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February Seminar, "The Jew and Judaism in the American
Novel," speech, 1961.

EAST SIDE TO SUBURBIA

February Seminar

THE JEW AND JUDAISM IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

The Temple

Friday, February 3, 1961

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

(Paper read by Rabbi A. H. Silver)

The People of the Book did not pass the opportunity to express themselves in writing on their American adventure. Most American Jewish fiction is born of passion. Much of it is more revealing than rewarding, so much so that one is moved to recall the observation in our Apocrypha, "The fallen angel instructed mankind in writing with ink and paper and thereby many have sinned to this day." In the last three-quarters of a century a disproportionate number of Jewish intellectuals have rushed into print. This need for expression needs its own investigation. To recognize the numbers involved one has only to recall such names as Edna Ferber, Ludwig Lewisohn, Gertrude Stein, Meyer Levin, Bud Shulberg, Howard Fast, McKinley Kanter, Nathaniel West, Ben Hecht, Eliezer Lepinsky, Herman Wouk, J. B. Sallinger, Fannie Hurst, Octavius Roy Cohen, S. J. Perlman, S. N. Behrman, Leon Uris, Lionel Trilling, and Bernard Malamud.

This list is not inclusive, nor does it touch the full limits of American Jewish literature. American Jewish literature is trilingual and includes materials in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew. The Yiddish literature is vast. It contains the most accurate descriptions of the crowded areas of first settlement. Yiddish literature had its giants. One thinks of

Sholom Asch, Abraham Raisen, Joseph Opatoshu, and Yehoash. American Hebrew literature is our best indication of the fervor of Zionist interest. Not as extensive as the English or Yiddish material, it is nevertheless the most affirmatively Jewish.

Anglo-Jewish material is not of a piece. Some Jewish authors deliberately avoided Jewish themes (Edna Ferber, Fannie Hurst). Some Jewish authors were obsessed by what they believed the restrictive traditions of Jewish life and penned bitter caricatures (Ben Hecht, Jerome Weidemann). Some Jewish writers used the novel as a thinly veiled autobiography, for it afforded them an audience for their self hate (Bud Shulberg, Ben Hecht). Only a few treated Jewish subjects with sufficient dispassion to treat them successfully. Whether one sees Judaism positively, as Herman Wouk, angrily, as Ben Hecht, whether one accepts Israel, as Leon Uris, or condemns it, as Michael Gold, American Jewish literature remains by and large propaganda, more interesting as sociology than as art.

American Jewish history reaches back three hundred and seven years, the American Jewish novel only seventy-five. There were dramatic qualities to earlier Jewish life -- the saga of Jewish frontiersmen and cowboys, Illinois peddlers and California gold diggers is a rich and moving one. But until 1820 there were only five thousand Jews in the United States and by 1850 only twenty-five thousand. There was no Jewish problem as such, and there was no reading public avid for Jewish materials. Fortunately, many of these men and women set down their experiences in diary and memoir. Dr. Jacob Marcus, who was with us last year at this Seminar, has published five volumes of these intimate revelations. They are bright and revealing, but they do not fall within our scope. The pre-1880 waves of Jewish immigration were small. Jews quickly dispersed throughout the American

hinterland and most quickly made the transition from immigrant poverty to middle class prosperity.

In 1880, Russian brutality and violence forced a vast emigration of the Eastern European Jews. Between 1880 and 1920, one in every seven European Jews left the Continent -- most, for these shores. There were two hundred thousand Jews in America in the year 1880, four million, five hundred thousand in 1924 at the close of the opportunity for mass entry. This new immigrant was poorer than his predecessor. He brought with him less than eight dollars in ready cash. He came directly to the Eastern seaboard, especially New York City, whose port had consolidated ocean traffic. He came during an age of industrialization and urbanization, when opportunity lay no longer in the undeveloped prairie lands but in the city, and by and large he never left the city. Before 1880 New York had been only one of many sizable Jewish communities. After 1880 it came to include at least half of all American Jews. These immigrants came hoping for success and new opportunity. Between 1880 and 1910 the American economy moved ahead slowly. What employment there was came in the nascent garment and cigar industries, where men and women worked twelve to sixteen hours a day, six days a week, for an average ten dollar a week wages and no pay during slack. Such factories were unhealthy, unwholesome, unsafe sweatshops, and many an immigrant lost his life in accident or fire. To make ends meet, the immigrant home took in piece work, and the home became a factory. As the Jews streamed from Ellis Island and Castle Garden, they settled en masse in cold water flats near these factories, and the lower East Side became more an image of the Old World than a reflex of the New. Yiddish remained the spoken tongue; the Yiddish theater, Yiddish newspapers provided the substance of the culture. Immigrants

