tec concludes that social class, political affiliation, friendship and religious commitment couldn't be used as reliable predictors of who would or would not rescue Jews. Even outright hatred of Jews didn't mean necessarily an individual anti-Semitic Pole wouldn't aid a desperate Jew. One of the movers for the creation of the secret Council for Aid to Jews (code-named Żegota) was a prominent anti-Semitic Polish novelist Zofia Kossak-Szczucka. Formed in 1942 with limited resources provided by the Polish government-in-exile in London and by foreign Jewish organizations, the Żegota aided thousands of Jews in Warsaw and elsewhere.

There were also an unknown number of Poles who helped Jews in exchange for payment of money, gold or jewelry. Such paid helpers weren't eligible for the Yad Vashem designation as "righteous rescuers," which has been awarded to about 6,000 men and women, including about 1,800 Poles. Tec's research shows that paid helpers were more likely to mistreat their charges by starvation, robbery, increased demands, threats, even outright murder to prevent the Germans from learning of their activity. Such paid helpers generally were very impoverished peasants attracted by the prospect of cash but terrified when their greed was slaked and they then confronted the deadly danger of hiding Jews.

In an effort to understand what motivated those not interested in payment to risk their lives for endangered Jews, Tec turned to studies of altruism, which is defined as "self-destructive behavior performed for the benefit of others." Yet most studies of altruism focused on one-time, short-term acts that often receive social or communal approbation. Rescue of Jews in occupied Poland required continuous aid, during a longer period of time, in a society that neither reinforced nor rewarded such dangerous behavior. On the contrary, rescuers could face social ostracism and worse from fellow Poles.

Tec has concluded that rescuers shared several characteristics. They were independent, self-radiant individuals with a long history of aiding the needy in various ways. Rescuers saw their actions as their human duty, which usually began without premeditation. Finally, rescuers perceived the needy universally, disregarding any other attributes except their need and helplessness.

Independent and self-radiant, potential rescuers were more free to follow their personal inclinations and values. When asked for her reasons for aiding Jews, one woman was at a loss how to respond and replied with questions:

What would you do in my place if someone comes at night and asks for help? What would you have done in my place? One has to be an animal, without a conscience, not to help?

By viewing their acts in a matter-of-fact fashion, the rescuers effectively minimized their fear of Germans, leaving themselves free to act in accordance with their own moral imperatives. Referring to the frequent instances of arbitrary arrest and executions by the brutal Germans, one rescuer remarked to Tec: "After all, if one could be punished for anything at all, or nothing, then one might as well do something worthwhile."

***The Poles studied . . . were on the periphery of their community and not strongly controlled by it, thus leaving them more free to act on personal moral imperatives.***

Rescuers felt an intense need to stand up for the poor and helpless. That need, holds Tec, was fundamental to the psychic makeup of rescuers and overshadowed all other considerations. They were responding to the victim's persecution and suffering, regardless of other attributes. To these Poles, it didn't matter who the persecuted were, only that they needed assistance. Moreover, willingness to help didn't have to be linked with liking the needy victim.

In effect, Tec posits the existence of a kind of species survival instinct, triggering a compulsion to aid others; thus there were even anti-Semitic rescuers. Theorizes Tec:

Perhaps the more threatening the situation, the greater the likelihood that prejudice will be disregarded. Where the threat is severe, the victim's plight may reactivate the helper's need to be charitable. This need, in turn, may appear as an abstract force unhindered by personal likes and dislikes.

Tec is convinced many more Poles wanted to aid Jews but were unable to overcome their fear of death.

Tec's data shows intellectuals more

prone to rescue Jews than any other segment of the populace, while the middle class were rescuers in the same proportion as their part of the population. Lower class individuals didn't show a special propensity for rescue, while fewer peasants were rescuers than their proportion in Poland's population. In making the latter point, Tec fails to take into account some basic demographic facts: Most Jews were concentrated in the cities even before the Germans instituted the ghettos to further concentrate them, while the majority of Poles were peasants residing in rural, countryside villages. Thus the opportunity for rescue was less. Even so, a substantial number of Jews were aided by peasants.

