

---

PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements

---

1-1-1950

## Problems of Jewish culture

Morris U. Schappes

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/prism>  
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Schappes, Morris U., "Problems of Jewish culture" (1950). *PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements*. 338.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/prism/338>

*Problems of*  
JEWISH CULTURE

*by* MORRIS U. SCHAPPES

*A Publication of the*  
SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES

Price 10¢

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MORRIS U. SCHAPPES, the author of this pamphlet, was a member of the English Department at City College, New York, from 1928 to 1941. A leading authority on Jewish history and culture, he has edited *The Letters of Emma Lazarus*, and *Emma Lazarus: Selections From Her Prose and Poetry*. He is presently an editor of *Jewish Life*, and a member of the Board of Directors and a teacher at the School of Jewish Studies. His numerous articles, essays and reviews have appeared in the publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, *Journal of Negro History*, *Jewish Life*, *Masses & Mainstream*, *American Literature*, *The Worker*, *American Hebrew*, and the *Chicago Jewish Forum*.

The text of this pamphlet is reprinted from an article which appeared in the March, 1950, issue of *Masses & Mainstream*.

## PROBLEMS OF

# Jewish Culture

by MORRIS U. SCHAPPES

---

WITH anti-Semitism having recently expressed itself in pogrom action, as at Peekskill and Chicago, attention to the Jewish question is seen to be ever more imperative, and there is a growing recognition that this requires attention also to the cultural field. For progressive American Jewish culture is a weapon in the struggle for the survival of the Jewish people.

The material basis for this culture is the Jewish national group in the United States, with its particular problems, institutions and struggles. The six million victims of Hitler's war and the struggle for independence of Israel undoubtedly deepened Jewish consciousness here, but the enduring foundation for this quickened awareness is to be found not in Germany or Israel but in the fact that American capitalism has never allowed the *full* and *equal* integration of the Jewish people in American life.

Jews are part of the American capitalist relations of production, but with restrictions in employment. Jews buy their consumer goods from the national market, but with restrictions in housing, use of hotel and resort facilities and so forth. Jews are educated in American public schools, but with many restrictions in colleges and professional schools, and with the aid of text-books and teachers still too often obsessed by anti-Semitic stereotypes, from Shylock and Fagin to the Jew-who-doesn't-fight-in-our-country's-wars. Jews read in American literature, and meet ignorance of and hostility against the Jews at altogether too many turns in Eliot and Pound, Faulkner and even Thomas Wolfe. And so it goes with all the other aspects of the Jews in American life under imperialism: there is always the *but* that signals the absence of full and equal integration.



There are two types of cultural response to this situation that require examination: the bourgeois-nationalist and the working-class internationalist approach.

The bourgeois nationalist sees and shows the Jew always in physical, cultural or spiritual isolation from the non-Jew; or, if there is contact, the Jews are always in a hostile relation to non-Jews, or are always and everywhere oppressed by non-Jews. Such nationalism affirms the idea that Jews always have been and always will be apart from and at odds with the remainder of mankind. Holding "the world" (not its minority ruling classes) guilty of persecuting the Jews, these Jewish nationalists consider themselves superior because free from such sin. They avoid finding the cause of anti-Semitism in the kind of society in which a small ruling class divides and disorganizes the majority it exploits and oppresses by diverting popular wrath from itself onto the Jews; instead they regard anti-Semitism as some "eternal" product either of the Jewish character or the non-Jewish character.

Bourgeois nationalists, although expressing only one class, characteristically try to deny the existence of classes and class conflicts in Jewish life, whether in the United States or in Israel, or to minimize the conflicts and keep them from being laid bare. They deny particularly, and seek to prevent the development of, the ties that bind Jew and non-Jew in progressive struggle. Rejecting the fact that there is a Jewish people, living in many lands, with certain ties (historical, psychological, cultural), but without other bonds (territorial, economic, political), they affirm the false theory that there is one single world Jewish "nation," with its base and center in Israel. The nationalists are also strong supporters of religion. Such theories are no threat to imperialism—in fact, they are an aid to it.

