



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>  
*Scholarly journals online*

# Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism

*Laura Levitt*

To remain marked as other even in the process of becoming citizens, of becoming incorporated into the nation, still haunts contemporary Jewish experience as well as efforts to explain Jewish difference. Although it may be said that the French and American revolutions brought Jews into the dominant cultures of the West, they also set limits on this very promise of inclusion.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I am interested in these limits as they have been enacted and reenacted in the United States, especially after the mass migration of Eastern European Jews to this country at the turn of the last century.<sup>2</sup> I am concerned about the ways tolerance works to both regulate and maintain a deep ambivalence around Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism in U.S. society, even in the present.

Writing about Jewish difference and the legacy of Jewish emancipation in Western Europe, political theorist Wendy Brown explains that

to be brought into the nation, Jews had to be made to fit, and for that they needed to be transformed, cleaned-up, and normalized, even as they were still marked as Jews. These triple forces of recognition, remaking and marking—of emancipation, assimilation, and subjection; of decorporatization as Jews, incorporation as nation-state citizens, and identification as different—are what characterize the relation of the state to Jews in nineteenth-century Europe and constitute the tacit regime of tolerance governing Jewish emancipation.<sup>3</sup>

The regime of tolerance Brown describes, with its contradictory appeals and desires, aptly captures the ambivalent position of Jews in the United States. Working against this use of tolerance, I want to think about the ways Jews do not fit into the now long accepted litany of differences—race, class, gender, sexuality—as well as how the presumed “whiteness” of some Jews has served to make invisible the ways Jewish difference continues to make a difference in how Jews figure in U.S. culture. And, coupled with this, I want to call attention to what has been the most acceptable form of Jewish difference,

Jewishness defined as religious difference. This way of marking Jews as the same but different, the notion that they simply go to a different “church” has itself come to mark Jews who oddly enough do not define their Jewishness in these religious terms.

Alongside this problem, I am also interested in how this vision of acceptable Jewish difference as religious difference, a kind of community of faith, also differs from the ways many observant Jews understand themselves as followers of Jewish law who may or may not attend synagogue services. By retracing the legacy of Jewish emancipation in the West alongside a legacy of Jewish enlightenment and modernity as experienced in Eastern Europe and then seeing what happened as these two distinct visions of Jewish modernity came into conflict in the United States in the early twentieth century under the umbrella of the liberal inclusion Brown describes, I want to challenge the vision of tolerance offered in the West. I do this by showing how this vision of inclusion had no place for Eastern European Jewish secularism, the legacy of Yiddish secularism that characterized the Jewishness of so many of these immigrant Jews. I use this case to reconsider the legacy of liberal inclusion for Jews and what it might mean for there to be a place for secular Jews in the United States.

I return to this cultural legacy because it remains the inheritance of the vast majority of U.S. Jews. By retelling the story of Eastern European Jews coming to the United States at the turn of the last century, I want to show a more complicated legacy of impossible assimilation as a clash between different modern configurations of Jewishness. In other words, the legacy of Jewish emancipation and enlightenment in the West—inclusion on the basis of religious pluralism—and the traditions of worldly Eastern European Jewish enlightenment were set in conflict as Eastern European Jews struggled to figure out what it was going to mean for them to become Americans at the turn of the twentieth century.

By returning to the problem of Jewish assimilation in this way I ask, at what cost have Jews been accepted into the dominant culture of America? What has it meant for especially Eastern European Jews to refashion their Jewishness to fit into American middle-class Protestant culture? Part of what I will argue is that in order to be accepted as citizens of liberal nation-states such as the United States, Jews had to conform to the norms of this culture, remaking themselves and their Jewishness into something familiar. They were to become a version of the same with a minor difference. And yet, as Brown argues, this process has within it an inherent contradiction. It both promises acceptance

and effaces this same promise.<sup>4</sup> In other words, liberal assimilation produces a subject who is almost but not quite dominant. The harder this subject tries to fit in, ironically, the more s/he differs. Instead of sameness, these efforts produce an excess that always marks this subject as other. In the case of Jewish assimilation, the not quite dominant status of Jews can be seen in the ways so many continue to identify as Jewish but not as religious. As I have argued elsewhere, liberal assimilation is always haunted by its partial production of versions of the same. The harder U.S. Jews try to fit in, the more they end up demonstrating their Jewish difference. Hence, the joke: Jews are just like everybody else only more so. By looking more closely at the impossibility of liberal inclusion, like Brown, I want to imagine other forms of social inclusion that need not rely on merely tolerating difference.

By taking seriously the ongoing effects of and the necessarily incomplete character of the assimilation of Eastern European Jews into American culture at the beginning of the twentieth century alongside the not quite assimilation of an earlier generation of Western European Jews into the dominant culture of Protestant America, I hope to shed new light on the contradictions that continue to haunt contemporary U.S. Jewish life. To this end, in what follows I offer a somewhat schematized account of the differing eastern and western legacies of Jewish enlightenment and modernization that came into conflict in the early part of the twentieth century in the United States. I will then return to the archives to look specifically at the legacy of Yiddish Jewish secularism. By offering a reading of some of the arguments posed by the last of the Yiddish secular thinkers, ironically in the pages of the English language journal *Judaism: A Quarterly of Jewish Life and Thought*, a publication founded in 1952 with the explicit goal of reviving Jewish religious thought, I will challenge the liberal presumption that Jewish identity must be understood as a form of private faith.<sup>5</sup> Using some of the challenges these Yiddish thinkers posed to precisely these liberal American cultural presumptions in the first half of the twentieth century, I ask readers to reconsider what it might mean to claim a more complicated and decidedly less Protestant Jewish position in the present. Because these thinkers explicitly refused to adhere to precisely these Protestant religious norms, even as their movement was coming to an end, their arguments remain relevant.

As they make clear, *religion*, *race*, *class*, and even *ethnicity* have never been able to fully or accurately describe what it means to be a Jew in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The containment of Jewish difference within such narrow categories as required by liberal pluralism is no longer viable. By having to pin down

what, in essence, is most salient about Jewish difference, other, often crucial, pieces of Jewishness drop out. Jewishness is cultural and ethnic and religious in many but not all instances. Jewishness exceeds notions of ethnicity because there are multiple Jewish ethnicities and because it can include forms of religious expression beyond privatized faith. Thus, in order to appreciate what it means to claim a Jewish position, a Jewish identity, the common rubrics of liberal pluralist difference—race, class, and gender and/or sexuality—just do not fit, nor does the overarching notion of religion, although that has been the most salient and acceptable form of claiming Jewish difference in the United States.

### **Social Amelioration, or Religion as the Means to Emancipation**

The Jewish communities, during the stormy struggle for emancipation and enlightenment in the nineteenth century, achieved adjustment to the general social order on the primary basis of religious tolerance. . . . The Synagogue was, accordingly, the primary instrument of adjustment to modern life, and acknowledged as the center of Jewish loyalty and identification.