tended to settle among those who came from the same area in the Old World, and a thousand little synagogues and societies — landmanschaften — were established to keep up familiar emotional ties. The American promise was not, for these people, apparent, and many felt nostalgic for the good old Russian days. One of the first themes of the early Jewish novel, especially the Yiddish novel, was that of Paradise Lost — how much sweeter the spiritual life in Poland, how much slower its pace and less unsettling its economy than the harsh reality of the lower east side. One of the best descriptive novels of New York life was penned by a renowned Yiddish editor, Abraham Kahn, and was entitled "The Rise of David Levinsky." In it he describes the wandering of his young hero on his first day ashore:

I went wandering over the Ghetto. Instead of stumbling upon nuggets of gold, I found signs of poverty. In one place I came across a poor family who — as I learned upon inquiry — had been dispossessed for non-payment of rent. A mother and her two little boys were watching their pile of furniture and other household goods on the sidewalk, while the passers-by were dropping coins into a saucer placed on one of the chairs to enable the family to move into new quarters.

What puzzled me most was the nature of the furniture. For in my birthplace chairs and a couch like those I now saw on the sidewalk would be a sign of prosperity. But then anything was to be expected of a country where the poorest devil wore a hat and a starched collar.

I walked on.

The exclamation "A green one" or "A greenhorn" continued. If I did not hear it, I saw it in the eyes of the people who passed me.

When it grew dark and I was much in need of rest I had a street peddler direct me to a synagogue. I expected to spend the night there. What could have been more natural?

At the house of God I found a handful of men in prayer. It was a large, spacious room and the smallness of their number gave it an air of desolation. I joined in the devotions with great fervor. My soul was sobbing to Heaven to take care of me in the strange country.

The service over, several of the worshippers took up some Talmud folio or other holy book and proceeded to read them aloud in the familiar singsong. The strange surroundings suddenly began to look like home to me.

One of the readers, an elderly man with a pinched face and forked little beard, paused to look me over.

"A green one?" he asked genially.

He told me that the synagogue was crowded on Saturdays, while on week-days people in America had no time to say their prayers at home, much less to visit a house of worship.

"It isn't Russia," he said, with a sigh. "Judaism has not much of a chance here."

When he heard that I intended to stay at the synagogue overnight he smiled ruefully.

"One does not sleep in an American synagogue," he said. "It is not Russia." Then, scanning me with an air of compassionate perplexity: "Where will you sleep, poor child? I wish I could take you to my home, but -- well, America is not Russia. There is no pity here, no hospitality. My wife would raise a rumpus if I brought you along. I should never hear the last of it."

With a deep sigh and nodding his head plaintively he returned to his book, swaying back and forth. But he was apparently more interested in the subject he had broached. "When we were at home," he resumed, "she, too, was a different woman. She did not make life a burden to me as she does here. Have you no money at all?"

I showed him the quarter I had received from the cloak contractor. "Poor fellow! Is that all you have? There are places where you can get a night's lodging for fifteen cents, but what are you going to do afterward? I am simply ashamed of myself."

"Hospitality," he quoted from the Talmud, "'is one of the things which the giver enjoys in this world and the fruit of which he relishes in the world to come.' To think that I cannot offer a Talmudic scholar a night's rest! Alas! America has turned me into a mound of ashes."

"You were well off in Russia, weren't you?" I inquired, in astonishment. For indeed, I had never heard of any but poor people emigrating to America.

"I used to spend my time reading Talmud at the synagogue," was his reply.

Many of his answers seemed to fit, not the question asked, but

one which was expected to follow it. You might have thought him anxious to forestall your next query in order to save time and words, had it not been so difficult for him to keep his mouth shut.

"She," he said, referring to his wife, "had a nice little business. She sold feed for horses and she rejoiced in the thought that she was married to a man of learning. True, she has a tongue. That she always had, but over there it was not so bad. She has become a different woman here. Alas! America is a topsy-turvy country."