**T**HE manifestations of bourgeois nationalism in American Jewish culture are innumerable, but it will be useful to cite a few in order to identify the species.

Take a play recently praised and recommended in the organ of the American Jewish Congress as "one of the most stimulating studies of Jewish life in America ever written" (*Congress Weekly*, December 5, 1949). We are assured that the dramatist "examines religious, metaphysical, and international problems with an equal felicity," that

his "is a triumph of Jewish writing, it is so subtle and yet intense as an unprinted exclamation mark." Published in 1941, *Shenandoah* is by Delmore Schwartz, one of the pillars of the Trotskyite *Partisan Review*. Written in verse, the play tackles the mighty problem of whether a newborn boy whose last name is to be Fish should be given a Jewish name like Jacob or a non-Jewish one like Shenandoah. Fish, a manufacturer, acting on the advice of his lawyer, Kelly, rejects the opinion of the rabbi and an uncle who is a doctor, and resolutely decides on Shenandoah because, "after all, this child is going to live in a world of Kellys!" Delmore Schwartz, expressing himself directly through a Chorus, addresses the infant waiting to be circumcised, telling it of

"How many world-wide powers surround you now,  
And what a vicious fate prepares itself  
To make of you an alien and a freak!"

Later, reflecting on the circumcision itself, the Chorus speaks:

"How profound  
Are all those ancient rites: for with a wound  
—What better sign exists—the child is made  
A Jew forever! . . .

O the whole of history  
Testifies to the chosen people's agony,  
—Chosen for wandering and alienation  
In every kind of life, in every nation——"

There, in the idea that the Jew is "an alien and a freak . . . in every kind of life, in every nation," is bourgeois-nationalist theory, as un-subtle as a printed exclamation mark. When this was published, the Soviet Union had already amply proved the theory false; since then the East European new democracies have repeated the demonstration. Such a theory is obviously a hindrance to forming a coalition with non-Jews in the crucial struggle against anti-Semitism.

A manifestation of another order is the campaign launched more than a year ago by the Zionist Organization of America for the "Hebraization" of the American Jew. Since the masses of the American Jews have no intention of following Zionist dogma by gathering up to emigrate to Israel, the Zionist leaders are raising huge sums for the Hebraizing of American Jewish education. The manifesto of Daniel

Frisch, president of the Z.O.A., raises the slogan: "Mobilize your forces for the national-religious education of your own children and of the entire younger generation!" The objective is to make Hebrew the second language of American Jews so that they may draw their cultural sustenance from the nationalistic-religious bourgeois culture of Israel. But the American Jews, deeply concerned though they are with the establishment of Israel and its continuing struggle for democracy and for independence from imperialism, can hardly be expected to nourish themselves culturally chiefly by importation. Progressive American Jews, for instance, are looking forward to enjoying some of the products of progressive culture in Israel, in whatever language produced (Hebrew, Yiddish or Yemenite Arabic), just as they have been drawing inspiration from similar achievements in Poland, Romania and particularly, for so many years, the Soviet Union. But such importations can only supplement, and must not replace, the development of progressive Jewish culture in our own country.

Another nationalist tendency reveals itself in the vain attempt to develop what is conceived of as a full-fledged, separate Jewish *national* culture in the United States, despite the fact that there is no Jewish *nation* here but only a national group. Such a "Jewish national culture" is conceived of as arising only in the Yiddish language. Thus during the last Jewish Book Month, a well-known Yiddish historian reaffirmed the hard-dying theory that works written in Yiddish or Hebrew are Jewish, but anything about Jews written in English is not Jewish or Jewish-American, but "simply" American. This approach would exclude from Jewish culture no less than the majority of the Jews in this country, who today no longer use Yiddish. It would separate not only the Jewish people from the American people as a whole, but even one section, the Yiddish-speaking minority, from the bulk of American Jews. This theory would make of Yiddish a fetish, not a weapon. The weighty word of no less a builder of Jewish culture in Yiddish and English than Moissaye Olgin, editor of the *Morning Freiheit* until his death in 1939, was uttered against this linguistic fetishism, when in February, 1937, he called for "struggle against the type of nationalism which makes a fetish of the Yiddish language and seeks thereby to segregate the Jewish masses from the progressive forces among other peoples, thus weakening the front of struggle against reaction" (M. Olgin, *Cultur un Folk*, 1949).



