JEWISH CULTURE COMES TO AMERICA*

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For centuries, the Jewish community of North America labored under the stigma of being culturally backward. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the leader of nineteenth-century Reform Judaism in the United States, recalled that when he arrived in New York in 1846 he found "but three men in private life who possessed any Jewish or any Talmudical learning ignorance swayed the scepter, and darkness ruled."[1] Cyrus Adler, then the librarian of the Smithsonian Institution, complained as late as 1894 that American Jewry had "no libraries, no publications and no independent scholars."[2] Nineteenth-century European rabbis often described America as a *treifene medina*, an "unkosher land." The dearth of Jewish books, book learning and book publishing, help to explain why.[3]

* A longer and somewhat different version of this paper will appear as the chapter on "Jewish Publishing" in Carl F. Kaestle and Janice Radway (eds.) *A History of the Book in America*, vol. IV. I am grateful to Cambridge University Press for permitting me to republish the material here.

1 Isaac M. Wise, *Reminiscences*, Cincinnati 1901; reprinted New York: Central Synagogue, 1945, pp. 23–24; see also Isaac M. Wise, "The World of My Books," translated by Albert H. Friedlander, *American Jewish Archives* 6 (June 1954), reprinted in Jacob R. Marcus (ed.), *Critical Studies in American Jewish History*, New York 1971, I, p. 154.

2 Cyrus Adler to the "American Hebrew", 9 December 1894, in Ira Robinson (ed.), *Cyrus Adler: Selected Letters*, Philadelphia 1985, I, p. 70.

3 Arthur Hertzberg, "'Treifene Medina': Learned Opposition to Emigration to the United States," *Proceedings of the 8th World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 1–30.

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The two leading religious leaders of American Jewry in the nineteenth century, Isaac Leeser (1806–1868) of Philadelphia, and Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati (1819–1900), labored to combat this sorry situation. As a result of their concern about the lack of quality Jewish education and their eagerness to strengthen Jewish religious life — one as a proponent of Americanized Orthodoxy and the other of Americanized Reform — the two men mounted vigorous publication programs. Between them, they wrote, translated and edited almost 150 different works, and edited three of the community's foremost periodicals. Influenced by the democratization of print culture, the burgeoning growth of Christian religious journalism and the manifest success in America of "books, tracts and publications of all kinds," Leeser and Wise looked to the printed word to further two central objectives articulated by Leeser himself back in 1845: first, to provide American Jews with "a knowledge of their faith," and second, to arm them with the "proper weapons to defend against the assaults of proselyte-makers on the one side and of infidels on the other."[4] These same two objectives — Jewish education and communal defense — would remain central themes of American Jewish print culture forever after.

Jewish newspapers — those of Leeser, Wise, and others — dominated American Jewish cultural life in the nineteenth century. If they were not the "grand engine of a burgeoning...culture" that evangelical newspapers are reputed to have been,[5] they did indeed play a vital role in shaping the very notion of a national Jewish culture and community. They served as a prime source of in-group news and information, provided a forum for religious education and debate, and functioned as the hub of the communications web linking Jews from one end of the country to the

4 Isaac Leeser, "Address of the Jewish Publication Committee to the Israelites of America," preface to *Caleb Asher*, no. 1 in the series *The Jewish Miscellany*, Philadelphia 5605 [1845], 1–4, reprinted in part in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 2nd edition, New York 1995, pp. 461–463. On the growth of religious journalism, see Nathan Hatch, "Elias Smith and the Rise of Religious Journalism in the Early Republic," in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. William L. Joyce et al, Worcester 1983, pp. 250–277.

5 Hatch, "Elias Smith," p. 250.

other. By the Civil War, Jewish newspapers published in New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and San Francisco reached hundreds of communities, some of them places where only a single Jew resided.[6]

Nineteenth-century American Jews also produced books — several thousand of them, in fact — but the vast majority consisted of institutional documents, lectures, sermons, textbooks, prayer books, translations and imports. Henry Frank, a Jewish immigrant from Bavaria, and later his son, Leopold, issued more than fifty volumes beginning in 1848/9. Bloch & Co, (later Bloch Publishing Company), founded in Cincinnati in 1854 by Isaac Mayer Wise's brother-in-law, produced more than three times that number. Dozens of other printers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, produced books of Jewish interest.[7] For the most part, however, volumes brought out in this way lacked serious editing and required significant subsidies in order to be published.

