

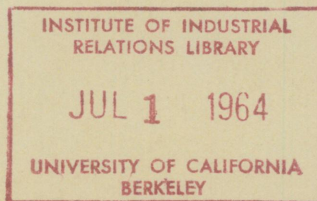
Labor movement - U.S. (1958)

# The Jewish Labor Movement In America:

TWO VIEWS *aby*

ISRAEL KNOX *and*

IRVING HOWE *//*



*= New York, May 1958 =*

**The  
Jewish Labor Movement  
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**TWO VIEWS**

**Jewish Labor —**

**The Reality and the Ideal**

**by Israel Knox**

**The Significance of**

**the Jewish Labor Movement**

**by Irving Howe**

## *Introduction*

**T**HE two analyses of the Jewish labor movement in America presented here are the product of a symposium held at the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service in 1957, co-sponsored by the Workmen's Circle and the Jewish Labor Committee.

The Workmen's Circle (Arbeiter Ring) is the fraternal order of that sector of Jewish life which helped build and maintains close contact with such unions as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers' International Union and the United Hebrew Trades. It represents that segment of American Jewry concerned with a secular (cultural—"veltliche") approach to Jewish problems, with a love for the Yiddish language and its cultural treasures. Today the Arbeiter Ring has among its 70,000 members not only the founders of Jewish labor organizations but also their American-born sons and daughters, professional and business people, as well as industrial and office workers.

The Jewish Labor Committee (of which the Workmen's Circle is an affiliate) speaks in the name of over 500,000 Jewish workers in the AFL-CIO. It is, of course, vitally concerned with the future of that movement of which it has for 25 years been a centralizing force. If it is to continue its role of speaking for Jewish labor in the American and world labor movements, if it is to remain the recognized arm of organized Jewry within the American labor movement in the fight against discrimination and injustice, then certainly it needs to be constantly aware of what is happening in that movement which it represents.

For these reasons the Jewish Labor Committee and the Workmen's Circle called upon two outstanding teachers and thinkers in American and Jewish life—Dr. Israel Knox and Professor Irving Howe—to consider the question of the future of our Jewish labor movement.

Because of the interest originally expressed at the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, we are happy to make their views available to a wider audience.

JACOB T. ZUKERMAN  
*President*  
*Workmen's Circle*

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## Jewish Labor —

# The Reality and the Ideal

by Israel Knox

**T**HE concept of labor is undergoing a serious change in today's America. It can no longer be identified solely with an economic class. If it is to have any meaning and import for us now, it must be regarded as a social category, as representative of a social philosophy. The association of this philosophy with labor is historical. It drew its content from the struggle of the common people in Europe, especially in England and America, for a place in the sun, for personal dignity, for some security, for the franchise, for religious tolerance. But in America, in the second half of the twentieth century, in this age of incredible technological advance and transformation, the concept of labor must be interpreted in terms of a social philosophy, of a point of view.

### *Status of the Jewish Worker*

There is no denying that the membership of Jews in the so-called Jewish unions (in the garment unions, etc.) is decreasing from year to year. These unions are still Jewish in the sense that their leader-

ship is Jewish. There is also a certain ethical quality in these unions which differentiates them from the "business" unions. Now, I cannot bring myself to shed tears over the news that the children of cloak-makers and pressers and cutters tend to become teachers and doctors and social workers. But I do believe it would be a serious loss and an occasion for regret if the ideals that have been linked with labor were to disappear from the Jewish scene in America. The question immediately arises whether that social philosophy can be maintained and sustained if the economic base slips away from under it. Ten or fifteen years ago I would have said: No, it isn't possible. But on reading only a few months ago that for the first time in the history of our country the number of workers in service industries exceeds the number of workers in the production industries, I was compelled to reappraise this whole matter. In this environment one can no longer be dogmatic about the close relationship between the economic foundation and the social and spiritual superstructure.

The fading away of the Jewish labor movement and the decline of a commensurate social philosophy would entail a sharp break in the historic memory of Jews. We often speak of three hundred years of Jewish life in America. True, the first Jewish settlement in our land can be traced back to 1654. But if we are concerned with a corporate and creative Jewish community in America, why then it is approximately eighty years old, and its impetus came from the East European immigration. That immigration brought to America our parents and grandparents. And it was these men and women who worked in the sweatshops of the garment industry, who labored as carpenters and plumbers and painters in the building industry, who bore the pack of the peddler from door to door. This is the epic of the Jewish immigrant in America who began with nothing, who accomplished so much, and whose roots in America are now so deep.

