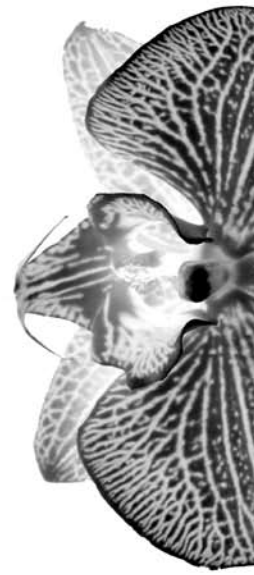


The Rise,
Fall,
and Rebirth of
Secular
Judaism





BY JONATHAN SARNA



THE TERM “SECULAR JUDAISM” SOUNDS LIKE AN oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. How can one simultaneously subscribe to Judaism and be secular? One is reminded of the perhaps apocryphal story of the Communists in late Tsarist terms who would often meet in the *bes medrash*, the house of study. One day they were studying Karl Marx and they got into a heavy debate over the existence of God. They argued back and forth, as pro-Communist ex-Talmudists were wont to do, and finally put the question to a vote. On a close ballot, God lost. At that point the *shammass* (beadle), who had been waiting patiently, got up. “*Rabovsai* (Gentlemen),” he said, “God or no God, it is time to daven *maariv*, time to say the evening prayer.” According to the story they all hastened to comply.

This ambivalence toward secularism, and jokes surrounding its seeming contradictions, may stem from its relative novelty in the world of ideas. The term itself is commonly attributed to George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906), the ironically named Englishman who literally wrote the early tracts on the subject. According to Holyoake, secularism

promotes three main principles: the improvement of this life by material means; the use of science for human betterment (“science is the available Providence of man”), and doing good. “The good of the present life is good,” Holyoake wrote, with some circularity, “and it is good to seek that good.” Above all else, Holyoake and his followers focused squarely on *this* world as opposed to the “world to come.” Indeed, the very term secular derives from a Latin form meaning “this world.”¹

Secularism owed a great debt to the Enlightenment, and specifically to the Jewish thinker Baruch Spinoza, who was born in Amsterdam in 1632. Spinoza’s views were seen as radical and highly dangerous in his day, and it is not surprising that the leaders of the young and highly insecure Jewish community of Holland eventually excommunicated him. But his influence was enormous. “Since everyone has a perfect right to think freely, even about religion, and cannot conceivably surrender this right, everyone will also have a perfect right and authority to judge freely about religion, and hence to explain and interpret it for himself,” he wrote.²

¹ <http://www.catholicity.com/encyclopedia/secularism.html>; “Secularism,” *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1991), 1696.

² *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, chapter 7:191 [(on p. 6 of *Judaism in a Secular Age: An Anthology of Secular Humanistic Jewish Thought* (Ktav, 1995), Renee Kogel and Zev Katz (eds.))].



Spinoza's emphasis on the right to "think freely" eventually give rise to a movement known as Free Thought, which in turn became popular in Revolutionary-era America. Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786) promised "that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in nowise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities." Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, published nine years later, attacked all major religions, including Judaism. "Every national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals," Paine declared. "Each of those churches accuses the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all."³

While Free Thinkers did not necessarily view Judaism sympathetically—Jefferson was somewhat critical; Thomas Paine was highly critical—Free Thought unquestionably advanced religious liberty for Jews, by opposing all forms of religious coercion. Indeed, when leading

Americans, including a former president of the Continental Congress, Elias Boudinot, and a future president of the United States, John Quincy Adams, became associated with an organization designed to convert Jews to Christianity (the so-called American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, founded in 1820), a leading Free Thinker named George Houston joined Jews in working to oppose it. His pamphlet, *Israel Vindicated*, written under a pseudonym, employed Free Thought arguments in defense of Jewish rights and liberties.⁴

Some Jews themselves became Free Thinkers and even avowed atheists. In 1834, a British-born New York Jewish chemist with the unusual name of Charles Cleomenes Coleman Cohen wrote in a newspaper called *The Free Enquire* that "I can attach no idea to the word God and cannot consequently believe in him." That very day an explosion in his laboratory blew him to bits. This naturally made the headlines—some viewed his death as Divine punishment—but at the same time, a newspaper sympathetic to Cohen noted that

³ Jacoby, Susan. *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (Metropolitan Books, 2004), p. 42.