Most rescuers were politically uninvolved, although those who were tended to be leftists. The religiously committed Poles didn't have unambiguous guidance from the Catholic Church as Tec writes:

The traditionally anti-Semitic Polish Catholic Church had no uniform wartime policy regarding Jewish extermination. Absence of an official posture left much latitude for clergy and lay public.

Tec denies the Catholic clergy played a major role in Jewish rescue, although her own data suggest they comprised up to 8 percent of the rescuers even though clergy were less than 1 percent of the country's populace. The clergy concentrated on saving Jewish children, many of whom were baptized. Such baptism and religious training of young children were justified as necessary camouflage for endangered children, making it less likely to give themselves and their protectors away to the Germans. Tec writes that most survivors who were children derived much comfort from the teachings of the Catholic faith. Yet potential rescuers of children often encountered resistance by Jewish parents to the idea of their children being raised as Catholics. Several thousand Jewish children were sheltered in Catholic convents and monasteries where many were initiated into the Catholic faith from which some never emerged.

The Poles studied by Tec were on the periphery of their community and not strongly controlled by it, thus leaving them more free to act on personal moral imperatives. Those imperatives might come from religious teachings, political beliefs, family values, all of which were ingrained in an individual with a long history of aiding those in need. Since they were committed to aiding all in need, it was possible for them to help even Jews whom they were socialized to dislike or whom they disliked as individuals. In an impulsive,

unpremeditated way they extended shelter to the helpless, needy Jews even though such assistance was life-threatening for all involved.

In Tec's judgment, the single most important factor in determining who would begin rescue was an established personal tradition of standing up for the needy. Money and other material payments were weaker incentives in motivating the kind of long-term help the Jews needed. Tec concludes her study on an optimistic note, stating there are "dormant heroes" who will act in ways natural to them, as the rescuers of Jews did. "The very presence of such people must give us hope."

The most valuable and fascinating material in Tec's book comes from her interviews with Polish rescuers and Jews. To preserve their anonymity, Tec used fictitious names to identify them and doesn't give specific geographic data, although it would have been useful knowing whether Tec's sample was drawn from all over Poland or from specific regions. Interestingly, all but five of Tec's interviews were conducted in Polish. It is odd none of the Jews chose to use Yiddish, although this might serve to confirm that more assimilated Jews could more likely pass. Another factor might be Tec's own knowledge of Yiddish and Hebrew as implied in the bibliography, which includes but one title in Yiddish and none in Hebrew.

Tec made some minor errors in her presentation of the prewar situation in Poland. She unfortunately chose to cite the distribution of parliamentary seats after the notorious 1930 election to support a statement that the left was relatively weak in Poland. She made no reference to the striking results of the city council elections held in hundreds of towns the year before the war, suggesting the growth of the leftist influence. The Polish Communist Party was dissolved in 1938, not by the Polish government but by Stalin's order. A prewar anti-Jewish boycott poster in Polish is reproduced and translated by Tec on page 16, although she misrenders a line meaning "our sons are perishing at Jewish hands" as "we are being murdered by Jews." Such loose translation might raise questions about other valuable material quoted by Tec.

Regardless of any quibbles, Nechama Tec has produced a valuable contribution to the literature on the Holocaust. It is a book enlightened by her own experiences and the discipline of a scholar attempting to understand how and why people reacted in time when evil seemed dominant.

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## TEXT AND CONTEXT: THE CASE OF AMERICAN JUDAISM

*Where Are We? The Inner  
Life of American Jews*

By Leonard Fein  
New York: Harper & Row,  
Publishers

A Review essay by  
Peter J. Haas

There can be little doubt American Judaism has entered a new era; it has outgrown its immigrant roots and has firmly established itself on the American scene. The question of the hour is how to describe this new American Judaism. How, as we enter the 1990s, do we propose to understand ourselves and our Judaism in the context of the unprecedented freedom in which we Jews in America live? One attempt to answer this question is Leonard Fein's *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews*. This book suggests the kind of text (to use the author's term) the American Jewish community should write to define itself within the American context.