He went on to show how the New World turned things upside down, transforming an immigrant shoemaker into a man of substance, while a former man of leisure was forced to work in a factory here. In like manner, his wife had changed for the worse, for, lo and behold! instead of supporting him while he read the Talmud, as she used to do at home, she persisted in sending him out to peddle. "America is not Russia," he said. "A man must make a living here." But, alas, it was too late to begin now! He had spent the better part of his life at his holy books and was fit for nothing else now. His wife, however, would take no excuse. He must peddle or be nagged to death. And if he ventured to slip into some synagogue of an afternoon and read a page or two he would be in danger of being caught red-handed, so to say, for indeed she often shadowed him to make sure that he did not play truant. Alas! America was not Russia.

If America was not Russia, there were many who could see its positive benefits, despite the near slum conditions of East Boston and South Philadelphia and the East Side of New York. There was squalor, dirt, the breakdown of familiar ways, but there was also opportunity and a responsive government, both utterly lacking in the Old World. Balanced to the literature of Paradise Lost is a literature which I call Paradise Found. Typical is the novel, "The Promised Land," by Mary Antin, a Polish immigrant who settled in Chelsea. She paints in this novel the blacker, and equally true, side of the Polish Pale of Settlement. She sees beyond the sweatshop to the sweet security that awaits, if not her generation, then surely the next. A parallel literature of success touches the theme of Paradise Found. Biographies of merchants and lawyers and theater people who made big successes were popular and brought home the Horatio Alger theme to the East Side Jew. Those who outgrew the ghetto developed later

a literature of humorous and happy recollection ("The Education of Hymie Kaplan" and Harry Golden's "Only In America"). Forgiving memory blunted the edge of cruel reality.

There were many who were neither nostalgic nor patiently hopeful. Life in the ghetto was cruel and difficult. Child labor, impossible factory conditions, low wages, piece work, and an absence of trade unionism were constant aggravations. As might be expected, given our Jewish prophetic heritage, many an author turned to a literature of social protest, and parallel to this literature there grew a Jewish labor movement which gave force and form to that protest. Typical of this literature is a short story by Isaac Raboy, in which the daughter of a wealthy sweat-shop manufacturer determines to spend her summer vacation working with her father. Raboy details her revulsion, a revulsion which ultimately leads her to submit the following letter to the Yiddish press:

To the Editors:

I am the daughter of Solomon. Do not be surprised if I make unexpected revelations about my father. He is greatly honored by the community and well thought of because he gives money lavishly to Jewish charities. But I have had the good fortune of receiving a Jewish education. I have absorbed myself in the writings of our great Jews and I have also read biographies of them. I have learned a great deal from those men. For instance I have learned that the great men of our race in both thought and action were dedicated to service of society. They issued from the people, lived for it, and died for it.

Allow me therefore to inform you that my father has no rightful place in the Jewish community, among its leaders, among men of enlightenment and social responsibility. My father has climbed to riches on a ladder braided by fragile women's hands. Immured in my father's factory are five hundred girls. They work for a pittance that even slaves would spurn. Day in and day out these five hundred girls are grinding out riches for my father. They dare not even laugh as healthy young girls should. They dare not sing as every normal girl should and wants. They dare not exchange a word with one another because my father's watch-dogs stand guard over them from early morning until late at night.

And now allow me please to ask you, is it just that such a man as my father should be honored by you, that the Jewish community should rejoice over him, because of the banquets that he makes for them, because of his wine that they drink, because of his food that they eat? All are bought with the money created by the sweat and blood of the five hundred girls who wear themselves away for my father in his factory.

I wish to sign myself with the name of

— Rosie —

There were some in the Jewish community who were not satisfied with the Brandeis-Gompers-Dubinsky policies of meliorative reform. Many had been touched while still in Europe by socialist, communist, and anarchist propaganda. They wanted a complete surgery of the American economy and many Jewish writers contributed articles to the "New Masses" and the "Daily Worker" and wrote novels to underline their feeling. One thinks of David Gold's "Jews Without Money" as archetype of this Jewish communist literature.

Communist literature was attractive to the Jew for a second reason. He was faced in America with many types of occupational, residential, and educational discrimination. He had to listen to the Pelleys, Gerald Smiths, an Father Coughlins, and the Bund. The Russian Constitution outlawed anti-Semitism, so the radical saw it as a solution to his insecurity. Communism also gave him sanction to attack religion, which communist and Jewish self hater alike saw as the drawback to total assimilation. That a disproportionate number of Jewish writers remained in the Communist Party for a disproportionately long time is a striking indication of the blindness of self hate which motivated them. Indeed, communist oriented or not, self hate is a mark of much of Jewish literary creation until comparatively recent times. It is perhaps understandable. Many a Jewish writer was denied deserved academic position and nowhere did his success save him from

social restriction. Despite personal success, he knew that he had not completely arrived and he was unwilling to place the blame where it rightly fell, on the prejudice of the American. He placed it rather on the religious and cultural traditions which the Jew brought with him. He mocked Yiddish. He made a fetish of the Jewish nose. He burlesqued Jewish mannerisms. He pitilessly tore aside the pretensions of the newly rich. He had no belief in or interest in faith. He saw it only as a millstone, preventing his total assimilation. One sees this pre-occupation with caricaturing the Jew in the opening lines of Ben Hecht's novel "A Jew In Love":