⁴ Sarna, Jonathan D. "The Freethinker, the Jews, and the Missionaries: George Houston and the Mystery of Israel Vindicated," *AJS Review*, 5 (1980), pp. 101-114.

there were in the United States some half a dozen other Jews—“most intelligent men...well-educated in the Jewish faith”—who had become “professed and fearless Atheists.”

Nor was atheism confined just to men. The pioneering 19th century Jewish feminist Ernestine Rose, daughter of a Polish rabbi and one of the foremost women orators and human rights activists of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, was also an avowed atheist. “Agitate, agitate” was her memorable slogan. Though she was always known as a Jew and defended Jews who faced oppression, Ernestine Rose identified herself as an “infidel” and actually published *A Defence of Atheism*.⁵

Most 19th century American Jews, of course, were not atheists. The mid-19th century witnessed the immigration of over 150,000 Jewish immigrants from Central Europe, particularly Germany and Poland, and these Jews covered a wide religious spectrum. As a contemporary poet put it in 1848: “Some are reformed and wisdom boast/Some orthodox/indifferent most.”⁶ Indeed, as many as half of all American Jews in 1850 belonged to no synagogue whatsoever.

These so-called “indifferent” Jews—large in number, far-removed from the synagogue, and seemingly uninterested in the practice of Judaism—continued, for the most part, to identify as Jews, and at least some of them turn out upon close examination to have been anything but indifferent to the fate of the Jewish people. Joseph Lyons of Columbia, South Carolina, for example, stayed home on Yom Kippur and described himself in his diary as “almost an atheist.” Yet he

longed to write “a complete history of the Jews”; he associated and corresponded heavily with Jews; and he clearly thought a great deal about what being Jewish meant. In New York, a group of Jews unconnected with synagogues formed, in 1841, what they called the “New Israelite Sick-Benefit and Burial Society,” reputedly “the first overtly secular Jewish philanthropy in the United States.” The society may have provided a “secular” alternative to synagogue-based burial rites, but as its name indicates, it was very much concerned with “Israelites” and their needs.⁷

Nationwide, this critical postulate of secular Judaism—the idea that the bonds of peoplehood, rather than faith, can preserve Jewish life—found its most important institutional expression in the Jewish fraternal organization B’nai B’rith (literally, “sons of the covenant”). Established in 1843 with the motto “Benevolence, Brotherly Love, and Harmony,” the preamble to the order’s original constitution carefully avoided any mention of God, ritual commandments, Torah, or religious faith, but stressed instead the importance of Jewish unity. The organization was by no means anti-religious. Some of its members belonged to synagogues, and even played active roles within them. Yet the organization’s “emphatic” policy—codified in 1859—was neither “to interfere with nor to influence” religious opinions. (And in fact, “questions of purely religious character” were officially banned from the order for fear that they would produce “serious trouble and disastrous effects.”) While synagogues divided Jews and alienated some of

5 Suhl, Yuri. *Ernestine Rose and the Battle for Human Rights* (Reynal, 1959); Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, pp. 96-101; Ernestine L. Rose, *A Defence of Atheism, Being a Lecture Delivered in Mercantile Hall, Boston, April 10, 1861* (Boston 1881).

6 Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism: A History* (Yale University Press, 2004), p. 88.

7 Sarna, *American Judaism*, pp. 88-89.



them altogether, B'nai B'rith argued that fraternal ties—the covenant (*b'rith*) that bound Jews one to another regardless of religious ideology—could bring about “union and harmony” in Jewish life. A parallel organization called the “United Order of True Sisters” sought (with considerably less success) to organize Jewish women on the same secular communal basis.⁸

We can get a more intimate sense of this world of secular Jews of Central European origin by examining the case of Louis Brandeis, one of America’s best known and most distinguished