The occasion of Fein's proposal is his sense that the American Jewish community has entered a new era and that the older modes of discourse are simply no longer functional. In this, of course, he isn't alone. The emerging American Jewish reality has become the subject of a number of studies in the last few years, an outstanding example being Charles Silberman's *A Certain People*. In this book Silberman claims, more or less persuasively, that Jews in America have now "made it." There are, he argues, no important areas of American life closed to Jews. Jews, even outspoken, publicly self-identifying Jews, have taken their place in the top echelons of American life and culture. There is among American Jews a widespread sense of at-homeness and acceptance in America. Israel is regarded, by and large, as a nice place to visit, but as a place for nurturing Judaism it fares no better, and possibly in some minds as somewhat worse, than the United States. This, Silberman announces, is the new American Jewish reality.

There is another side to this, however. While American Jews have made it financially and socially in America, it isn't clear whether they have done so "spiritually." That is, while the physical and financial survival of American Jews seems settled, there is growing concern among observers of the community as to the nature of the

"Judaism" that has survived. There has yet to emerge a discourse explaining to American Jews why being Jewish is important, beyond the anthropological value of ethnic survival *per se*. It is precisely this question Fein addresses.

Any discussion of this question has to begin with some understanding of the current ideas and convictions holding Jews together in a distinctly recognizable "Jewish" community. There is little argument that the most powerful set of symbols for the sixties and seventies generation was the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel. In many ways these symbols carried forward in the American Jewish mind the traditional convectional complex of Exile and Return. That is why, or so we are told, the Six-Day War had a powerfully galvanizing effect on American Jews. Through these events, U.S. Jews suddenly experienced in their own lives, as it were, something of the implications of Rabbinic discourse: Jews abandoned by the world but at the most crucial moment saved by what appeared to be nothing less than a miracle. The traditional patterns of exile and redemption, death and rebirth were to continue through the twinned symbols of Holocaust and Israel to be world-constructing notions for American Jewish identity.

This symbolic construct possibly is losing power among American Jews, however, as Jacob Neusner argues in *Strangers at Home: "The Holocaust," Zionism and American Judaism* (Chicago, 1981), because these symbols are lived out at second-hand and so are ultimately irrelevant. American Jews haven't experienced the Holocaust themselves nor have they for the most part participated directly in the settlement or building of the state of Israel. While they use these events symbolically for a Judaic understanding of the world, the users are more observer than participant in the events of which they talk. In his analysis, Neusner points out this is ultimately an unhealthy situation, for the reality posited by these symbols isn't reinforced or validated by actual experience. So if American Jewish experience is, as Silberman describes, secure and comfortable, then the symbolism of Holocaust and redemption is ultimately alien.

In the last few years the inherent instability of the Holocaust-Redemption motif has led to a search for what really makes American Judaism tick. One very persuasive study is that of Calvin Goldscheider of Brown University. In his study of the American Jewish community (*Jewish Continuity and Change: Emerging Patterns in America*, Bloomington, 1986), Goldscheider, a sociologist, concludes that Jews in America aren't held together any longer by a single theology or "weltanschauung." There is no common

view of God, of the holy life or of divine mission that would have American Jews working together in unity of purpose. Rather, Judaism as a religious way of perceiving, understanding and evaluating the world is so attenuated through assimilation into modern Western, secular culture it no longer has any statistically relevant function. What holds the community together, Goldscheider concludes, is precisely our sense of community. But this need not be a cause for apocalyptic alarm; such a secularized mode of communal life is just as valid, just as important and, more to the point, just as powerful as the older religious mode. The bonds binding Jew to Jew are still as strong as ever, even though they now are expressed in a secular, modern key rather than the traditional one.

It is at this point Fein enters the discussion. For Fein, the secularized text of contemporary American Judaism is not sufficient; he sees the attenuation of American Jewish spirituality as both significant and dangerous. We are, after all, a religious community dedicated to working out God's commandments in the here and now. If we lose that sense of sacredness, Fein argues, then we as Jews lose our reason for survival. True, American Jews might continue indefinitely as an ethnic group celebrating its particularity, but this, for Fein, is an empty victory; it is Jews without Judaism.