—Herbert Parzen, 1959

In 1959 in the pages of *Judaism*, Herbert Parzen, a Conservative rabbi and, at the time, a contributor to numerous Anglo-Jewish periodicals, notes the crucial role of religious tolerance and the centrality of the synagogue to Jewish emancipation in Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> He uses this account to draw a sharp contrast between East and West and in so doing follows closely Jewish historian Paula Hyman's account of what it meant for Western Jews to enter into the dominant cultures of Western liberal nation-states. As she explains,

The entry of Jews into the general body politic and the transformation of the Jewish community from a self-governing corporate body with police powers to a voluntary religious association challenged the very nature of Jewish self-understanding. Increasingly, Jews were seen, and defined themselves, as adherents of a religious faith rather than as members of a religio-ethnic polity, a people-faith. Their rabbis became religious functionaries—preachers and spiritual counselors—rather than judges and interpreters of the law.<sup>8</sup>

I open this discussion with these accounts of the transformation wrought by Jewish emancipation as a way of making clear the material and social implications of what it meant for Jews to become citizens of Western nation-states. These Jews not only pledged allegiance to these states in order to take on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, but they also gave up a great deal in

this process. Prior to emancipation, Jews were, as Hyman indicates, a “self-governing corporate body.” Jewish communal authorities had both police and judicial powers. Emancipation, or more precisely, using the language of the late eighteenth century, “civic amelioration,” meant that the political and social integration of the Jews into Western culture came at a price.<sup>9</sup> Not only did Jews lose their communal autonomy; they were also required to re-create themselves as Jews. They made Jewish communal life into a voluntary religious association, something completely at odds with what had been a traditional Jewish self-understanding.<sup>10</sup> What is striking in this regard is even the historian’s difficulty in pinpointing this loss. What was it that the Jews had been before emancipation? Hyman herself struggles to find words adequate to explain this Jewish self-understanding. In her text the difficulty is signified by her use of the hyphenated terms “religio-ethnic polity” and “people-faith.”

The process of political emancipation in the West in effect re-created Judaism as a religion. It used familiar categories of faith to assure that this people within a people would not be a threat to their new nation-states. Even so, the Jews had to find a way to still be recognized as a communal entity. Religion as a voluntary commitment of faith and communal practice enabled Western European Jews to maintain their commitment to an ongoing Jewish communal life without remaining a separate self-governing corporate body. In other words, what religion offered to Jews in the liberal West was a Protestant version of religious community that they could apply to themselves as Jews. Given this, one of the lasting legacies of political emancipation in the West was the formation of Jewish religious denominations as we now know them. Since affiliation was a matter of choice facilitated by capital (like the term *denomination* itself, from *denominate*, “to issue of, express in terms of a given monetary unity”), these Jewish communities produced a variety of congregational options that allowed for certain differences among Jews while also reinforcing the notion that what links all Jews is a common faith.<sup>11</sup> As Hyman notes:

This transformation of Judaism and the Jewish community facilitated the emergence of denominations within Judaism, particularly in America, where the voluntary nature of the Jewish community was most fully realized. Any group of Jews who could muster the requisite financial and human resources to establish a synagogue, school, or journal were free to do so and thereby to disseminate their conception of Judaism.<sup>12</sup>

Although political emancipation was the product of the age of reason, the end of the rule of religion, for Jews in the West, this version of the rule of reason brought with it, ironically, a reaffirmation of religion, and specifically of reli-

gion as a kind of faith. For Jews to become enlightened as Jews was to remake Jewishness into a matter of individual faith. As I have already suggested, the problem was that Jewishness never fit easily into Western notions of religion as simply a matter of individual faith.

This lack of fit was not simply because the presumed category of religion was Christian, but also because it was an enlightenment construct. As Robert J. Baird and others have argued, “religion” as a category was produced by the enlightenment. It was built on a Protestant model, with an emphasis on individual, private, and voluntary confessions of faith.<sup>13</sup> To become citizens of liberal nation-states such as the United States, enlightened Jews needed to redefine themselves as adherents to a Jewish religious faith and voluntary community.<sup>14</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, this was never an easy process. In many instances Jews were the other within the “more civilized” dominant cultures of the West, atavistic throwbacks, members of a more primitive people, the people of the Old Testament that had to be superseded. In many cases Jewish loyalty to the nation as opposed to the Jewish community remained an issue. Thus, even as Judaism was religiously privatized, the liberal state maintained an interest in supervising Jewish communities. This can be seen in state efforts to control even the most “private” of matters, such as marriage and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> Here public and private enactments were intertwined. Liberal states used the control of sexuality under the auspices of liberal marriage and proper or middle-class morality as a way of judging Jewish fidelity to the state. So, although rabbis were free to perform weddings and divorces in France, the first state to emancipate their Jews, even in these matters rabbinic authority was granted only by the nation-state. In performing presumably religious rites, rabbis in effect became agents of the state, acting by virtue of the power vested in them, not by their denominations, or by God, but rather by the power of the state.<sup>16</sup> In these ways, again, Jewishness, although a matter of private faith, was very much about state-sanctioned collectivity. And, in the United States, Jews took their cues in these matters from the dominant culture and its Protestant majority.

In the nineteenth century, as various denominations of U.S. Protestantism were becoming increasingly privatized and feminized, Jews followed suit.<sup>17</sup> As U.S. Jewish historian Karla Goldman has demonstrated, in the United States public worship among Protestants was marked by its decidedly feminine character.<sup>18</sup> The image of church pews filled with devoted women had a particular impact on the transformation of Jewish worship. In contrast to the bourgeois norms of Western Europe, in the United States middle-class

Jewish women were expected to show their devotion in public by attending synagogue worship services. They more than met these cultural expectations and, as Goldman shows, their growing presence in synagogue services had material effects. In the United States the architectural structure of synagogues changed to meet this new expectation. Synagogues were literally restructured: women's sections were first expanded, and later, mixed pews became a part of Jewish worship in many liberal Jewish congregations. Despite such dramatic changes, as Goldman's work indicates, these reforms were not without conflict. Although the women came to synagogue, their presence at services did not mean that they were granted communal authority, even in the most liberal of these institutions.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, changing gender norms were only one example of how powerfully Jewish political emancipation came to transform Jewish self-understanding.

In the early part of the twentieth century, this liberal Protestant version of Jewishness came into direct conflict with a very different understanding of Jewish enlightenment, the modern vision of Eastern European Jews. As millions of Jews immigrated to the United States, these religious practices were very much at odds with the forms of Jewish life they were accustomed to in Eastern Europe. Not only did many of these newly arrived Jews not recognize the liberal religious practices as Jewish; they did not have any simple way of explaining their own very different forms of enlightened Jewish expression.

## **Jewish Enlightenment in the East**

Jewish Secularism originated in Eastern Europe, and was imported to this country as part of the social baggage of Eastern European immigrants.