Compared to Germany, the center of Jewish scholarship and culture, the American Jewish community's literary output remained embarrassingly small. American Jews imported far more in the way of Jewish culture than they created independently, and very little of what they did create was deemed worthy of export.

In the late nineteenth century, as America's Jewish population multiplied, its cultural productivity kept pace. Robert Singerman's comprehensive bibliography of Judaica Americana published to 1900 makes it possible to quantify this change.[8] The gross number of publications listed decade by decade demonstrates slow steady growth, which expanded rapidly in the 1880s and 90s:

1850–1859	507
1860–1869	565

6 Rudolf Glanz, "Where the Jewish Press Was Distributed in Pre-Civil War America," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 5 (1972/73), pp. 1–14; *idem*, "The Spread of Jewish Communities Through America Before the Civil War," *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science* 15 (1974), pp. 7–45.

7 The index to Robert Singerman, *Judaica Americana: A Bibliography of Publications to 1900*, New York 1990, includes a gazetteer of publishers and printers, making it easy to trace the output of individual firms.

8 Singerman, *Judaica Americana*, is the authoritative bibliography of publications to 1900.

1870–1879	659
1880–1889	1046
1890–1899	2017

A noticeable rise also took place in the quality of American publications pertaining to Jews, as evidenced by the appearance of such volumes as: Emma Lazarus's *Songs of a Semite* (1882), Moses Mielziner's *The Jewish Law of Marriage and Divorce* (1884), and the first parts of Marcus Jastrow's monumental *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (1886–1903).

Yet as the American Jewish community grew larger, the cultural ties that bound it together frayed. Cleavages developed along generational, social, religious and class lines. Language too became a divisive factor in American Jewish life, for Jews now spoke an array of different languages, including English, German, Ladino and especially Yiddish, but no longer shared a common language.

In this transitional era, Jewish leaders looked to books as a source of salvation. A traditional symbol of unity among Jews, books historically brought status both to the individuals who wrote them and to the communities that produced and owned them. A community that published quality books and boasted a great library was elevated in its own eyes and in the eyes of world Jewry.[9] The American Jewish community, having grown almost overnight into one of the five largest in the world, coveted precisely that status. The founding of the Jewish Publication Society, in 1888, followed by an array of other book-related projects, promised to fulfill that desire, and aimed to unify American Jews in the process.

America's emergence as a cultural center of world Jewry took place during the first two decades of the twentieth century — just when America was beginning to make its mark in so many other ways on the world stage. During these years, both native and immigrant Jews

9 Cecil Roth, "The People and the Book," *Personalities and Events in Jewish History*, Philadelphia 1953, pp. 172–173.

experienced a sense of cultural independence. No longer did they have to depend upon Europe for great books and new ideas; now they could look to themselves for resources. Nor did they feel compelled to turn to Europe for legitimation; increasingly, if sometimes grudgingly, Europeans came to recognize American Jewish works.[10]

Two early twentieth-century events heralded American Jewry's "arrival." The first was the publication in New York of volume one of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* in 1901. It signified both that Jewish cultural authority was passing to the New World and that the language of Jewish scholarly discourse was shifting to English. The Hungarian Jewish scholar Wilhelm Bacher, in his review of the *Encyclopedia*, crowned New York as the new "center of Jewish scholarship."[11]

The arrival in 1902 of one of the world's foremost Jewish scholars, Solomon Schechter, who had left England for New York to assume the helm of the newly reorganized Jewish Theological Seminary of America, seemed to confirm this judgment. Coming just a year after the encyclopedia began to appear, this second event reinforced the sense that a great cultural transition was taking place, and that American Jewry was now in the ascendancy.