### *A Bridge to Past Values*

Without a continuing Jewish labor movement, without a social-democratic sector within the Jewish community, there is bound to be a break in our historic memory as a group in the New World. And a people as old as we are cannot permit itself the luxury of such a gap. The break would lead to an attenuation of the values that have prevailed in the Jewish community. Our children are no longer

hungry — literally, physically — as were the children of an older generation. We are no longer afraid of the lockout and the strike, because we are not engaged exclusively in such economic enterprises. But I am very much afraid that not only are the physical hungers a thing of the past, as they should be, but that our spiritual hungers too are vanishing. As one observes Jewish students—indeed, this is true of most students—in the colleges and universities, one cannot help noting often enough the absence of a genuine spiritual hunger, of a felt need for values. And without this, everything else that we have—all our material achievements—is dust and ashes, wind in the hand.

This failure to understand and acknowledge an indebtedness to a preceding generation is far more significant in its consequences than we are inclined to realize. It points to a lack of affiliation with the past and therefore to the difficulty of building a bridge to the future. We are living at a time when the passion for belonging is considerable. And the sober fact is that there is no authentic belonging to a group without a history, without continuity. Yet as a teacher talking to my students, the impression is frequently compelling that their parents were born in a desert, in a no-man's-land—or still worse, that they have no parents at all (except for payment of tuition). Surely this is not conducive to the fulfillment of the passion for belonging and does not make for inner harmony and joyous fellowship in a group.

### *Dignity Despite Hardship*

Ours is a technological age, and it is also the age of “the organization man.” The result of all this—for good or for ill—is a sort of *depersonalization* of the individual in America. Our immigrant parents of half a century ago may have been depersonalized in the factory. This finds powerful expression, for example, in Morris Rosenfeld's famous poem, *Ich Bin a Mashin* (I Am a Machine). A more pathetic and poignant strain is struck in his poem, *Mein Ingele* (My Little Boy): he tells how seldom he sees his little boy, because when he leaves early in the morning, the lad is sleeping, and when he returns late in the evening, long after sunset, the child is again in bed.

In the sweatshops our immigrant parents were “machines,” were “depersonalized,” but in the evenings, after work, they were human beings in their own right. There were lectures on Friday; the “lecture” was an institution, there has never been anything like it in any labor movement; it was their Sabbath, it was their elevation of soul. They were human beings, in the fullness of their dignity as individuals, at their meetings—of the Socialist Party, unions, fraternal organizations, cultural clubs. There was a reverence in them for the values of the mind, a respect for ideas, a love of literature—not as sheer entertainment, but as a revelation of life, as one of the avenues of truth. I cannot discover a serious and enduring interest in literature among too many Jewish students—or among their parents. This has now been replaced by the idolatry of the sociological report, of the statistical table and graph. Good and important as they are, it is obvious that they do not touch life and people directly. They are concerned with them abstractly and as fragments. It is literature that deals with the whole human person, and does so concretely and imaginatively. Fifty years ago our immigrant parents who were struggling and fighting for their economic existence, not knowing whether they would have money for next month’s rent or even for the next day’s meals, treated literature almost with piety. The Yiddish newspaper reserved considerable space for stories, poems, essays and criticism. (Bovshover’s magnificent poem—*To the Toiler*—was written three years before Markham’s *The Man with the Hoe*; it was written in Yiddish and then translated by the author into English.) Our parents were interested in people. After work, they were human beings, not “machines.”

Now the process has been reversed. In our factories, in our offices, we are people, no longer mere tools, commodities, “machines.” That is good and praiseworthy. We have rights and there are unions to protect them. Our factories and offices are comfortable. The notion of vacations, decent hours, holidays is no longer “radical.” However, it is in our homes, in our hours of leisure that so often we cease to be individuals and become “depersonalized.” We turn into “machines,” or fuse into one with the machine—radio and television. We do see our children—that is no problem. The hours are at our disposal. We see them and talk with them, but there is no communication, no spiritual sharing. Both father and son are absorbed in the same baseball game or prize-fight or comic strip;



mother and daughter are excited about the same movie actor or actors or the best beauty parlor. This, of course, is an exaggeration, but it does disclose a real situation. And it is in sum and effect a process of "depersonalization."