Jo Boshere (born Abe Nusbaum) was a man of thirty — a dark skinned little Jew with a vulturous and maddy face, a reedy body and a sense of posture. The Jews now and then hatch a face which for Jewishness surpasses the caricatures of the entire anti-Semitic press. These Jew faces in which race leers and burns like some biologic disease are rather shocking to a mongrelized world.

People dislike being reminded of their origins. They shudder a bit mystically at the sight of anyone who looks too much like a fish, a lizard, a chimpanzee or a Jew. This is probably nonsense. The Jew face is an enemy totem, an ancient target for spite and, like a thing long hated, a sort of magic propagandist of hate. Its persistence in the world is that of some repulsive and hostile fauna, half crippled, yet containing in its ineffaceable Yiddish outline the taunt and challenge of the unfinished victim. This, of course, is true only of the worst looking Jew faces and the worst Jew haters.

Boshere was not quite so bad as this. The racial decadence which had popped so Hebraic a nosegay out of his mother's womb was of finer stuff than that glandular degeneration which produces the Jew with the sausage face; the bulbous, diabetic half-monsters who look as if they had been fished out of the water a month too late.

These bloaters are truly a vicious drag on the vanity of the race, and nobody winces at the sight of them so much as the Jew.

Boshere was no matter for wincing, yet he had an uncomfortably Semitic face, a face stamped with the hieroglyphic curl of the Hebrew alphabet. For this face, however, he had invented such unJewish expressions, surrounded it with such delicate mannerisms (although he never quite outgrew the semi-monastic activities of his hands) that his personality had almost lost its Semitic flavor.

He had a way of standing, one hand spread genteely over his epigastrium, his skimpy shoulders hunched forward, his slightly enlarged eyelids drooped in an artificial and brooding smile, his red-lipped mouth widened in an actorish grimace of meditation; a way of posturing, purring and smiling in the teeth, as it were, of his Jewishness, that gave him the look of a Prince Charming in the midst of a pogrom.

This literature by the self haters and the leftists has not entirely disappeared despite the radical post-World War II transformation of American Jewry. It crops up occasionally in the literature of the avant garde and the pages of the Partisan Review and Commentary where studies of American Jewry tend to center on the lunatic and the extremist fringes.

The last twenty years have seen a major transformation of Jewish life. The New Deal legislated most of the desired economic reforms. An expanding economy allowed the Jewish proletariat gradually to disappear. Third generation children were less troubled by the accents and mannerisms of their grandparents than their parents had been. Hitler made anti-Semitism unfashionable and knocked into a cocked hat all those theories which assumed the possibility of total assimilation. In defense of its own right, in support of Israel, and in many worthwhile community projects, Jewish communities came together with a surprising degree of cooperation. Demographically the Jew moved from the East Side to Westchester, and most of his distinguishing immigrant characteristics disappeared in that move. Jewish valor during the war and Jewish heroism in the establishment of Israel brought out a new literature of self adulation. Herman Wouk, Irwin Shaw, and Norman Mailer made the Jewish soldier even braver than he was. Peter Viertel and Leon Uris pictured Jews of heroic proportions as responsible for the upbuilding of Israel. This literature is much less distasteful than that of self hate, but equally unreal. Overblown heroes are as untrue to life as overdrawn villains.

It is hard to say how the Jewish novel will now develop. The texture of suburban Jewish life seems so attenuated as not to draw the interest of this generation of authors. There is an occasional satire such as "Marjerie Morningstar," but no compelling study. This one further observation ought to be made: with the exception of Herman Wouk, no Jewish writer has delineated a search for faith. Our busy communal life has no parallel in personal commitment. Our hope is that our artists will help us see the need of faith and the way to faith. The well organized, well established Jewish community we see about us is not enough. It is not enough to be busy — there must be meaning and purpose to our busy-ness. Our writers have a unique opportunity. It is to be hoped they will live up to it.