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secular Jews. Brandeis was born in Louisville around 150 years ago, in 1856. His grandfather and great-grandfather in Prague had been leaders in an antinomian Jewish cult movement known as Frankism, followers of the Jewish pseudo-messiah Jacob Frank, but his mother Frederika rejected the cult and raised her children in a home devoid of traditional Jewish learning and rituals, but strong on values such as high intelligence, a blameless mode of life, and a powerful sense of morals, justice, and charity. As an adult, Brandeis never belonged to a synagogue, observed no Jewish holidays, and enjoyed eating the tasty hams that his brother, Alfred, sent him from Kentucky. His family’s rituals were conspicuously secular: birthdays, anniversaries, family vacations at Chatham. The only religious holiday that the family seems to have observed with any regularity was Christmas, which was an occasion for gift-giving, and featured, for a

time, a traditional tree. Like most German Jews of their type, they would have considered theirs a thoroughly secular Christmas: a Christmas without Christ.⁹

What kept Brandeis Jewish was a deep personal sense of Jewish identity, a wide network of Jewish kin, and a late-burgeoning (in his fifties) commitment to Zionism, which linked him to Jewish people worldwide as well as to Jewish aspirations. And yet—significantly—he found this hard to transmit to his children. His daughter, Elizabeth, intermarried and ended up sharing

none of her father’s Jewish or Zionistic interests. Elizabeth’s husband, Paul Rauschenbush, was the son of the well-known liberal Protestant theologian, Walter Rauschenbush. Brandeis considered the boy a “rare find,” perhaps because Rauschenbush’s liberal ethical values (the social gospel) mirrored those of the Brandeis clan. But today, that branch of the family maintains no ties to Judaism. Brandeis’s niece, Amy, likewise intermarried and Brandeis described himself as “very happy” with that match. Brandeis’s daughter, Susan, did marry a Jew, and the Jewish attachments on that side are much stronger. Nevertheless, Brandeis, like other secular Jews, found it hard to justify endogamy (in-marriage) on ethical grounds and his descendants were therefore more likely than not to out-marry. In his case, as in so many others, secular Judaism proved inherently self-limiting.

Brandeis’s brother-in-law, Felix Adler,

8 *ibid*, p. 89.

9 Sarna, Jonathan D. “The Greatest Jew in the World Since Jesus Christ: The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis,” *American Jewish History* 81 (1994), pp. 346-364.



understood this problem earlier than most. As early as 1876, he publicly disavowed Judaism (with its dogma of in-marriage) in favor of “Ethical Culture,” a universalistic faith that focused on ethics and the study of world religions. His experience illuminated secular Judaism’s greatest challenge. Could it craft a this-worldly Judaism, bereft of God and religious ritual, that would nevertheless ensure Jewish continuity?

Immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe rose to meet that challenge. Between 1881 and 1924, almost 2.5 million of them immigrated to America. A large percentage cast off the practice of Judaism either before they left home or after they arrived on these shores, some adopting revolutionary ideologies in its stead. More than half failed upon their arrival to affiliate with a synagogue.

In place of religion, these Jews committed themselves to what they called Jewishness, or Yiddishkeit—a secular cultural Judaism that emphasized the importance of helping Jews, fighting antisemitism, and promoting universal social justice. They opposed all forms of religious coercion, insisting that both religion and anti-religion were “private affairs,” and they demanded that education and culture be protected from any form of heresy-hunting. “Secularism,” the great theorist of secular Judaism, Chaim Zhitlowsky, once proclaimed, “denotes the exclusion of everything that comes in the name of any revealed superhuman, supernatural authority, [or] divinity.”¹⁰

East European Jews in America succeeded in creating a secular Jewish culture—by far the most

successful secular Jewish culture ever created in the United States. It revolved around Yiddish, and it boasted institutions like the Workmen’s Circle (Arbeter Ring), the Yiddish press, schools (the Yiddische *schule*), camps, a thriving Yiddish literature, music, art, theater, food, and, in time, radio. Without ever entering a synagogue, secular East European Jews in America *felt* intensely Jewish.

Four critical factors made this secular culture possible. First, and perhaps foremost, was a shared language—Yiddish (*mamalosben*), the folk language of the Jewish masses. Yiddish also distinguished Jews from non-Jews and linked East European Jews in America to the self-governing Jewish world of Ashkenaz, rooted in the medieval German lands.