The books issued by the Jewish Publication Society, while geared to a more popular audience, reflected the same goals. By the second decade of the twentieth century, JPS was publishing important original works by authors living in America: *The Legends of the Jews* by Louis Ginzberg (1909–1913),[12] *Zionism* by Richard Gottheil (1914), and, most significantly of all, *The Holy Scriptures*, a new Jewish translation of the Bible overseen by the American Jewish scholar, Max Margolis.[13]

10 Michael A. Meyer traces this development to the last third of the nineteenth-century; see his "German-Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model.* New Brunswick, 1987, pp. 247–267.

11 Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *The Emergence of Jewish Scholarship in America: The Publication of the Jewish Encyclopedia*, Cincinnati 1991), esp. pp. 16, 86–87.

12 Additional volumes appeared in 1925, 1928, and 1938. Ginzberg, of course, was an immigrant, and he wrote his original manuscript in German.

13 Jonathan D. Sarna. *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture 1888-1988*, Philadelphia 1989, pp. 29–112; Joshua Bloch, *Of Making Many Books*, Philadelphia 1953, pp. 37–135.

Even the books published by East European Orthodox Jewish immigrants demonstrated an appreciation of the American Jewish community's new status. In the nineteenth century, Menahem Blondheim shows, these Hebrew-language books usually carried approbations (*haskamot*) from rabbis back in Eastern Europe; the only rabbi practicing in America who was deemed significant enough to endorse a book was New York's Chief Rabbi, Jacob Joseph. By contrast, during the first quarter of the twentieth century the number of *haskamot* provided by American Orthodox rabbis rose sharply. Over half of the Orthodox works Blondheim examined for the years 1902–1925 carried endorsements **solely** from Orthodox rabbis practicing in America, and almost seventy percent of them carried an endorsement from at least one American rabbi. What this means, Blondheim has persuasively shown, is that in the twentieth century, the source of legitimation for the immigrant Orthodox shifted to America. Their books, no less than the ones produced by the Jewish Publication Society and by the scholars of the Jewish Theological Seminary, bespoke American Jewry's coming of age.[14]

Cultural independence, of course, did not depend entirely on the publication of books. To be taken seriously as a center of Jewish culture and to enable high-level scholarship to proceed, American Jewry had to develop world-class Jewish libraries as well. These too emerged in the early part of the twentieth century, thanks to the ardor of energetic Jewish book dealers like Ephraim Deinard, who traveled the world assembling and importing large collections of Judaica, and to the visionary philanthropy of Jewish leaders like Mayer Sulzberger and Jacob Schiff, who purchased these collections for American libraries.[15] In 1904, Sulzberger donated his own private library, assembled in large

14 Menahem Blondheim, "Ha-Rabanut Ha-Ortodoksit Megaleh Et Amerikah [The Orthodox Rabbinate Discovers America]" in Miriam Eliav-Feldon (ed.), *Be-'ikvot Kolumbus: Amerikah 1492-1992*, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 492–494.

15 Adolph S. Oko, "Jewish Book Collections in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book 45* (1943–44), pp. 67–96; Robert Singerman, "Books Weeping for Someone to Visit and Admire Them: Jewish Library Culture in the United States, 1850–1910," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore 20* (1998), pp. 99–144.

part with Deinard's help, to the Jewish Theological Seminary in the hope that the Seminary would become "the centre for original work in the science of Judaism." Beginning about 1910, the library of Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College moved to compete with the Seminary, seeking to "gather and preserve every procurable literary record of the Jewish past." Jewish libraries under government and university auspices also proliferated in America at this time: notably the Judaica Division (est. 1898) of the New York Public Library, the library of the University of California at Berkeley, the Library of Congress (which established its Semitic Division, later the Hebraic Section, in 1914), Harvard and Yale. Significantly, the major Judaica collections in these and several other public and university libraries were established, maintained, and classified separately from the general collections of these libraries. For all that Jewish Studies had achieved, on the shelves of America's great libraries, Jewish books — like American Jews themselves — were still segregated from the mainstream.