—Herbert Parzen, 1959

Although it is often assumed in popular imagination that culturally backward Eastern European Jews were enlightened only as they made their way west, as the above passage suggests, this was not the case.<sup>20</sup> The other, and perhaps even more important, story of Jewish enlightenment for U.S. Jews took place in Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup> Although Eastern European Jews were never granted political emancipation, they were very much affected by the legacy of the Haskalah or Jewish enlightenment well before they reached the shores of the United States. It is this inheritance that interests me as it has come to shape contemporary expressions of Jewishness.<sup>22</sup>

The notion of “modernity” or cultural enlightenment as enacted in Eastern Europe is not a simple matter. Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged any unitary reading of these processes.<sup>23</sup> Although much of the scholarship on Jewish enlightenment has privileged the experience of Central and Western European Jews, Eastern European Jews complicate the ways rationality, secular education, and the study of science, philosophy, and literature became a part of Jewish self-understanding in Eastern Europe. Here “secular,” in English, became the term for what was understood as a series of worldly knowledges and practices. It did not necessarily bring with it the privatization of Jewish religious observance. In some instances, there was a wholesale rejection of religious practice; in others, there was an embrace of any variety of worldly political and cultural enactments. To be clear, in the East, modernity and enlightenment rarely led to political emancipation as they did in the liberal nation-states of the West. Instead they offered new modes of sometimes uniquely Jewish cultural and political expression (modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures and various forms of Jewish nationalism), as well as more universal expressions of culture and politics to which Eastern European Jews adhered.

In other words, for the Jews of Eastern Europe, enlightenment values were not necessarily linked to remaking Jewishness into a matter of faith or, for that matter, denominations. Enlightenment was enacted in other venues and on other terms.<sup>24</sup> Here modernization was not a matter of becoming bourgeois; in fact, for many Eastern European Jews, poverty and political disenfranchisement led to more radical forms of enlightened politics. These Jews became involved in socialism and communism as Jews. They accentuated their Jewish particularism even as they participated in these larger political movements. In Eastern Europe, Jews used the languages of socialism, communism, and nationalism to envision their own transformed versions of modern Jewish communal life.

For some, this meant seeing the Jewish people as their own nation. This nation was conceptualized as either a separate entity within the boundaries of Eastern Europe or as a nation with their own independent state and their own forms of modern Jewish cultural expression. In all of these ways, Eastern European Jews used the expansive public dimensions of traditional Jewish life, those aspects of rabbinic Judaism as an autonomous political and social entity that Western Jews gave up in order to become citizens of liberal nation-states, to construct their own enlightened Jewish positions. In the East and, eventually, in the Yiddish speaking world of U.S. Jews, these autonomous forms of Jewish communal life were greatly expanded. And, in the early part of the twentieth

century, it was these enlightened secular Jews who took on leadership roles in the immigrant community.<sup>25</sup> They used culture as well as politics to solidify their own enlightened notions of Jewish community.

By focusing on the distinctiveness of Jewish culture, they took pride in the creation of new Jewish literatures in both Hebrew, their ancient sacred tongue, and Yiddish, their modern Jewish vernacular. Eastern European Jews created modern Hebrew as a living language, even as they transformed Yiddish into modern poems, stories, novels, and plays.<sup>26</sup> It should also be noted that still other groups of Eastern European Jews wrote Jewish poetry, novels, and short stories in both Polish and Russian.<sup>27</sup> In all of these instances, Eastern European Jews used Western enlightened cultural forms to fashion themselves as modern Jews. Instead of reconstituting their Jewishness as a form of bourgeois religion, they both mimicked and transformed enlightened cultural expressions and politics to make sense of their own lives. They staged performances as well. Making powerful use of the Yiddish theater, they literally enacted their discomforts, remaking them into both art and artifice.<sup>28</sup>

### **Worldly Versus Religious Jews**

For many Eastern European Jews, modernity meant liberation from the restraints of a more stringent religious way of life. Their new modern Jewish identities were no longer bound by ritual practice; they were worldly, or, as they were to call themselves in the United States, “secular.” The Yiddish term for what is often referred to as “secular” Jewishness is *weltlikh*, deriving from the Yiddish word for world or universe. It describes, in the broadest terms, a kind of Jewish cosmopolitanism that included both rational and nontheistic ways of being in the world as Jews.<sup>29</sup>

Given this legacy of enlightenment, the encounter with those Jews already in the United States was somewhat confusing. Although these more acculturated Jews offered a model of how to succeed, there were few Eastern European analogies to this explicitly religious form of enlightened Jewishness.<sup>30</sup> In Eastern Europe, the notion of enlightenment went hand in hand with a sense of worldliness. It was primarily on these terms that Eastern European Jews’ deferred hope for political emancipation rested. But, of course, what they found in the United States was something quite different. Here there was little place for their worldly forms of enlightened Jewishness. Instead they found themselves being asked to enter into what Mordecai Kaplan described as the only form of acceptable Jewish difference in their new home.

In this country, as well as all other countries where the Jews have been emancipated, the synagogue is the principal means of keeping alive the Jewish consciousness. . . . [It] is the only institution which can define our aims to a world that would otherwise be at a loss to understand why we persist in retaining our corporate individuality.<sup>31</sup>

Faced with this very different strategy, the question was, how much of these other forms of enlightened Jewish expression would these new immigrants be able to maintain?

The vast majority of Eastern European Jews who came to this country at the turn of the last century were the least educated, the poorest, and the most desperate. My argument is not that these Jews were particularly enlightened but rather that even these Jews had a very different sense of what it might mean to be modern as they entered the United States. And so it was that Eastern European Jewish immigrants brought with them a mixture of pride, shame, nostalgia, and joy in the Yiddish culture and politics they left behind.<sup>32</sup> Most still spoke and read Yiddish in their new home, learning about the world through the pages of a vibrant U.S. Yiddish press.<sup>33</sup> They learned how to become Americans through these papers. As Riv Ellen Prell and other Jewish historians have argued, the Yiddish press played an active role in assimilating Eastern European immigrants into the middle-class norms of American culture.<sup>34</sup> In other words, these papers not only taught immigrants how to dress, how to speak, and how to decorate their homes, but they also continued to influence their politics.

In addition to reading Yiddish newspapers, these immigrants also kept alive other parts of their Eastern European Jewish culture. They went to the Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side of New York City and sought out traveling Yiddish theatrical productions as they played in smaller venues across the country.<sup>35</sup> They continued to enjoy the diet they had known in Eastern Europe, now increasingly understood as simply Jewish. These immigrants performed these secular rituals that kept them linked to the Jewish culture of Eastern Europe even as they strove to assimilate into U.S. society. Although there were pockets within this community that remained loyal to the radical socialist politics they brought with them to the United States, and still others who remained observant of *Halacha* or Jewish law, most of these immigrants had only vague relations to any of these traditions.<sup>36</sup> For these Jews, coming to the United States was not an all-or-nothing proposition.

What is difficult in the present is trying to characterize the “religious” practices of all Eastern European Jews, not only those who remained religiously observant but also those who had begun to give up their religious commit-

ments in Eastern Europe. There were any number of permutations among and between what was cultural and what was religious or Halachic in terms of diet, foods, and everyday practices. When asked why certain foods were or were not eaten, immigrant Jews offered numerous explanations. In other words, not all who kept some semblance of a kosher diet did so as a religious obligation. For many it was just what their families had done, it was familiar and comforting, and they did not do so out of religious obligation. Such practices had many, even contradictory, meanings for those who performed them.