Second, patterns of residential segregation made secular Jewish culture possible. East European Jews overwhelmingly lived in Jewish neighborhoods which they themselves dominated: in places like Brownsville, Far Rockaway, and Grand Concourse (all of which were 60 to 80 percent Jewish), but also elsewhere, in cities like Boston, Cleveland and Chicago. Even in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, we learn that Jews “clustered side by side within particular blocks.”¹¹ This “segregation” of East European Jews was partly voluntary, partly encouraged, and partly imposed from without. But whatever the case, creating a Jewish subculture proved much easier when everybody lived close to one another.

Third, secular Jews lived side by side with religious Jews. “The dominating characteristic of the streets on which I grew was Jewishness in

¹⁰ Goodman, Saul L. (ed.), *The Faith of Secular Jews* (Ktav, 1976), p. 54.

¹¹ Morawska, Eva. *Insecure Prosperity* (Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 77.

all its rich variety,” the writer Vivian Gornick has recalled. “We did not have to be ‘observing’ Jews to know that we were Jews.”¹² The Sabbath, the holidays, the synagogues calling out for men to complete a minyan—these formed an inescapable part of the neighborhood atmosphere for Jewish immigrants and their children. Secular Jews absorbed that atmosphere and therefore never lost touch with the traditional rhythms of Jewish life.

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, antisemitism—hatred of Jews in all of its manifold forms—helped to preserve secular Jewish culture. From the devoutly religious to the most universalistic-minded secular Jews, it served as the great unifier of the Jewish people, reminding them that they shared a common particularistic fate, since all alike were victims.

Social antisemitism, in addition, helped to prevent intermarriage—which, as the Brandeis case demonstrated, posed significant risks to secular Judaism. The fact that Jews were not welcome in many non-Jewish homes, and that most non-Jews looked askance at the prospect of having a Jewish son- or daughter-in-law, significantly limited the risk of intermarriage during the first half of the 20th century.

In the second half of the 20th century, however, everything changed, and Jewish secularist culture in America collapsed. Already in the 1930s, the Nazis shook the pillars of Jewish secular culture, disillusioning many who had come to harbor a perfect faith in progress, universal justice, and human potential. News of Soviet purges, persecutions and deportations

against Jews, beginning in the late 1940s, further undermined the confidence of those who had come to see the Soviet Union as something of a Jewish secular paradise. Meanwhile, persecutions of Communists, suspected Communists, and former Communists in America in the wake of the Cold War created a climate of fear in Jewish secularist circles. To call oneself secular (as but 1% of the U.S. population did in 1952) was to declare oneself subversive, for religion was deemed an essential part of the “American Way of Life.” In this dangerous climate, many secularists prudently cut their ties with the Workmen’s Circle and affiliated with respectable Conservative and Reform synagogues, even if they rarely attended them. At the same time, all four of the pillars that had previously held up Jewish secularist culture began to topple. Antisemitism declined. Residential segregation was outlawed, and within two decades about a third of all Jews had moved out to suburbia, far from the old Jewish neighborhoods that had sustained and nurtured secularist Jewish culture. As a result, Jews lived much further from one another and secularist Jews no longer absorbed Jewishness from their more Orthodox Jewish neighbors. Their children interacted instead with tolerant non-Jewish neighbors, and many of those children eventually intermarried. Most important of all, Yiddish lost its hold among the Jewish masses. In 1958, fewer than 2 percent of American Jewish children were studying in Jewish secular schools (Yiddische *schule*), and the demise of Yiddish was widely heralded. The writer Irving Howe, who chronicled secular Jewish culture and translated it into English, was by the end of his life

¹² Sarna, *American Judaism*, p. 223.

disconsolate. He spoke of a “profound discomfort, perhaps desperation.” “Those of us committed to the secular Jewish outlook,” he declared, “must admit that we are reaching a dead-end.”¹³

That was in 1994, and at the time, most observers agreed with him.