The problem for Fein, then, is how to put Judaism back into American Jewish discourse. In line with what we have said

above, he finds the older symbols of Holocaust and Israel no longer viable. One alternative, of course, is to jettison modernity altogether and adopt the traditional symbols and lifestyle of the Orthodox, a move that has registered some success at the hands of *Lubavitch Hassidim* and among *baalei teshuvah*. While the unquestionable growth of these sectors in American Judaism indicate a need among American Jews for spiritual meaning, Fein doesn't find this route compatible with his understanding of what Judaism demands of him as a modern, liberal, educated American. Some other option must be found and Fein now sets out defining it.

For Fein, the starting point is the conviction that Jews exist on earth to fulfill Torah and that fulfilling Torah means to sanctify the world. That is, Jews aren't called upon simply to be Jews but to make the world a different and a better place in the name of the creator-God. For the values bound in this mission, Jews still need to practice Judaism. This set of convictions is summed up, says Fein, in the traditional concept of *tikkun olam* ("repair of the cosmos"). This ancient doctrine can be exploited, Fein says, providing the symbolic discourse needed to reinvigorate American Judaism with a sense of its spiritual mission. Because this doctrine stresses the necessity and importance of Jewish involvement in the world, *tikkun olam* can speak directly to the life-experiences of American Jews as socially and politically active citizens. Fein sums up his argument as follows (page 212): "... that for the sake of Jewish continuity we

must be concerned with Jewish ethical values, more specifically that Jewish continuity requires a corollary commitment to *tikkun olam*."

Exactly what that commitment to *tikkun olam* means in practical or programmatic terms isn't clear. In fact, Fein himself acknowledges the specifics of the program always will be a matter of debate and disagreement. That prospect, however, doesn't call into question the basic thesis. It isn't the details that are important for Fein at this point but the need for American Jews to recognize they have a higher — spiritual — purpose to fulfill and become committed to doing so. As long as a concept such as *tikkun olam* animates the internal dialogue of the Jewish community, Fein argues, there is a moral sense of why Jewish survival is important beyond its own sake, whatever the details might be.

Yet Fein gives us some guidance concerning the kinds of parameters the concept of *tikkun olam* places on Jewish discourse. To begin with it demands that we be committed to pluralism. Within this context, American Jews must be willing to act as Jews in pursuit of *tikkun*, that is, building a better world. Statistics and voting patterns show that, as a group, American Jews generally accept the values and discourse of American liberalism. Insofar as the liberal agenda largely carries forward contemporary Jewish sensibilities and insofar as it also is committed to the broader principles of *tikkun olam* (elimination of

*continued, next page*

## Book Briefings

***Every Day Remembrance Day.*** By Simon Wiesenthal. New York: Henry Holt and Company. The history of the Jews during the past 2,000 years is all too often a story of discrimination, persecution and murder. In this book, the author compiled a chronology showing how easily prejudice can descend into barbarism. Starting with Jan. 1 and running through Dec. 31, he has chronicled, for each day of the year, events throughout Jewish history — reminders of the extent and horror of anti-Semitism. A work of enormous scholarship, it is both an invaluable reference guide and a moving document that keeps alive the memory of those who have suffered.

***The Rescue of the Danish Jews.*** Edited by Leo Goldberger. New York University Press. This story is one of the most remarkable chapters in history. To understand the complex factors that might account for this rescue is of lasting significance. In this volume, a group of internationally known individuals, Jews and non-Jews, rescuers and rescued, offer their enriching first-person accounts and reflections that explore the question: Why did the Danes risk their lives to rescue their Jewish population? What can help us understand their behaviors?