These Jews should not be confused with what we now think of as “Orthodox” Jews. Here again the terms and categories of “religion” obscure historical and cultural differences. “Modern Orthodoxy,” for example, began as a Western European movement. It was a response to religious reform, and its leaders included figures such as Samson Raphael Hirsch, who believed it was possible to be fully modern in the public sphere and fully observant at home. For him, the issue was that the reformers had gone too far.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, to speak of “Modern Orthodoxy” in the present in the United States is to recognize strands of this Western European tradition as it merged with some of the practices of only some observant Eastern European Jews. And this is only part of the story. The arrival of Orthodox and Hasidic refugees, especially after 1945, has come to reshape Orthodox Judaism in the United States yet again.<sup>38</sup> These later refugees brought with them the remnants of their traditional communities in order to rebuild them and have been extremely successful in these efforts.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Demise of Yiddish Secular Culture Revisited: The Move to *Judaism***

Although most scholars agree that the unraveling of Yiddish secular culture in the United States occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there is less agreement about why this culture came to an end as a vernacular communal practice.<sup>40</sup> I want to take a step back and see this problem in a larger historical context, remembering both the end of Jewish immigration in the 1920s on the one hand, and the traumatic destruction of the center of secular Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe with the Holocaust on the other. To do this, I turn to feminist poet and writer Irena Klepfisz, a child survivor of the Holocaust who grew up after the war in some of the last of these secular, Yiddish-speaking communities in the United States. By illustrating the complexity of this historical moment, her account sheds light on the ways that the end of Yiddish as a secular vernacular in the United States was not so much about the ideology

of Yiddish secularism as about the larger historical forces that led to the end of these communities. For Klepfisz, both the power of assimilation after the end of the great migration of Eastern European Jews to the United States in the 1920s and the Holocaust made Yiddish secular culture increasingly a less viable way of being Jewish in the United States after the Second World War.

In Klepfisz's account, these losses are palpable. For her, secular Yiddish culture offers contemporary Jews a path not taken. It is a viable alternative to the narrow, religiously construed Jewishness of dominant U.S. Jewish culture. By telling this story in its brokenness, her account also prefigures the kinds of postvernacular Yiddish cultural expression addressed in Jeffery Shandler's remarkable study, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture*, on new ways of being Jewish that build on that culture in innovative and surprising ways that speak to younger generations eager to claim other forms of Jewish cultural expression as their own.

In her essay "Secular Jewish Identity: *Yiddishkayt* in America," Klepfisz describes her own encounter with the demise of Yiddish secular culture in the United States. For her, the world of Yiddish in the United States was a new home. It was the space in U.S. culture that defined her Jewishness. And although her own first language was Polish, and along the way she learned to speak Swedish and English, Yiddish was the language of her mother's secular Jewishness and her own. For Klepfisz, being a U.S. Jew meant being a secular Bundist, a Jewish socialist who spoke and read Yiddish.<sup>41</sup> Growing up in the shadows of the Holocaust, she found herself a part of yet another community that was dying, although as she explains in her essay, she did not realize this at the time. It is only much later as an adult that she came to understand that the U.S. Yiddish-speaking world in which she was raised no longer exists.

It is with great sadness that Klepfisz writes about the loss of this *yidische svive*, this Yiddish-speaking world. The loss is complicated; not all is lost. Klepfisz believes that secular *Yiddishkayt* can be revived in new forms. She believes there is both a need and a desire for this kind of Jewish cultural expression in the present. She believes there is a place for a kind of broken Yiddish culture, a secular Yiddish culture for those who no longer speak the language of their ancestors but who bring other things to this cultural legacy. These other commitments include feminist and queer politics, jazz and art, literature and film.<sup>42</sup>

As Klepfisz explains, these contemporary Jews present not only a "totally new phenomenon, Yiddishists without knowledge of the Yiddish language but deeply committed to the survival of Yiddish culture;" they also include a growing movement of Jews committed to fully reclaiming Yiddish language,

literature, music, and theater in the present. In other words, although the vast majority of secular, assimilated, and liberal religious Jews may not speak Yiddish fluently, these Jews nevertheless may present a viable future for Yiddish secular culture in the United States.<sup>43</sup>

Despite these signs of hope, what Klepfisz clearly describes in her essay is a generational loss. As the immigrants who came to the United States between 1880 and 1920 and their children began to die, and without an ongoing influx of new Yiddish speakers coming into this world, it became difficult to sustain these communities. And, although refugees like Klepfisz and her mother helped bring new life into this Jewish world after the war, the reality was that there were no more secular Yiddish speakers left in Europe after the Holocaust. Although many Eastern European Jews and their children continued to speak Yiddish, by the second and third generations, the number of Yiddish speakers in the United States also dwindled.

What is it about U.S. culture and the specific experiences of these immigrants that made sustaining Yiddish—much less its various secular cultural expressions—so difficult? One partial answer to these questions can be found in the pages of *Judaism*, a journal that was founded in the early 1950s to meet the needs of a new generation of U.S. Jews. As I will demonstrate, here we find Jewish secularists grappling with precisely these issues. I focus on this journal and its first decade of publication because it is a pivotal moment in the consolidation of the kind of religious expressions of Judaism and Jewishness I have argued become hegemonic in the postwar United States. The journal expresses the desire to affirm a profoundly religious notion of Judaism, and in the process it also traces in its pages the last breath of what were explicitly secular and cultural forms of Jewish identification that become increasingly unlivable after the war. In *Judaism* we find the convergence of these quite disparate versions of U.S. Jewish identification and literally see how, in order to survive, Yiddish secularists try to reimagine their movement in increasingly religious terms.

\*\*\*\*\*

The only enduring type of pluralism which the structure of American life envisages lies in the field of religion. . . . It is within the rubric of religious pluralism, therefore, that the basis for permanent survival of the Jewish group as an indigenous element of American Life is to be sought.

—Robert Gordis, 1952

*Judaism* marks a Jewish embrace of religious pluralism, and yet in the process of solidifying this vision, the journal also allows the last generation of U.S. Yiddishists to offer traces of a road not taken, their efforts to maintain secular Yiddish positions and communities. And yet, as they become increasingly desperate, they come to find themselves advocating for a reinvention of their explicitly secular movement in religious terms, agreeing with Gordis's assessment of the future of U.S. Jewish life. There is a sad irony to these essays. They show explicitly the generational tensions in defining Jewishness and increasingly make clear that, as Kaplan suggested, in the United States, the future depends on redefining Judaism as ultimately and only in religious terms.

*Judaism*, a journal of the American Jewish Congress, was first published in 1952. As Robert Gordis, a Conservative rabbi and professor of biblical exegesis at the Jewish Theological Seminary, explained in the opening essay of the very first issue, this new journal was dedicated to a revival of Judaism after Hitler and after the founding of the State of Israel.<sup>44</sup> Gordis inaugurates the journal with a commitment to reassessing the Jewish religious tradition as a basis for the future of the Jewish people.<sup>45</sup> He also suggests that like the journal itself, there is in the American Jewish community more broadly a kind of religious revival, especially among a new generation of U.S. Jews, Jews no longer satisfied by the enlightened answers provided by reason and science.