THE rejection of Yiddish as a fetish simultaneously helps make possible a positive attitude toward Yiddish as a language whose vitality is far from exhausted. The progressive American Jew, whether he speaks the language or not, fights for respect for the Yiddish language. Why? Because the jingoistic American ruling-class mockery of an attack against Yiddish is part of its general program of degrading the Jewish people, a couple of million of whom still know the language. As an instance of the compulsion which is part of bourgeois assimilationism, take the attitude to Yiddish fostered among certain sections of the Jews here during the past three generations. Rabbi Albert I. Gordon, in *Jews in Transition*, a recent sociological study of the Jews of Minneapolis, reports that "there appears to be an emotional bias against the Yiddish language among the children of the immigrants. . . . Often one hears such persons hush up anyone who begins to speak Yiddish or use a Yiddish expression in a public place."

But where did this "emotional bias against Yiddish" come from? It was instilled into them by the dominant class with its theories of Anglo-Saxon cultural and political supremacy, with the bourgeois German Jews acting as a transmission belt for this theory. Therefore, progressive American Jews actively resent the slander and abuse of Yiddish, the burlesque of it in so-called dialect humor, in radio and phonograph parodies of the so-called Yiddish intonation or accent, or in any other form. We fight for the Yiddish classics, for contemporary Yiddish progressive literature. We fight for the right of people to speak Yiddish, in private or in public. We also, however, realize that most American Jews do not know Yiddish and cannot be subjected to abuse as second-rate Jews therefor. Undoubtedly not knowing the language deprives them of certain direct acquaintance with valuable cultural treasures. Teased by translations, some may even be stimulated to study the language. But the most important thing is the people, their survival and their progress, not what language is used. The Jewish people have used and outlived many languages. They have been creative in many languages, and they are creative in English too.

Still other manifestations of bourgeois nationalism in American Jewish culture should be noted. In *Commentary*, the Trotskyite-edited and staffed organ of the American Jewish Committee, editor Elliott E. Cohen recently had an article on "The Intellectuals and the Jewish Community" in which he tries to convince Jewish communal leaders, who hold



the purse-strings, to make more use of certain American Jewish intellectuals. Cohen assures these leaders that these intellectuals are studying hard to make themselves trustworthy. What are they studying? Says Cohen: "One hears of at least four circles of Jewish intellectuals at or near universities that meet regularly for the study of theological works." So apparently the rejection of Marxian social science leads to the rejection of all science and to the study of—theology. Shall we soon be graced by a school of neo-Rambamites to parallel and rival the obscurantism of the neo-Thomists?

But Cohen sees other good qualities in these Jewish intellectuals. In social theory they are against "totalitarianism," a term they mis-apply to socialism, and are devoted to "the development of social-democratic thinking and procedures in the labor-management field." This and similar traits lead Cohen to foresee that "the Jewish intellectual-religious tradition [will] flower in ways that will stand comparison with Spain, Germany, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere." Here religious nationalism, obscurantism and social-democracy are packaged neatly if odiously in a magazine that expresses the merger of a section of the Jewish big bourgeoisie with the Social-Democrats.

Another luminary of *Commentary*, Isaac Rosenfeld, adds a pungent odor to his friend Delmore Schwartz's concept of the Jew as "an alien and a freak." Rosenfeld is addicted to that new opiate of the bourgeois intellectual, the "psychoanalytic interpretation" of history and social reality. To this wit, anti-Semitism is a "symptom of a serious, underlying psycho-sexual disease." The "root" of anti-Semitism Rosenfeld sees "in the popular sexual culture of the Gentiles in the form of a delusion about the sexual superiority of the Jews." Can the separation of Jew and non-Jew go any further than this theory of sexual antagonism between Jew and non-Jew?