And yet, in our own day, almost like the proverbial phoenix, Jewish secularism has made something of a comeback. The National Yiddish Book Center—a creation of young Jews in their 20s—works to “rescue Yiddish...books and celebrate the culture they contain.” With 30,000 members young and old, it claims to be “the largest and fastest-growing Jewish cultural organization in America.”¹⁴ Reboot, an organization that reaches out to Jews in their 20s and 30s, has produced a wide range of cultural materials including books, a magazine, a record label, and a film—almost all of it overtly secular. Revealingly, David Katznelson, who manages Reboot Records, describes himself as an “atheist-leaning agnostic leftist Zionist who is a firm lover of the cultural tradition of Judaism and not really a believer in the religious side of it.”¹⁵ *Heeb Magazine*, known as “the crown jewel of publications courting Generation X and Y Jews,” describes itself as seeking to engage “progressive, culturally savvy Jews in their 20s and 30s who are disproportionately left-leaning, disproportionately unaffiliated, disproportionately smart.” And, as

readers of the magazine know, disproportionately secular.¹⁶ The American Jewish World Service, founded in 1985 and today among the most admired, popular, and successful of new Jewish philanthropies, consciously echoes the universalism and ethics of Jewish secularist culture, describing itself as “a Jewish response to the needs of communities throughout the globe, regardless of race, religion or nationality.” As if in response to the late 1960s’ particularist turn in Jewish life, the organization proudly “breathes life into Judaism’s imperative to pursue justice and helps American Jews act upon a deeply felt obligation to improve the chances for survival, economic independence and human dignity for all people.”¹⁷ Finally, we have the establishment in 2003 of the Center for Cultural Judaism, which sponsors grants, publications, programs, and university courses, all directed toward “non-religious, cultural and secular Jews.” “A rapidly increasing number of Jews throughout the world identify themselves as cultural, non-religious Jews,” the Center proclaims on its website. “The future of Judaism depends on reaching this community and enabling them to celebrate their Jewish identity and pass it on to the next generation.”¹⁸

This unexpected rebirth of Jewish secularism reflects, in part, a generational turn: a reminder of the adage that what one generation seeks to forget another seeks to remember. But in my

¹³ Howe, Irving. “The End of Jewish Secularism.” *Hunter College Jewish Social Studies Program Occasional Papers in Jewish History and Thought* #1 (NY: n.d., [1994/5]), p. 10.

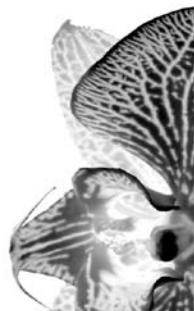
¹⁴ <http://yiddishbookcenter.org/>

¹⁵ [New York] Jewish Week, *Directions Magazine*, December 27, 2004, p. 2.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷ <http://www.ajws.org>

¹⁸ <http://www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/about/mission>



view, it also reflects more than that. For one thing, Communism has collapsed, so the stigma of subversion no longer attaches to secularists; they can safely come out into the sunlight and once again breathe freely. In addition, secularism has become widespread throughout much of formerly Christian Western Europe as well as in Israel; so it is perhaps not surprising that we are now seeing some of these same trends among young liberal Jews and Christians, particularly on the West Coast and the East Coast (the blue states). Finally, the growth of Jewish secularism may well represent a cultural response to the explosion of fundamentalism among Jews, among Christians, and especially among Muslims. Having witnessed the violence, the intolerance, and the self-righteousness to which far too much of contemporary religion worldwide has fallen prey, is it any wonder that some in the younger generation are steering clear of religion altogether?

For those who have followed the rise and fall of secular Judaism in the past, however, its

contemporary rebirth is not an unmitigated blessing. I, for one, wonder: In the absence of a collective Jewish language, a shared Jewish neighborhood, and a common antisemitic enemy, will Jewish secularism prove viable in the long term? Can Jewish secularism, with its universalistic ethic, meet the challenge of intermarriage and keep Jews Jewish? Will secular Jews and religious Jews remain tethered to one another, each continuing to view the other as part of the totality of the Jewish people?

The great Jewish historian Lucy Dawidowicz, herself a secular Jew who over time became more and more religious, once wrote that “the American Jewish experience—still in process, still vulnerable, still experimental, has so far shown that with the will to do so, Jews can preserve and sustain Judaism and Jewish culture while participating in the larger society.”¹⁹ That, to my mind, remains the central challenge for all contemporary Jews—young and old, religious and secular alike. I hope that *all* can prove equal to that great challenge.

¹⁹ Dawidowicz, Lucy S. *What is the Use of Jewish History* (Schocken, 1992), p. 222.



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