### *Hedonism — The New Experience*

As we look at the Jewish community in America, there is no doubt that much in it is commendable. Indeed, in balance and perspective, what is affirmative about it is weightier than what is deplorable. And yet some of its typical middle-class characteristics must be taken into account, too. First, there is the hedonism of food and clothing and Miami Beach and Atlantic City. Our conventions are generally held in Atlantic City. Of course, there is nothing objectionable in that, but there was a period when Jewish organizations—especially such as the Workmen's Circle, unions, the Jewish Labor Committee—would meet in some city where there was a large Jewish population, where there were signs of corporate and creative Jewish activity. They would meet there for purposes of demonstration as well as inspiration, for their own sake and to light a candle in that particular community for the "cause." But now we go to Atlantic City. The hedonism of food, clothing, the *bar mitzvah* and the *hasena* (wedding), and even birthday parties, surrounds us everywhere.

Second, there is the hedonism of ostentation—jocularly referred to as the "edifice complex." There are synagogues and Jewish centers in America which cost millions of dollars to erect and small fortunes to maintain. In some of these cities, there is no Catholic or Protestant church that could measure up to the synagogue in magnificence as a sheer structure. That too may be fine, but it is pretty remote from Micah's imperative to "walk humbly with your God." Why should middle-class people pour millions of dollars into mere buildings?

Third, a word is in order about Jewish philanthropy. On the whole it constitutes one of the noblest chapters in American Jewish life, unparalleled in its scope and magnitude in our millennial history. And yet it, too, has been "depersonalized," has been converted into a kind of business, an industry, perhaps a major industry. Some of us remember Jewish charity in America—when women gave watches and rings, their last pieces of jewelry, when people gave their last

dollars and even pennies, not as charity but as brothers sharing with brothers in moments of distress. And there were no stag parties, no "thousand dollar" speakers (usually selected for their political prominence rather than for their competence, knowledge or even eloquence), no elaborate and occasionally crude programs of "amusement." And above all there were no sumptuous feasts as the speakers described the hunger and plight of others.

These are aspects of Jewish experience in America. Excellent or lamentable, they do not exhaust the substance of Jewishness. They are only some of its actual manifestations and derive sustenance and meaning from a deeper source.

### *The Messianic Expectancy*

To be a Jew is to be the bearer of a great hope—the Messianic expectancy. To be a Jew is to believe with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind that this Messianic hope has not yet been fulfilled, but sometime, somehow, it will be fulfilled. You can be a Jew whether you "daven" (pray) or do not "daven," whether you observe the dietary laws or whether you do not, but you cannot be a Jew unless you cherish and hold on with all your might to the Messianic expectancy. To accept things as they are, the world as it is (with tragedy at its very heart), as *already* redeemed—is to cease being a Jew, is to be guilty of the gravest transgression against the prophetic heritage.

If this is so, then it follows that the supreme and final heresy in the American Jewish community and, especially, in the religious community, is the tacit or overt belief that we are living in an age that has already been redeemed, that the Messianic hope has already been realized. Only so is it possible to explain the contentment, the "peace of mind" that is patent in our midst—the rapturous acceptance of all that the State of Israel may do and the passive attitude toward much that cries out for amelioration in our own land. The Messianic dream does not stop short of Utopia, of the full enthronement of righteousness and lovingkindness. As such it may never be wholly achieved, but the dream must not be relinquished. The movement toward its fulfillment is part of the dream; the going and the goal are one. In Jewish tradition it is *mitzvot maasiyot*, precepts of action in daily conduct, that chart the course to it.

## *“Delegated” Dedication*

Now and then there is an awareness in the Jewish community that the Messianic age has not yet come, that the age of redemption has not yet been inaugurated. Well, then, how are we to reach it? Too often the response to this awareness is altogether simple and disappointing. It would appear to be by way of the social worker and the rabbi, perhaps also of the teacher in the Hebrew school. That is, by virtue of a kind of *delegated* lovingkindness and piety. Thus, in the synagogue, the less observant the members of the congregation are, the more insistent are they that the rabbi be an exemplar of piety or at least propriety. Just as they want a good doctor and a good lawyer—the best doctor and the best lawyer according to their financial means—so they want the best rabbi. The best rabbi is judged in terms of success, prestige and status. Money is no obstacle; nothing less than the best will do, since he is to take charge of their souls at a distance and with no painful requirements as the doctor takes charge of their bodies.