**I**F THESE are some of the manifestations of bourgeois nationalism in American Jewish culture, what is proletarian internationalism? First, it is based upon the working class and its Marxist, internationalist outlook. Marxism teaches that national oppression and anti-Semitism and Jim Crow are not and cannot be in the interests of the workers, who suffer from being diverted from their real class enemies by Jim Crow, anti-Semitism, and oppression of nations and national groups. The advanced working classes of *necessity* support all move-

ments for national liberation and equality of peoples because they know that their own emancipation depends upon the alliance with these movements. Proletarian internationalism underlines the interconnection, interdependence and common elements of all progressive forces in all nations and peoples, while at the same time encouraging the expression of this progressive content in manifold national forms. Imperialism and monopoly capital are defined and fought as the source of national oppression, Jim Crow and anti-Semitism. Therefore the proletarian internationalist, to fight anti-Semitism, stresses the need for uniting Jew and non-Jew in the struggle; for the abolition of anti-Semitism and the survival of the Jewish people are today in the interest of all progressive mankind.

A progressive American Jewish culture should therefore base itself first upon the working class. Now among the Jews in our country, the middle and lower middle classes are very large and constitute the increasing bulk of the population. But the working class among the Jews is substantial, and is furthermore the main source of progressive theory and practice in the Jewish community. The working class is, after all, the only force that can lead an effective movement for a broad anti-imperialist coalition for peace, prosperity, civil and political rights—and the very survival of the Jews. Therefore more and more attention should be given the Jewish worker as a subject for progressive American Jewish culture.

Some petty-bourgeois writers have developed an imitation of Baudelaire's practice, "*épater le bourgeois*," to smack the bourgeoisie for its vulgarity, coarseness and crudity. Thus the Jerome Weidmans and Norman Katkovs "*épater le bourgeois juif*," they smack the Jewish bourgeoisie, especially the lower bourgeoisie. Well, the Jewish bourgeoisie may be no lovelier than any other bourgeoisie and its cultural values no higher. But such writers make two interrelated mistakes. They show the unlovely Jewish bourgeoisie in isolation from the unlovely non-Jewish bourgeoisie (which is after all the dominant class), thereby contributing to anti-Semitic stereotypes, for the reader can too readily infer that it is the Jew and not the bourgeois who is unlovely. Secondly, they show the Jewish bourgeoisie as if it were the only class in Jewish life, and tend to omit particularly the progressive Jewish working-class element, thereby also contributing to the anti-Semitic stereotype, which would have it that there are no Jewish



workers. Writers of this type exude a cynicism and contempt for humanity that is the blind alley of the despairing lower-middle-class intellectual.

A survey of the themes of the twenty-six American novels issued in the publishing year 1948-1949 in which Jews write about Jews shows the following thematic materials. Thirteen dealt with phases of the last war: how anti-Semitism hindered the war effort; how anti-Semitism made a Jew feel compelled to out-brave non-Jews; how a Jewish girl helped rear the child of a Negro-American soldier and his German wife; how a German-Jewish refugee doctor got to Macao and did such fine, self-sacrificing work there as to rouse the hostility of the Portuguese rulers of the colony; how refugee Jews suffered in DP camps.

The novels not centered in the war treated these subjects: anti-Semitism in a private academy; residential restrictions and anti-Semitism; anti-Semitism in a small town; a Brownsville boy's renunciation of communism and simultaneous dedication of his life to service of the people (!); a Jewish manager of an Irish-American pugilist; a Jewish delinquent youth; the Maccabee uprising; the adjustment of a Jewish widow to the loss of her husband; Jewish middle-class youth in the depression of the 1930's; a Bronx boy in school, business, and in running a Jewish camp; how a Philadelphia Jewish furrier "passed" as a Baptist in a North Carolina town; Brooklynese Jewish humorous *mores*; the disruption of an intermarriage of a Jew and Gentile in a small town in Connecticut.