By highlighting the limitations of the secular discourse of science, Gordis goes on to argue for religion as the basis for ethical judgment and insists on the new journal's commitment to reassessing Judaism as a religious tradition. As he explains: "The Jewish community can boast of a number of valuable periodicals concerned with various aspects of Jewish life, but we regard it as an indefensible lacuna that practically none is primarily concerned with the philosophy, ethics, and religion of Judaism as a factor in the contemporary world."<sup>46</sup> *Judaism* was established in order to meet these needs.

*Judaism* carries within its pages traces of the various forms of Jewish cultural, political, and intellectual life it was leaving behind, and this included the legacy of secular Yiddish culture. This is why, especially in its early years, it included explicitly secularist essays. Nevertheless, reading through the pages of the first fifteen years of the journal, one notices that the pieces about Yiddish secularism grow increasingly sparse, and by 1960 they are primarily about the demise of this cultural formation and what might be done to transform these legacies for the future. And, by the mid-1960s, the definition of secularism itself shifts. It no longer refers to Jewish worldliness but rather, quite explicitly, to the absence of religion, with virtually all discussions of secularism now focused on Israeli

and not U.S. Jewish culture.<sup>47</sup> Reading these early essays shows why Yiddish secularism did not survive and how this form of Jewish cultural identification gave way to religious definitions of American Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism.

I now want to turn more directly to two of these essays, Herbert Parzen's "The Passing of Jewish Secularism" and Saul L. Goodman's "Jewish Secularism in America." What these writers describe, and even Gordis suggests at the end of his inaugural essay, is that, in the United States, it is only through religious pluralism that Jews can survive as Jews. But need this still be the case? Is it possible to imagine a place for other forms of cultural difference, including the various broken versions of secular Jewishness that continue to exist in the United States? These are the issues that animate both essays as another way of understanding the status of U.S. Jews even in the present. Although in both instances the writers are very much concerned about the future of Jewish secularism, they each offer vivid critical descriptions of U.S. culture to make their cases. In what follows I build on these descriptions to challenge these cultural norms in the present.

### **"The Passing of Jewish Secularism"**

Parzen opens his 1959 essay by addressing what he sees as the dual impasse faced by conscientious secularists. As he explains, "in separating themselves from the Synagogue—the basic institution of the historical tradition as the inevitable instrument for the survival of organized Jewish life in America, they are committed to foster a substitute—a secular Jewish culture sufficiently resourceful to reward them with self-fulfillment and to assure group survival."<sup>48</sup> Secularists need to have a central institution, a substitute for the synagogue on the one hand. And, on the other, they need to become contemporary. Although "Jewish secularism was destined to flourish temporarily and artificially in this country," this is no longer the case.<sup>49</sup> It may have made sense to an immigrant generation of Eastern European Jews, but it is no longer viable; its adherents are aging and have little to offer to a new generation of U.S.-born Jews. Parzen continues by saying that Jewish secularism "can no longer serve as an agency for self-fulfillment and survival."<sup>50</sup> He explains that the only form of cultural difference that is recognized and respected in the United States is religious difference.

American culture is unitary and national, by design and intent. The only exception is religion. And though there is a clear-cut contemporaneous tendency to de-emphasize this tradition, the separation of Church and States is, nevertheless, a regnant rule in American thought

and life; it decisively directs, likewise by design and intent, that religious phases of American civilization shall be diverse, discrete, and necessarily, pluralistic.<sup>51</sup>

This account is offered as what we might now call a reality check, a reminder to the remnant of Jewish secularists that their program no longer makes any sense. He continues, “Thus, religious pluralism is the law of the land.” This is in sharp contrast to secularist notions of cultural pluralism that were developed in Eastern Europe. As Parzen explains, in the United States as in Western Europe, Jews “achieved adjustment to the general social order on the primary basis of religious tolerance.”<sup>52</sup> It was expected that Jews would conform to the cultural patterns of the state and not maintain separate cultures. Parzen is frustrated that these seemingly simple truths have not been taken up by Jewish secularists, who seem to go on as if they were living elsewhere, insisting that they can maintain their old ways even in the United States.

As it turned out, by and large Parzen was right: secular forms of Jewishness were dying. Before assessing the “perilous position of present-day secularists in the United States,” circa 1959, Parzen makes one final point that is worth reiterating. He clarifies that Jewish secularists should not be confused with assimilationists. This is a crucial point, one reaffirmed almost thirty years later by Irena Klepfisz. As Parzen explains, “secularists must be differentiated from assimilationists. The first planned to preserve Jewish peoplehood and its culture, the second sought absorption or ‘integration’ in the dominant civilization.”<sup>53</sup> As Parzen makes clear, secularists were very much committed to Jewish culture and a Jewish future. What is painful is that their strategies did not survive in the United States. By the end of the twentieth century, it had become virtually impossible to recognize the differences. Given this, by 1986 Irena Klepfisz had to fight hard to make the case that it was possible to be a committed secular Jew, a notion that sounds like an oxymoron to most contemporary U.S. Jews.

And yet it is precisely the memory of these secular traditions that helps explain the contradictions that so many contemporary Jews experience around their own Jewish positions in the present. Rereading Parzen helps us recall that these traditions were a part of the “social baggage” that Eastern European Jews brought with them to this country.<sup>54</sup> He also reminds us that the loss of these traditions is part of the price that eastern European Jews paid to become U.S. citizens. They had to give up these forms of Jewish cultural expression to become a part of the dominant culture. To assimilate into the dominant Protestant culture of the United States, Jews were required to identify their Jewishness as a form of religious faith to remain visible as Jews.

Having made these cogent arguments, Parzen concludes his essay by looking at specific Jewish secularist positions and explaining where he thinks they go wrong. He moves from general Zionists, to labor Zionists, to Yiddishists, and finally to a group he calls native Jewish intellectuals. He demonstrates how and in what ways each of these groups failed, but he saves his most vehement critique for this final group who persist “in a sort of no-man’s land, on the periphery of Jewish life and on the margins of American culture, discontented, dismayed, disjointed.” For Parzen, the message is clear, for all of these Jews there is no future. Appealing to Jewish tradition, he concludes his essay by describing these Jews as *nishmatin artilain*, ‘naked souls,’ meandering about the world without balance and without consistency! This, it seems to me, is the fate of Jewish secularists in the United States.<sup>55</sup> In this way Parzen ultimately rejects Jewish secularism in order to assure a more stable Jewish future. In the United States, Jews need to position themselves as a religious group to survive as Jews, and none of these groups was willing to do this.

### “Jewish Secularism in America”

By way of contrast, Saul L. Goodman attempts to tell a different, but again not uncritical, story about the future of Jewish secularism in his essay “Jewish Secularism in America: Permanence and Change.” The subtitle of this essay conveys the tension at its heart. Goodman wants permanence as well as change and is willing, in a sense, to let go of the secular in order to save Jewish secularism.

Goodman wrote this essay while directing New York’s Yiddish secular Sholom Aleichem Schools. He wrote from within the Yiddish secular world as both an educator and a scholar. Although like Parzen he is critical of what was happening to Jewish secularism in the United States, he very much wanted there to be a future for this movement. Precisely because he was committed to the future of American Jewish secularism, he was willing to consider change, even radical change. Goodman went so far as to suggest the viability of Jewish secularists self-consciously joining religious Jewish communities to make this possible.