All these themes — American Jewry's cultural emergence, the quest to unite Jews around a common culture of print, the effort to strengthen Jewish education and Jewish religious life, and the relationship between Jewish books and non-Jewish books — came together in one of the most ambitious American Jewish publication projects of the early twentieth century: the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics. The project, announced amidst great fanfare by the Jewish Publication Society in 1915, looked to produce twenty-five volumes of carefully edited post-biblical Jewish classics with texts, translations and scholarly notes, on the model of the Loeb Classical Library. Jacob Schiff was James Loeb's brother-in-law, and the cultural and religious symbolism — expressed in each case through book sponsorship — could scarcely have been more transparent. Loeb, an assimilated Jew who craved social acceptance, attached his name to the central literary canon of western civilization, one that excluded all of the great Jewish cultural works written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. Schiff, a proudly identifying Jew who scorned assimilation, attached *his* name to the very works that his brother-in-law excluded. Where the Loeb Classics implied that Jews kowtowed to western civilization, the Schiff Classics were designed to

demonstrate the opposite — that Jews had a rich classical literature of their own.[16]

The Schiff series also demonstrated that painstaking textual scholarship — "the collation and accurate edition of ... original sources and documents" — could now be accomplished by Jewish scholars working in America. Two decades earlier, such textual scholarship could scarcely have been attempted in America; the requisite books and manuscripts lay across the ocean. Now, thanks to the country's newly created Judaica library collections, everything had changed. The Schiff Classics demonstrated that in textual scholarship too, American Jewry had arrived.[17]

As an unintended benefit of the Schiff Classics project, America became a significant center of Hebrew printing. Until World War I, American presses possessed only limited printing capabilities in Hebrew. Demand was low, and it proved cheaper to send Hebrew books to Europe or Palestine in order to be printed.[18] The kind of high quality printing demanded by the JPS for the publication of its classics simply could not be found in the New World. The war, which cut America off from quality Hebrew printing and resulted in the destruction of some of Europe's most famous Hebrew presses, called attention to the pitfalls of this kind of dependency. In response, the Jewish Publication Society decided to acquire its own high-quality Hebrew press: a pair of European-manufactured monotype machines with duplex keyboards. Inaugurated in 1921, the new press was managed by a former employee of the highly prestigious and now destroyed Romm Press of Vilna (Moses Alperovich), who seemed to embody precisely that cultural transfer from Europe to America that the press and the classics series as a whole represented. In time, under the management of Maurice Jacobs at

16 Sarna, *JPS*, pp. 120-130, provides a full history of the Schiff Classics.

17 Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter: A Biography* Philadelphia 1948, p. 259; Jonathan D. Sarna, "Two Traditions of Seminary Scholarship," *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, New York 1997, V. II, pp. 59–61.

18 See, for example, Nathan M. Kaganoff, "American Rabbinic Books Published in Palestine," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. Bertram W. Korn, New York 1976, pp. 235–261.

JPS and then after 1950 as an independent venture under Jacobs' name, the press became one of the world's foremost printers of Hebraica and Judaica. It reenacted, through books and printing, a perennial pattern in Jewish history, creating a new cultural center from the ruins of the old.[19]

For all that it succeeded in achieving and symbolizing, the Schiff Classics project ultimately failed. Only nine of the twenty-five originally scheduled works appeared; the rest were cancelled. As a group, the classics proved too high-brow for most readers. They did not unite American Jewry around a common cultural canon, and certainly did not broaden the corpus of "Western Civilization" to include Jewish works. What the series did do, in retrospect, was to point to the growing rift within the American Jewish community with regard to the meaning and purpose of Jewish books. On one side stood the Jewish Publication Society's idealistic and somewhat elitist vision of cultural stewardship, which saw books as instruments for elevating, integrating and transforming the American Jewish community. On the other side stood a more popular mass vision, which judged books largely on the basis of their sales potential, usefulness and enjoyment value.