***A Daughter's Promise.*** By Julie Ellis. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc. This novel moves from a dismal tenement on New York's Lower East Side to the boardrooms and

boardrooms of the rich and privileged in London and Palm Beach. But it is rooted in the small Georgia city where, in 1924, Jacob Roth becomes the innocent victim of an adult anti-Semitic lynch mob. His daughters are hounded out of town and escape to New York. We follow the sisters for 50 years as their personal triumphs and failures intermingle with the tumultuous events of the mid-20th century.

***For the Land and the Lord.*** By Ian S. Lustick. New York Council on Foreign Relations. In this analysis of the Jewish fundamentalist movement in Israel, it becomes evident that the struggle now unfolding to determine the territorial shape and the meaning of Israel as a contemporary nation will be affected largely by the activities of the fundamentalists — bent on a rapid achievement of transcendental messianic imperatives through direct political action — and the reaction to their activities by pragmatic, democratically oriented Israelis. The author argues that the 10-20,000 devotees of Gush Emunim activate the entire panorama of Jewish fundamentalists and secular ultra-nationalists, including some of Israel's most powerful leaders. The author has written an impressive study.

*Inclusion of a book in "Briefings" doesn't preclude its being reviewed in a future issue of Menorah Review.*



poverty, concern for the less fortunate, and so on), it seems a perfect candidate for establishing the contours for an American Jewish text for the 1990s.

Although the retrieval of *tikkun* as an operative concept seems to have the potential of infusing American Judaism with a way of discursivizing its spiritual mission, the choice of this particular notion isn't without its problems. First of all, *tikkun olam* (as a spiritual doctrine and not as a matter of social order) is a technical concept in the rather esoteric literature of *Lurianic Kabbalah*. Many, if not most, American Jews might find themselves sympathetic to Fein's overall description of American Jewish values. However, most would have a hard time identifying with the *Lurianic* notion of an imperfect universe shattered at the point of creation while trying to contain a self-contracting God and that the purpose of *Halachah* is to release the shards of the divine light scattered by the explosion and helplessly embedded in the stuff of Creation. Thus, although the term *tikkun olam* has been appropriated in a sort of sanitized way by liberal Jewish intellectuals (see *Tikkun* magazine), the term in its original setting bears connotations with which few of these intellectuals would be comfortable. So we are being asked to accept the term while

ignoring its historical development.

But this is not the end of the problems. The appropriation of this term is, in fact, revolutionary. After all, it has been the *Halachah* setting the agenda and parameters of Jewish discourse and behavior throughout the centuries. To decenter the *Halachah* and put in its place a new vocabulary represents more of a break with the past than Fein seems to appreciate. And to add to the conceptual difficulties, Fein makes the vocabulary of *tikkun olam* accessible to us only by reading it through an entirely different, in fact, secular, text: that of American liberalism. We can only wonder if such a classical text read through a modern, secular political program can supply an authentically Jewish spiritual core for a Judaism of the future.

Fein, of course, sees the question and proposes an answer that runs roughly as follows: It is true the *Halachah* structured traditional Jewish behavior. But the *Halachah* was never an end in itself; it was always a means toward fulfilling further ends, ends bound up with the sanctification of the cosmos. In short, *tikkun olam* was always the foundational spiritual conviction, *Halachah* merely being the text Jews wrote during one era of history for expressing that conviction. But now, in America, the context

has changed radically. This shift in context requires a new text for a plausible discourse; the older ways cannot make sufficient sense for the contemporary population to serve as a text of the community's spirit and experiences. So American Jews have been in the process of writing their own up-to-date text on *tikkun olam*, and that text is close to what we now label American Jewish liberalism. Despite its connections with Western secularity, this new text preserves the true point of Judaism and is imbued deeply with Jewish content.

Fein's book is different from many other contemplations of contemporary Jewish life in America because he wants not only to describe but to alter and inject religious meaning into the Jewish community he finds. His reach for a religious vocabulary is thus deliberate. By describing ourselves through a text such as *tikkun*, by expressing our Jewishness in the new way, Fein hopes we will become subconsciously, if not consciously, a spiritual people. This is what Fein sees as the great need now. As he says in the last page of *Where Are We*, "It is not God who gives us meaning, but our own quest for godliness. . . ."

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