At the heart of Goodman’s essay is his struggle to come to terms with religion as a secularist. For him, religion had already come to structure Jewish life in the United States. His question was what are secularists to do with this reality? After providing a brief overview of the origins of Jewish secularism in the nineteenth century and the crises faced at the eve of the Second World

War, including a disillusionment with not only the promises of emancipation gone sour in Western Europe and a lack of faith in the larger promises of progress at the heart of the enlightenment more broadly, he makes his case. As he explains,

in addition to these altered internal factors within the Jewish community, the general climate of opinion in America was radically different now. Modern man became disillusioned with technical-material progress that did not satisfy his hunger for genuine loftiness, did not give him a *raison d'être*, and left a void in place of the old faith that promised immortality, permanence, and tranquility.<sup>56</sup>

Goodman builds on this disillusionment. Like Parzen, he wants something to take the place of this old faith in reason. He wants a new foundation since he too no longer finds it in reason or science.

In this way, Goodman sets up his quest to reclaim “religion” as a secularist. He uses this broader disillusionment and longing for a lost idyllic past in order to reconsider some of the basic tenants of Jewish secularism. By challenging the opposition between religion and Judaism within some of the earliest U.S. proponents of Jewish secularism, Goodman hopes to make it easier for other secularists to reconsider the merits of religious community for the future. He turns to the writing of Jewish secularist Leibush Lehrer in order to present this secularist position so that he can then take it apart point by point.

As Goodman explains, in the late 1930s Lehrer argued that Judaism was not to be equated with religion. According to Lehrer, religion was in essence an individual psychic experience that could not be confused with Judaism. “Judaism is mainly a code which regulates the lives of Jews as belonging to a collectivity.”<sup>57</sup> Lehrer suggested that even the English term *secular* makes no sense when applied to Judaism. Judaism need not be secularized since it was never a religion. Moreover, as Goodman goes on to explain, the Yiddish term *Weltlikh* and the English word *secular* are clearly not one and the same thing. In other words, *secular* is not the opposite of *religion*. In the case of Yiddish secular Jews, not being religious did not mean that they were not committed to Jewish culture and Jewish tradition.

I think it helpful to quote from Goodman’s text at some length to fully express the way he builds on this earlier Yiddishist position citing Lehrer explicitly.

In Judaism the essence is not theological but rather legalistic; not metaphysical sanctions but sociological functions; not whether you have faith in God but whether you observe the sancta (*Mitzvoth*) is what counts. Which is another way of saying that the true substance of

Judaism is expressed in folkways, observances, in culture, in tradition, in Law, (*Halakhab*), and conduct; not in “fear of the Lord”, not in piety, nor in creedal dogmas. “Judaism” is primarily a folk idea, a concept of conduct.<sup>58</sup>

Here the distinctions are sharp. Judaism is presented as a unique cultural formation that is anything but a religion. Yet in order to make this case, Lehrer appeals to the kinds of Jewish stereotypes most often deployed by Christians against Jews. Jews are legalistic and clannish as opposed to spiritual and universal. According to Goodman, this is the secularist position at its most extreme and most pernicious in terms of how dominant U.S. culture would see it given its rootedness in Protestant Christianity.

Although there is something to be said for this notion of Judaism as a legal, cultural, and social folk tradition whose sole purpose is the survival of the Jewish people, Goodman believes there is more to it than just this. He suggests that even for secularists, Judaism offers something that is also transcendent, something that could be understood using the language of religion.

In the final portion of his essay, Goodman presents his own constructive argument. Like Parzen and Gordis, Goodman sees the future of the Jewish people in America as contingent upon the redefinition of the Jewish people as a religion. “American Jewish community life, including its secular-cultural elements, should be put into a religious framework.” Using the work of Jewish sociologists to make his case, he explains that there can be no Jewish communal future without an accommodation to the dominant norms of U.S. culture. “[I]n order to get the sanction of America to Jewish group survival, we must declare ourselves to be a religious community. Inasmuch as America will not consent officially to a permanent ethnic or linguistic separateness, our descendants will not exert themselves to preserve their Jewishness.”<sup>59</sup> This is the crucial point. In order to find a place for secularists among already established explicitly religious Jewish communities, those sanctioned by the dominant culture secularism must become, in a sense, religious.

Goodman concludes his essay by offering one final “American twist to the concept of Jewish secularity” by appealing to John Dewey’s distinction between the adjective *religious* and the noun form *religion*.<sup>60</sup> As Goodman explains, “the adjective religious denotes an attitude, a disposition, a commitment.” According to Dewey, “any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal and against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring values is religious in quality.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, Goodman used Dewey to bolster his position for claiming the language of religion. He argues that for Jews to do whatever it takes to secure the survival of the Jewish people,

Jewish values, and Jewish practices, the explicit goals of Jewish secularism, they are, in Dewey's sense, "religious." For Goodman, religious secularism, although seemingly an oxymoron, is, nevertheless, a way of securing a future for secular Jews. As he explains: "The Jewish secular conception is an attempt by all who are seeking to identify themselves with the Jewish group through modern means; it is an attempt to harmonize the prevalent ideas of modern culture with the historic Jewish heritage."<sup>62</sup>

In this way Goodman ends his essay by placing his efforts to renovate Jewish secularism within a broader historical framework and uses Dewey, the quintessential American thinker, to do this. As Goodman reads it, in every generation, Jewish secularists have rethought their Jewish inheritance in the present. They have sought to reconcile modern culture and Judaism. Jewish secularists have attempted time and time again to offer "satisfactory rationale" for what it means to be a modern Jew. In Goodman's case, U.S. culture demanded that he embrace a new form of Jewish religiousness even as a secular Jew.<sup>63</sup> Although this schematization, this rigid adherence to the terms of liberal assimilation made sense for Goodman in 1959, I want to suggest that in 2007 it is time to reconsider this wager and the ongoing effects of this embrace of liberal pluralism. In order to allow for the diversity of Jewish expression both historically and in the present, it would be worthwhile to consider the implications of what it would mean not to define Jewishness in religious terms. Instead U.S. Jews might consider claiming the diversity of Jewish expression outside of the confines of religious pluralism.