If properly treated, virtually all of these themes could result in contributions to *progressive* American Jewish literature; yet exceptional is the novel that actually turned out to be that, either because the author did not have a progressive understanding of the situation presented, or did not convey his progressive insight into his fiction. Conspicuously absent even from the themes, however, is the class-conscious, organized Jewish worker. This gap is glaring not only in literature but even in the writing of history. The American Jewish Historical Society, for example, has published thirty-eight thick volumes since its founding in 1893, but not a single page has been given to the history of the Jewish working class. On the other hand, the social-democratic Yiddish Scientific Institute, unable to ignore Jewish labor, misrepresents that history along bourgeois nationalist as well as social-democratic lines.

TO DEPICT the Jewish workers is not enough; they should be shown objectively, truthfully, and that means from the standpoint of proletarian internationalism. In any medium—fiction, drama, song, dance or the graphic arts—the truthful presentation of the Jewish worker in the United States today requires his being portrayed both in Jewish circles and organizations (fraternal, social, cultural), and in intimate daily contact with non-Jewish workers in the same unions, political parties, tenants councils, unemployed movements, civil rights struggles and peace campaigns. A progressive approach to Jewish life must take into account what is developing as well as what is fading.

The *main* theme can no longer be the immigrant's conflict with and "adjustment" to the new environment of capitalist relations in our country, if only for the reason that today some eighty per cent of the Jewish population is American-born. The drastic curbing of immigration, Jewish as well as Eastern and South European, signaled in the law of 1924, has produced qualitative changes in the life and problems of American Jews. The setting and characters are no longer the same as in those two classics of progressive American Jewish literature, Samuel Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* (1924) and Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930). We welcome the grandfathers and fathers of the current generation when we find them in Odets' *Awake and Sing* or in Ben Field's *The Outside Leaf*, for the aged and aging are also contemporary. There is still a great theme, for instance, in the elderly immigrant Jewish men and women workers in the shops today. Their social biography is the untold story of the transformation of a mass of militant workers with socialist ideals and political affiliations into a body saddled with the weight of social-democracy in its rankest manifestations of the Dubinsky stripe, with only a militant minority loyal to socialism and the working class.

But the Jewish workers of 1950 include perhaps even in larger number those born in this country and who, becoming workers, did not follow their parents into the same crafts and trade. There is no longer, as there was fifty or even twenty years ago, a single industry in which the Jews constitute a majority of the labor force—not even the garment industry. The Jewish workers are therefore turning up in small numbers in ever more crafts and industries, working alongside a majority of non-Jewish workers in shops and factories, stores and offices, laboratories and technical departments. Their problems on the



jobs, in their residential communities, in all their social and political relations, are the problems of a new generation in a new setting.

Particularly is the progressive Jewish worker likely to be in active co-operation with Negro workers, in the garment industry, in the distributive and metal trades, in public service, in the maritime, auto and other industries. Consider the triumph of unity at Peekskill—unity of Negro and white, of Jewish and non-Jewish, and especially the unity of Negro and Jew. Memorable is the sentence in the *New York Times* of September 6, 1949, describing Paul Robeson's first press conference after the attack on the second Peekskill concert. When Robeson said, "We Negroes owe a great debt to the Jewish people, who stood there by the hundreds to defend me and all of us yesterday," even the *Times* reporter noted with respect that the "tears started from his [Robeson's] eyes." Where did these Jewish workers and progressive intellectuals come from, if not from the garment unions, Local 65, the U.E., the Office Workers, Public Workers, and others? In such organizations, Jewish workers are learning the importance of Jewish-Negro unity in struggle against reaction.

In Chicago, too, it was Jewish trade unionists who invited Negro fellow-workers to their homes that became the target for a pogrom against the Jews. And then in Stuyvesant Town the wall of Jim Crow was breached by Jewish-Negro unity, when a Jewish trade unionist invited a Negro family to make a long-term visit in his apartment, thereby setting a pattern that should sweep the country, and suggesting a major theme for our cultural workers.

