

Living Politically in Two Civilizations

The Politics and Political Culture of American Jews, by Arthur A. Goren
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REVIEWED BY REENA SIGMAN FRIEDMAN

What was the significance of the mass funeral held for the beloved Yiddish writer, Sholom Aleichem, in 1916?

What role did the Yiddish newspaper, the *Morgen Zhurnal*, and its publisher, Jacob Saphirstein, play in Republican politics at the turn of the century?

What can the congressional campaigns of Morris Hillquit and Meyer London (in 1908 and 1910, respectively) tell us about the ethnic and political loyalties of East European immigrant Jews?

How did American Zionists make use of the image of the “*halutz*” (Jewish pioneer in Palestine) to advance their cause?

What did the planners of the 1954 Tercentenary Celebration (marking 300 years of Jewish presence in America) hope to prove to themselves and others?

These are among the thought provoking questions raised by Arthur

Goren in his recently published anthology, *The Politics and Political Culture of American Jews*. Each of the essays in this rich collection explores a discrete topic in American Jewish history, spanning the period from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1970's. Yet all of them relate in some way to the overall theme of Jewish political activity, both within Jewish communal circles and in the larger American context.

Collective Identity

On a more fundamental level, the author is concerned with American Jews' efforts to formulate and project a sense of collective identity which ensures both complete integration into American society and Jewish continuity. American Jewish leaders, he notes, have long struggled with these issues. In his landmark 1907 address, entitled “The Problem of Judaism in America,” Dr. Israel Fried-

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laender, Professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, articulated the anxieties many felt about Jews' abilities to balance participation in American life with retaining group ties and fulfilling their responsibilities to world Jewry.

In essence, this is a book about how American Jews have dealt with the challenges and rewards of "living in two civilizations," to borrow Mordecai Kaplan's phrase. As Goren explains, it is a complex process:

The twin desires for ethnic survival and personal acceptance into American society were rarely posed as an either-or choice. Much of Jewish communal thought was directed toward formulating strategies and programs to mitigate tensions through compromise and accommodation, or by redefining the group's Jewish identity and the character of American nationality. (p. 14)

Some of the essays discuss well known episodes in American Jewish history, such as the establishment of major communal organizations or the contributions of famous Jewish labor leaders. Yet even when the subject matter is familiar, Goren supplies additional information, offers fresh perspectives or provides a more complex analysis.

For example, much has been written about the founding of the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, as well as

the early clashes between their two leaderships and constituencies. The author, however, delves more deeply to examine the backgrounds and motivations of major players such as Louis Marshall and Stephen Wise, enabling the reader to better understand the public positions that they took.

Similarly, most accounts of the early years of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee emphasize the organization's ability to bring together individuals from many different sectors of the community in a common relief effort. Goren demonstrates that, though the JDC's mission was ultimately successful, quite a few tensions lay beneath the surface.

Zionism

In his chapters on Zionism, Goren also illuminates important, though less well known, aspects of a much discussed topic. While we know that there were many different factions within American Zionism, most scholars have emphasized the work of political Zionists and the movement's early organizational challenges, rather than ideological differences among its leaders. Goren evaluates the impact of cultural or spiritual Zionists within the American Jewish community, focusing on four individuals: Israel Friedlaender, Judah Magnes, Mordecai Kaplan and Louis Finkelstein.

In assessing the responses of the first two leaders to the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, and the

last two to the passage of the Biltmore Program in May 1942, the author discusses the reservations they expressed about the goal of Jewish political sovereignty in Palestine. Once the post-war need for a haven for Jewish refugees became clear, Kaplan and Finkelstein certainly supported the creation of the state. However, the earlier arguments of cultural Zionists — that such objectives were unattainable under existing conditions, deviated from the true goals of Zionism (i.e. the cultural renaissance of the Jewish people) and might exacerbate international tensions — constituted an important critique of mainstream political Zionism.

In addition, these Zionist spokesmen emphasized the importance of the American Jewish community, as well as the positive cultural influence which Israel would have on Jewish life in this country.

Public Pageants

In other cases, the author examines more obscure events, those not discussed in other surveys or mentioned only in passing, and reflects on their broader significance. One particularly interesting chapter explores the phenomenon of public Jewish funerals in the early twentieth century. The author provides detailed descriptions of funeral rites organized for such well known figures as Kasriel Sarasohn, Orthodox leader and publisher of the *Yiddische Tageblatt* (1905); the Yiddish playwright, Jacob Gordin (1909); the famous writer, Sholom Aleichem

(1916); and Jewish labor leaders, Meyer London (1926), Morris Hillquit (1933) and Baruch Vladeck (1938).

Goren views the funerals as “public pageants” which variously blended traditional Jewish mourning rituals, East European customs honoring departed leaders, socialist ceremonial and American organizational techniques. The funerals were occasions for communal bonding, when mourners rededicated themselves to the ideals represented by the deceased, affirmed their collective identity and projected carefully crafted self images to the larger society. Along with rallies, parades and other mass demonstrations, the funerals helped to create a domain of “Jewish public culture,” in Goren’s words.