## **Toward the Future**

Like Goodman and Parzen, I too end with thoughts about the future of Jewish secularism but at a different historical juncture. There is, of course, no going back to their specific world. The community out of which Goodman wrote no longer exists. In this essay I have returned to Goodman, Parzen, and others to remember that there was a Jewish secularism, that the vast majority of U.S. Jews did not necessarily come to this country at the turn of the twentieth century with the notion that Jews were a religious minority. I have returned to this tradition to better explain the place of Jews in U.S. culture and what it might mean for Jews to more fully accept our own complicated positions as Jews who never quite fit into a religious definition of our Jewishness. What this earlier generation of explicitly Jewish secularists reminds us is that some of our own discomforts are not of our own making. They remind us that U.S.

culture, despite its promise of inclusion, still finds it difficult to embrace cultural differences. Moreover, they remind us that liberal inclusion has always been only partial. In Brown's terms, "the triple forces of recognition, remaking and marking—of emancipation, assimilation and subjection" all remain operative. To be accepted as Jews into U.S. culture we have had to remake our Jewishness into a form of private religious faith containing our Jewish difference to the "church and home." By returning to the archive of *Judaism*, I have tried to show how this model of Jewish inclusion has never quite fit the realities of Jewish existence in the United States, especially after the vast migration of Eastern European Jews to this country in the early twentieth century. Moreover, this problem was not unknown to precisely these same Jews. Secular Yiddishists were quite clear about the limitations of liberal inclusion. Although I am not interested in resurrecting their particular solutions, I appreciate their early articulation of the problem. By seeing these issues spelled out by an earlier generation of Jews, I believe we can more fully appreciate the need to resist this legacy in the present. This is very much the vision of many contemporary U.S. Jews involved in creative new forms of Jewish communal expression.<sup>64</sup> These new Jews are increasingly interested in not only revisiting Eastern European Jewish secularism, but also in exploring various other nonreligious forms of Jewish academic, cultural, and political expression.<sup>65</sup>

Liberal assimilation is never complete. As a process it is necessarily ongoing and partial, even as it holds out the promise of completion. We need to let go of this mechanism. For the vast majority of U.S. Jews, the descendants of Eastern European immigrants, this process of assimilation was a repetition with a difference. Like their predecessors, Jews who came from Central and Western Europe, these Jews tried to redefine themselves as religious to fit into U.S. culture, but the definition was not quite accurate. Although all of these Jews were compelled to assimilate into liberal religious norms, their efforts remained fraught; their Jewishness did not fit easily into this model of acceptable social difference. As I have argued, some overtly resisted this imperative. This was especially so in the case of secular Jews who refused to define themselves as religious. Given this, contemporary American Jews have been left a series of contradictions. American Jews are both too religious and not religious enough, too American and not nearly American enough.<sup>66</sup> The question of what it means to be an American Jew remains contradictory. Given that Jews are, as Yiddish literary critic Samuel Niger put it, "a historic ethico-cultural, and socio-politico-economic-psychological phenomenon," there remains no easy or simple way of containing Jewish difference.<sup>67</sup> Instead of changing, I

believe we need to reconsider these norms for acceptance and their ongoing effects. I have returned to the writings of Jewish secularists because these Jewish thinkers worked hard to resist adhering to the category of religion in defining themselves as American Jews.

By reclaiming the complexity of Jewish modernization and enlightenment offered to Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century, we remember that there are other ways to be Jews in the United States. We need not continue to adhere to the failed promises of liberal inclusion. The example of Eastern European Jewish secularists suggests the impossibility of this model as well as what it might mean to challenge the notion of religious pluralism as a means to Jewish social acceptance. They make clear that for this to happen it is not Jews who must change but, rather, U.S. culture and its notions of cultural inclusion. By letting go of liberalism as this defining discourse, it might be possible to imagine other ways of describing and inhabiting positions Jewish or otherwise eccentric to the dominant culture of the United States in the present and in the future.

## Notes

This essay was inspired by the work of Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, especially the special issue of *Social Text* they edited, "World Secularisms at the Millennium," *Social Text* 64, 18.3 (Fall 2000), and their coauthored book *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004). A version of this essay was originally written for their collection *Secularisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming [2008]). That essay is titled "Other Moderns, Other Jews: Revisiting Jewish Secularism in America." I am indebted to Janet and Ann for critical editorial suggestions and advice on that essay.

1. For more on this problem, see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York: Routledge, 1997), esp. chaps. 3 and 4.
2. For more on these very different legacies of enlightenment, see the primary sources collected in Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
3. Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 53.
4. On this issue of liberalism's promise and effacement, see Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*, esp. introduction and chaps. 1 and 4.
5. I thank Ayako Sairenji and David Watt for sending me back to particular essays in *Judaism*. These articles include the following: Abraham Menes, "Religious and Secular trends in Jewish Socialism," *Judaism* 1.3 (July 1952): 218–26; Herbert Parzen, "Eastern European Immigrants and Jewish Secularism in America—1882–1915," *Judaism* 3.2 (Spring 1954): 154–64; C. Bezalel Sherman, "Nationalism, Secularism, and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement," *Judaism* 3.4 (Winter 1954): 354–65; Abraham Menes, "The East Side—Matrix of the Jewish Labor Movement," *Judaism* 3.4 (Winter 1954): 366–80; Samuel Kreiter, "Sh. Nigier—Yiddish Humanist," *Judaism* 6.4 (Fall 1957): 334–38; Herbert Parzen, "The Passing of Jewish Secularism in the United States," *Judaism* 8.3 (Summer 1959): 195–205; Saul L. Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America," *Judaism* 9.4 (Fall 1960): 319–30.
6. See Sara Horowitz, "The Paradox of Jewish Studies in the New Academy," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 116–30.
7. Parzen, "The Passing of Jewish Secularism," 196.

8. Paula Hyman, "Enlightenment," in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs*, ed. Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: Free Press, 1987), 167.
9. See Hyman, "Enlightenment," and Brown, "Regulating Aversion," on this point as well as my own discussion in Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*, esp. chap. 3.
10. See Parzen, "The Passing of Jewish Secularism," 196; and Joseph L. Blau, "What's American About American Jewry?" *Judaism* 7.3 (Summer 1958): 208–18.
11. See the *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), s.v. "denominate."
12. Hyman, "Enlightenment," 167.
13. See Robert J. Baird, *Inventing Religion in the Western Imaginary* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, forthcoming), and his essay in Jakobsen and Pellegrini's *Secularisms*. See also Pellegrini and Jakobsen's account of the genealogy of religion in their introduction to "World Secularisms at the Millennium," *Social Text*, 17–20, as well as their introduction to *Secularisms*. Other key works include: Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84; Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism and Diversity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a haunting historical account of these issues, see the entry for "Religion, or Theology," in the first edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Edinburgh: A. Bell and C. MacFauquhar, 1771). For more on this entry and the relationship between Protestantism and Enlightenment, see David Harrington Watt, "Protestantism," in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 2007).
14. Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*.
15. Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*.
16. See Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*, chap. 3.
17. See Tracy Fessenden's "The Convent, the Brothel, and the Protestant Woman's Sphere," *Signs* 25.2 (Winter 2000): 451–78; and Parzen's 1954 essay "Eastern European Immigrants and Jewish Secularism," esp. 155–56.
18. On the feminization of American Judaism, see Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
19. See Karla Goldman's careful account of these tensions and conflicts in *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*, esp. in chaps. 4, 5, and 6.
20. This narrative is usually associated closely with what Stephen Steinberg describes as the myth of the "Jewish Horatio Alger" on the one hand and the romanticization of the shtetl on the other. See Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (New York: Antheneum, 1981); and Caren Kaplan, "'Beyond the Pale': Rearticulating U.S. Jewish Whiteness," in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998): 451–84. On the role of Russia and the shtetl in particular in Jewish imagination, see Steven Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).
21. On the differences between Eastern and Western Jewish efforts as modernization and enlightenment, especially in terms of gender, see Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).
22. Between 1880 and 1920, more than 2 million Jews from Eastern Europe migrated to the United States. They came from the Russian Empire, Poland, Austria-Hungary, and Romania. See Gerald Sorin, *A Time of Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Irving Howe's classic study *The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976); Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Plume, 1975); Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (New York: Schocken, 1988); Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).
23. On this issue of multiple Enlightenments, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