Bloch Publishing symbolized the more pragmatic approach toward books. In its mission and mode of operations, it represented, in a sense, everything that JPS was not. Where JPS was idealistic, Bloch was utilitarian; reputedly, publisher Charles Bloch "considered favorably any manuscript which in his judgment would yield him a profit." Bloch produced and sold a wide range of Jewish books — its own and others — in several languages, as well as textbooks and religious articles. Far from being highly selective, as JPS was, it unashamedly "acted as literary midwife for scholarly, semi-scholarly and popular books" alike. Indeed, it sought to embrace *all* Jewish books. Its sales bulletin, which served for many years as the most reliable listing of Jewish books in print, presumed that the Jewish community broke down into an assortment of brow levels, tastes, ideologies and religious movements, each with special book needs of its own.[20]

19 Sarna, *JPS*, pp. 127-28.

20 Charles Madison, *Jewish Publishing in America*, New York 1976, p. 76.

More specialized Jewish publishers, focusing on narrower segments of the community, also emerged at this time. The most important of these was the Hebrew Publishing Company (est. 1901) that catered largely to an immigrant and Orthodox clientele that read Hebrew and spoke Yiddish. Hebrew Publishing produced and sold everything from effusive greeting cards and romantic sheet music to educational textbooks and pious religious texts. It helped its customers navigate their way between the old world and the new, offering them familiar devotional literature, pirated from Europe, alongside Yiddish-English dictionaries and highly-touted self-help books designed to socialize and uplift those who sought to get ahead; for example, Alexander Harkavy's *American Letter Writer with Useful Information and a Treatise on Book Keeping [in] English and Yiddish* (1902), and Tashrak [I.J.Zevin]'s *Etikette* (1912). Books of high and low culture, religious works and secular ones — all found willing readers within the immigrant community, and all were therefore issued by the Hebrew Publishing Company. Having understood that even the community of immigrant readers was heavily divided and segmented, the Hebrew Publishing Company reached out in various directions simultaneously.[21]

The inter-war years witnessed a sharpening of these lines of division within the American Jewish community. The end of mass immigration, burgeoning generational and religious conflicts, the growth of universalist, nationalist and revolutionary ideologies, the rise of anti-Semitism, and, of course, the inevitable impact of social, cultural, political and economic forces operating within American society at large — all these convulsed American Jewry. The books and periodicals published during these years, far from drawing the community together, both reflected and fueled the divisions. By World War II, American Jewry boasted a pro-Communist Yiddish Cultural Association (YKUF) and an anti-Communist Central Yiddish Cultural Organization (CYCO), both of which published significant books in Yiddish; there were also Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jewish publishers; Zionist and Hebraist publishers; several scholarly publishers; and

21 Madison, *Jewish Publishing in America*, pp. 77–84, 206–207.

assorted publishers that sought to create textbooks for Jewish schoolchildren.[22] Periodicals proliferated even more broadly, spurred in part by demands from professional groups for journals of their own.[23]

For all of this evident fragmentation, however, the ideal of American Jewish "unity through books" continued to inspire leading Jews. The "book" remained an important Jewish cultural symbol, and being characterized as "the people of the book" still distinguished Jews from their neighbors. As a result, efforts through the medium of books to "bring Jews back together again" persisted throughout the twentieth century. For example, the massive 1600 page *Jewish Communal Register* (1918), published by the New York Kehillah, attempted — within the covers of a single book — to bind together the variegated segments of New York Jewry in the hope that this figurative "binding" would serve as a precursor to the "well-ordered, well-organized Jewish community" that was the organization's ultimate goal. The *American Jewish Year Book*, published annually beginning in 1899, promoted itself in a similar vein. According to its longtime editor, Harry Schneiderman, writing in 1948, a prime purpose of this annual record of events and trends in American and world Jewish life was to serve "as a force for the promotion of the homogeneity of the Jewish community of the United States." The *Year Book*, he believed, was itself an agent of change, working, among other things, to "keep alive and to nurture in the hearts of American Jews that sense of kinship and common destiny which has inspired our community worthily to fill the role of big brother to our overseas brethren."[24]

The destruction of European Jewry in World War II — the brutal murder of scholars and writers, the burning and looting of libraries, the rack and ruin of established presses — brought together the two themes

22 Madison, *Jewish Publishing in America*, pp. 84–100, 206–217; see also the annual bibliography of American Jewish books published in the *Jewish Book Annual*.