The treatment of the funeral of Rabbi Jacob Joseph is an example of Goren’s ability to view familiar events through a new lens. Several historians have discussed the ill-fated career of Rabbi Joseph, who was brought to the United States in 1888 in a vain attempt by Orthodox leaders to establish a Chief Rabbinate in the United States. Existing accounts of the 1902 funeral have focused either on the fact that Rabbi Joseph died in poverty or on the Irish-Jewish riots which erupted during his funeral procession. In contrast, Goren is more interested in the ways in which East European Jewish immigrants transplanted Old World burial rituals for great scholars to the U.S. as a means of strengthening communal solidarity in their new land.

Post-War Decades

Much has been written about American Jewry in the postwar decades, including the phenomenon of suburbanization, Jews and liberal politics, communal policy regarding Israel, Jews and the Left and Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights movement. Goren's essay, "Inventing the New Pluralism," sheds light on a little known chapter in the history of this period: the activities of the American Jewish Committee's National Project on Ethnic America. In an effort to defuse the mounting racial tensions of the 1960's, AJC leaders broadened the scope of their work beyond particularistic Jewish concerns to support the interests and preserve the ethnic consciousness of various urban, white ethnic groups. They conducted research, developed educational materials and worked to shape public policy in this area. In the process, they helped to forge a new, pluralistic vision for America as a whole.

In some instances, Goren's book breaks entirely new ground by challenging commonly held assumptions regarding Jewish life in America. His analysis of Jacob Saphirstein and the *Morgen Zhurnal* (the major Orthodox Yiddish daily newspaper at the turn of the twentieth century) is a case in point. The essay "The Conservative Politics of the Orthodox Press" highlights Saphirstein's loyal support for the Republican Party on both the local and national levels. Saphirstein and his followers repre-

sented a segment of the immigrant Jewish community that was conservative, non-ideological, politically savvy and rather parochial in its interests. Such a picture contrasts sharply with the usual image that we have of the socialist minded, cosmopolitan, fervently ideological but somewhat naive residents of immigrant ghettos. As the author notes, this is a topic that deserves greater scholarly attention.

The Reconstructionist

There is much in this volume of interest to those with connections to the Reconstructionist movement. In addition to the obvious appeal of the book's central themes, several of the essays touch directly on the role of Mordecai Kaplan as a bold thinker and major contributor to American Jewish life. In his first chapter, which deals with various efforts to shape a definition of American Jewish identity, Goren presents Kaplan's concept of Judaism as a total civilization. Moreover, it was Kaplan who charged planners of the 1954 Tercentenary of American Judaism with failure to place American Jewry within the larger context of Jewish history or to evaluate its relationship with Israel and other Jewish communities around the world. As noted above, the questions raised by Kaplan, the spiritual or cultural Zionist, regarding the potential dangers of "statism," as well as the ultimate goals of Zionism, remain as meaningful today as in the 1930s and '40's.

In fact, *The Reconstructionist* magazine itself is praised as an important and influential voice within the American Jewish community. Goren cites a series of articles published in the immediate postwar period, a time of turmoil and upheaval for world Jewry. The first of these, an editorial which appeared on January 11, 1946, discussed the concept of the *halutz* which, according to Goren, had by that time become a central motivational image for Zionist work in the United States and worldwide. The journal's editors reinterpreted the term *halutz* to include American Jewish immigrants to Palestine who would not necessarily settle on kibbutzim but would apply their education and skills to the difficult challenge of absorbing the refugees then pouring into the country.

A subsequent editorial, dated January 23, 1948, reiterated this idea, stressing the unique contributions that Jewish settlers from the U.S. could make in bringing American expertise and "democratic principles" to that land. Interestingly, an article by Jack Cohen, entitled "*Halutziut* for American Jews" and published on December 27, 1946, further broadened the notion of *halutziut* to encompass Jewish communal work in America.

A Wider Context

The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews, like many of Goren's other works, focuses on particular events and personalities as keys to

understanding the larger themes and issues of American Jewish history. These varied essays, enriched by well-selected quotations and accompanied by extensive documentation, reflect the author's wide ranging knowledge and erudition. Written in a lucid style, they are valuable reading for academics and students of Jewish history, as well as anyone interested in tracing the roots of aspects of contemporary Jewish life.

In some instances, additional information might have "rounded out" the picture somewhat. For example, the fascinating chapter on the image of the *halutz* in American Zionist ideology includes a great deal of material on folksongs, dances and film. It also describes dramatic photo exhibits, such as the one featured at the Palestine Pavilion of New York's World's Fair from 1939-41. It would have been interesting to note, as well, the impact which art work focusing on *halutz*-related themes had on American Jews' support for Palestine in the early years. Moreover, the author discusses the ideal of gender equality in pre-state Palestine and cites passages from various reports attesting to a more equal role for women in the new society. However, he does not mention the fact that, for many if not most women, the reality fell far short of the ideal, a contention substantiated by much current research.

This anthology makes a most valuable contribution to the field of American Jewish history. Its essays all relate to Professor Friedlaender's

central concern: Could American Jewry “participate in the life and the culture around them and yet remain Jewish?” In this election year, the questions raised by Arthur Goren’s book are particularly relevant and meaningful. Senator Joseph Lieberman’s candidacy focused renewed attention on the role of Jews in American politics, their self-image as a

religio-ethnic group within American society and the challenges of “living harmoniously in two cultures,” as Friedlaender put it. The publication of this volume, which will certainly serve as an important historical guide as we continue to ponder these issues, could not be more timely.