THE Jewish working class is thus the key to and main base of progressive American Jewish culture. Of course, with a proper Marxist approach, any aspect of Jewish life, here or abroad, historical or contemporary, can result in a work of proletarian internationalist meaning, and it is not the intention here to exclude or limit such aspects. But with such a great tradition of Jewish labor struggles, it is startling that contemporary progressive Jewish writers in English have not made more of this fascinating and literally heroic material. We need, instead of Hecht's Jew-in-love and Schulberg's Sammy-on-the-run, the forward-moving images of militant Jewish workers.

There is a tradition in American progressive Yiddish culture of writing and singing as a result of direct experience and long-continued

personal observation. The proletarian Yiddish poets and fiction writers of the period from 1890 to 1920, Morris Winchevsky, David Edelstadt, Joseph Bovshover, Morris Rosenfeld, Leon Kobrin and others, were often themselves hands in the sweatshops, and the poems and sketches they wrote of lives conditioned by the sweatshop were read and sung by the workers in the shops. To this day, many a Yiddish poet and novelist works in a shop and writes evenings, weekends and in slack periods. Even Jewish trade union leaders like Ben Gold and Max Perlow continue to write novels and short stories based on their participation in the lives of the workers who have elected them to leadership.

In Ornitz and Mike Gold this tradition of writing from deep within the human condition one is describing is to a certain extent carried on and helps account for their impact and durability. If there has been a hesitancy, not to speak of resistance, on the part of younger Jewish cultural workers to include the American Jewish scene in their scope, this reluctance may in a measure be due to the fact that their lives seem to them to be lived not in the center of Jewish working-class life but on its periphery. But certainly the creative imagination, consciously guided into contact with and study of the Jewish masses in a particular locale or industry or technical field, can solve, as it always has solved, the problem of writing convincingly and effectively about experiences not immediately one's own.

To seem to direct others in the field of culture is a thankless task that may provoke charges of arrogance and busybodying. Yet the progressive Jewish masses are more and more insistent that *their* creators, their sons and daughters gifted with talents that no progressive can regard as merely private, should reflect and artistically illuminate *their* lives, and hearten and inspire them in *their* struggles against reaction and for the survival of the Jewish people. It is not exclusive preoccupation with Jewish life that they require, for that would confine the artist in a ghetto from which the progressive Jews have broken. These Jewish masses demand, however, that they be *included* in the creative sphere of interest of their creative artists. Can any progressive Jewish cultural worker find any reason consistent with his progressivism for not responding to that demand—and with enthusiasm, humility and devotion?

# ABOUT THE SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES

---

The School of Jewish Studies is a modern, secular School. Its program of study and methods of instruction are scientific and progressive. It is a bi-lingual school, giving courses in both English and Yiddish. Its approach is based on the understanding that the Jewish labor movement represents the most progressive and strongest element in American Jewish life.

The School also believes that its function is to provide American Jewry with that kind of knowledge which would make it capable of solving the many pressing problems that it faces today, especially the problem of discrimination and anti-Semitism.

The curriculum of the School includes courses in Ancient, Medieval and Modern Jewish History, American Jewish History, History of the Jews in the American Labor Movement, The National Question and the Jewish People, Jewish Literature, Negro-Jewish Unity, Social Democracy and the American Jewish Community, Problems of Marriage and Jewish Family Life, Yiddish Stenography and Typing, Yiddish, Hebrew, English and many other important subjects.

The academic year of the School consists of three terms, 10 weeks each:

Fall Term—October through December

Winter Term—January through March

Spring Term—April Through June

EXTENSION COURSES on various topics relating to the life, problems and culture of the Jewish people can be arranged through the School by community organizations and trade unions, to be given in their neighborhoods and centers.

THE LECTURE BUREAU of the School is ready to serve organized groups with single lectures on topics of general or specifically Jewish interest. For more information write to:

SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES

575 Avenue of the Americas, New York 11, N. Y.