

Jewish Culture

in AMERICA

*Weapon for Jewish
Survival and Progress*

by

NATHAN AUSUBEL

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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