23 Sarna, "The History of the Jewish Press in North America," *The North American Jewish Press: The 1998 Alexander Brin Forum*, Waltham 1995, pp. 6–7; *American Jewish Year Book* 43 (1941–42), pp. 631–642.

24 Harry Schneiderman, "American Jewish Year Book, 1899–1948," *American Jewish Year Book 50* (1948–49), pp. 87–88.

that, we have seen, dominated the history of the Jewish book in America since the late 19th century. First, the Holocaust demonstrated to American Jewry, even before the full details of the Nazi horrors were known, that they had become, in the words of historian Jacob Rader Marcus writing in 1941, "the heart of Jewish life":

> Almost everywhere Jewish books are being destroyed. Almost nowhere outside the United States are they being printed. The Jewish Publication Society is the only surviving literary medium of mass instruction west of Jerusalem.... Jewish culture and civilization and leadership are shifting rapidly to these shores.[25]

Indeed, with the last remaining Jewish presses in continental Europe destroyed or shut down, only those in England, Palestine and the Americas continued to operate. The Jewish Publication Society took this as a challenge. "Our press," Maurice Jacobs declared, "is ready to assume its greater responsibility. The record of the scholarly presses of Europe can and will be duplicated and perhaps surpassed in the scholarly Press of Philadelphia."[26]

Second, with the mantle of Jewish cultural leadership thrust upon them, American Jews again looked to books to bring them together. The prayer book produced by the National Jewish Welfare Board for Jewish soldiers in the American armed forces reflected this quest for unity. Composed of sections from Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox liturgies, the volume received the endorsement of all three branches of Judaism and was printed in hundreds of thousands of copies.[27] The Jewish Book Council, founded in 1942 and subsequently (1944) sponsored by the National Jewish Welfare Board reflected this same desire for harmony. An outgrowth of Jewish Book Week (later book month), initiated by librarian Fanny Goldstein in 1925, the Book Council sought to spark "a Jewish renaissance in America," in response

25 *American Jewish Year Book 43* (1941–42), p. 789.
26 Quoted in Sarna, *JPS*, p. 183.
27 Sarna, *JPS*, p. 188.

to the destruction of the Jewish communities of Europe. To this end, it stressed its "impartiality as regards denominational loyalties" and promoted all manner of books in English, Hebrew and Yiddish "to infuse in both young and old the traditional ardent zeal for Jewish knowledge." It looked to Jewish books in general — though not in this case to any one book in particular — to unite Jews and help them, as one rabbi put it, "to understand better the creative Jewish spirit and the creators of Jewish values."[28]

In summary, then, these two ambitious goals — to forge a new Jewish cultural center in America and to integrate American Jewry into a nationwide community bound together by a common culture of print — were themes central to all of American Jewish publishing from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries. The American Jewish community became culturally self-sufficient at this time, and after years of competition came to succeed Europe as the unofficial center of the Jewish diaspora, a status tragically confirmed by the Shoah. Much to the disappointment of the communal elite, however, the unification of American Jewry never fully took place. Even as improvements in communication strengthened ties among American Jews, the forces of social, economic, political and religious diversification impeded the creation of a common group culture. Instead of uniting American Jews, print media represented all that divided them.

28 Madison, *Jewish Publishing in America*, pp. 64–67; Oscar I. Janowsky, *The JWB Survey*, New York 1948, pp. 348–49; Michael N. Dobkowski, *Jewish American Voluntary Organizations*, Westport 1986, pp. 202–204; Philip Goodman, "A Chronicle of the Jewish Book Council of America," *Jewish Book Annual 25* (1967–1968), pp. 366–389.