24. On these issues, see the primary sources collected in Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz's *The Jew in the Modern World*. See also David Weinberg, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Haim Zhitlowski, Simon Dubnow, Ahad Ha-Am, and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1996).
25. See Parzen, "Eastern European Immigrants and Jewish Secularism."
26. See Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Alan Mintz, *"Banished from Their Father's Table": Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). For a powerful critique of the politics of modern Hebrew literature, see Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).
27. See Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*; Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland Before the Holocaust* (1977; New York: Schocken, 1994); Michael Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997), esp. chap. 1 on Polish Jewish cultural production; and Carol Balin, *To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000).
28. I am grateful to Paul Reitter for his fascinating account of the power of Yiddish theater in German Jewish imagination. Paul Reitter, "Karl Krauss's Yiddish Theater," conference paper, Los Angeles, Association for Jewish Studies, December 2002.
29. Alexander Harkay, *English-Yiddish Dictionary* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1929). See also the discussion of *Weltlihb* verses, secular, in Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America."
30. See *Image Before My Eyes* for examples of more liberal enactments of Jewish religious life in cosmopolitan Poland.
31. Mordecai Kaplan, 1917, as quoted by Abraham Karp in his introduction to *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Abraham Karp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 31.
32. For a particularly nostalgic look at this phenomenon, see the highly popular videos produced by WLIW21 Public Television about the creation of "Jewish Americans": *A Laugh, a Tear, a Mitzvah* (New York: WLIW21, 1996), 90 min., and *Another Mitzvah* (New York: WLIW21, 1997), 90 min.
33. In addition to the extensive treatment of the importance of the Yiddish press presented in the various articles from *Judaism*, especially Parzen, "East European Immigrants and Jewish Secularism," see Maxine S. Seller, "Defining Socialist Womanhood: The Women's Page of the Jewish Daily Forward in 1919," *American Jewish History* 76.4 (1987): 416–38; Riv Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); and Barbara Schreier, *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880–1920* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1995).
34. See Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, esp. chaps. 2 and 3.
35. On the role of Yiddish theater as well as the Yiddish press and literature in promoting secular Jewish culture in the United States, see Parzen, "East European Immigrants and Jewish Secularism," 161–62.
36. On these issues, again, see Parzen, "East European Immigrants and Jewish Secularism." This is a position close to my own heart. It is the position taken by my own grandparents. See my discussion of my maternal grandmother's citizenship in the introduction to *Jews and Feminism*.
37. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters on Judaism* (New York: Feldheim, 1969). See also the various primary sources collected in *The Jew in the Modern World*, ed. Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz.
38. Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 28.4 (Summer 1994): 64–130. I thank Ellen Frankel for this reference.
39. On the growth of ultra-orthodoxy at the expense of more modern forms of Jewish orthodoxy, see Samuel G. Freedman's *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken, 1992); and Heilman and Menachem Friedman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim," in *Fundamentalism Observed*, vol. 1 of the Fundamentalism Project,

- ed. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 197–264. For a more historical account of U.S. orthodoxy, see Jenna Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
40. On postvernacular Yiddish culture, see Jeffery Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddish Land: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). The demise of Yiddish culture after World War II is connected not only to the Holocaust and the destruction of so much of what was Eastern European Jewish culture; it is also linked to the aging and assimilation of the first generation of Eastern European Yiddish-speaking immigrants who came to the United States at the turn of the century. Another aspect of this move away from Yiddish culture in the United States is connected to the cold war and McCarthyism. Many of the most radical adherents to various forms of Yiddish politics and cultural production were blacklisted during the fifties. For more on this, see Michael Staub, *Torn at the Root: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
  41. For a more developed reading of Klepfisz's essay and her secular Jewishness, see Laura Levitt, "Feminist Spirituality," in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, ed. Peter Van Ness (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 305–34.
  42. This move echoes the more expanded argument made by Shandler in *Adventures in Yiddishland*.
  43. See Klepfisz, especially the final section of her essay devoted to *Di tsukunft*, the future, 159–84. See also Levitt, "Feminist Spirituality"; quote on 161.
  44. Robert Gordis, "Towards a Renaissance of Judaism," *Judaism* 1.1 (January 1952): 3–11.
  45. Gordis, *Towards a Renaissance*, 4.
  46. *Ibid.*, 5.
  47. An example of this is Nathan Rotenstreich's "Secularism and Religion in Israel," *Judaism* 15.3 (Summer 1966): 259–83. This has become the dominant reading of Jewish secularism. See, for example, Ben Halprin, "Secularism," in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, 863–66.
  48. Parzen, "The Passing of Jewish Secularism," 195.
  49. *Ibid.*
  50. *Ibid.*
  51. *Ibid.*
  52. *Ibid.*, 195, 196.
  53. *Ibid.*, 199, 197.
  54. *Ibid.*, 197.
  55. *Ibid.*, 205.
  56. Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America," 320.
  57. *Ibid.*, 321.
  58. Lehrer, as cited by Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America," 321. These seem to be Goodman's own translations. As his notes suggest, these passages come from a Yiddish text, Leibush Lehrer's *Yiddishkeit und Andere Problemen*.
  59. Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America," 324.
  60. As Goodman explains, this is a distinction Dewey makes in his *Common Faith* (Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America," 330).
  61. Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America," 330; Dewey, as cited by Goodman, *ibid.*
  62. *Ibid.*
  63. It should also be noted that Goodman continued to write and think about these issues. His later publications include the anthology *The Faith of Secular Jews* (New York: Ktav, 1976).
  64. For more on these various forms of communal expression, especially in relation to a younger generation of U.S. Jews, see Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman, "The Continuity of Discontinuity: How Young Jews Are Connecting, Creating, and Organizing Their Own Jewish Lives" (New York: The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007); and Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman, "Cultural Events and Jewish Identities: Young Jewish Adults in New York" (New York: The National Foundation for Jewish Culture, 2006). Cohen offers an account of their most recent study in "Continuity Beyond Communal Walls," *The Forward*, May 25, 2007. For a broader account of new Jewish cultural expression in the transnational present, see David Shneer and Caryn Aviv, *New Jews: The End of Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
  65. One important venue for this new work, especially in the academy, is the work of the Posen Foundation. The foundation has taken a leading role in promoting new scholarship on the legacy of secular Jewish

forms of expression. They have sponsored new scholarly works, books, and encyclopedia projects, as well as courses and programs of study at numerous colleges and universities in the United States and internationally. For more information about the Posen Foundation go to <http://www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/grants> (accessed June 29, 2007). Under the auspices of this program, at Temple University we have instituted a new undergraduate certificate program in secular Jewish studies.

66. On this problem of excess as a form of mimicry, where assimilation is always already partial and incomplete, see Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*, introduction and chap. 1, as well as the discussion of Jewish whiteness in Caren Kaplan, "Beyond the Pale."
67. As cited by Goodman, "Jewish Secularism in America," 326.