The social worker in the Jewish community is in a similar predicament. The profession of the social worker—like that of the nurse—involves dedication (which is not at all to imply that therefore adequate salaries are out of the question). Many so consecrate themselves, some do not. But here, too, *lovingkindness*, the direct relationship to those who are afflicted, is *delegated* to the social worker. He or she represents us as our Congressman represents us. It is as if we were to announce: “Some want and should have help—you do the helping for us. We’ve got the money to buy the best lovingkindness. So go about dispensing it for us.”

## *The American Pattern of Living*

It might be asked, why is all this so? It is not a uniquely Jewish situation. This is, to an extent, the pattern of living in present-day America. The rise of suburbia is not accidental, and there is much about it that is a blessing for children and for parents too. But it is a bit pretentious to extol suburbia and its modes of living as though the Messiah had taken up residence in it. And this is the dominant pattern in suburbia with its middle-class denizens. It has a special fascination for middle-class Jews—the first generation (or second)

enjoying the status and comforts of the middle class. This is the "dialectic," as it were, the rhythm and pattern of middle-class living among Jews in America. In fairness, it must be repeated and emphasized that there are wonderful dimensions to it. It would be wrong and inaccurate to insist that this is the picture, complete and exhaustive. It would then be a distorted picture. But this is one side of it, a side that must not be neglected and overlooked.

What is to be done? What of the future? Looking back to the immigrant generation that preceded us, it must be remembered that our parents brought with them to America a millennial legacy, despite the fact that for a goodly portion it ceased to have direct and ascertainable efficacy in their daily experience and behavior. But it was this legacy which shaped their character, and its overarching principles permeated their conception of life and of man's destiny. Despite the diverse origins of its population and the pluralistic strains in its culture, there was in America, too, a moral heritage, a spiritual perspective, whose roots were in Puritanism, in the Calvinist ethic of Puritanism. This ethic was not explicit, it was not neatly formulated in intellectual terms. Yet it was the constant factor in America's culture and a dominant factor in determining its values. Naturally, the immigrant generation of our parents knew nothing of this. These matters were alien to them. But whether they knew it or not, they unwittingly counterposed to this Puritan ethic another ethic—that which was central in their own heritage. The Calvinist ethic is a very simple and a practical one. If you are rich, it is a sign of election. Riches are an outward sign of grace—a sign that God loves you and has chosen you from all others for salvation. If you are poor, that is a punishment for your sins; it is a sign of *dis-grace*, of an absence of grace, of a falling away from the Divine Grace. It was as simple as that. It was therefore almost a sin to pity the unsuccessful, the poor, the wretched, the downtrodden: you were interfering with the divine scheme, a rather cruel scheme. Poverty was regarded as a condign punishment for your sins.

### *A Faith in Social Progress*

That was not the Jewish tradition. In the Book of Job and throughout the ages, Jews were reluctant to accept a facile theodicy. Even the wonderful rabbi of Berdichev, Levi Yitzhak, dared to engage

in controversy with God in behalf of his suffering people. He challenged God and cried out in protest because God allowed such agony and persecution to befall His people, a people that acknowledged Him to be its sovereign, its one God. From Abraham's "Will not the Judge of all the world himself act justly?" to Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev—there was one theme, one prayer, one hope, one answer. What was this hope and what was the answer? It was the ultimate and enduring hope of Judaism—the "thirst for the future," the Messianic expectancy and the faith in its fulfillment. Not an expectancy which supplants right action, not an abstraction, but an expectancy that is concrete, that embodies itself in right action, in deeds of merit—*mitzvot maasiyot*—in a way of living, a style of living, an experiment in holiness.

It was in the spirit and mood of this tradition that the Jewish immigrants founded unions, the Yiddish press, the Workmen's Circle, the United Hebrew Trades. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was not built up solely because the immigrants, harassed and exploited, wanted shorter hours and higher wages. It was done out of a sense of dignity and human worth, and that is why it was easier to organize the Jewish immigrants than it was the Poles or Italians. Strange as it may seem now, the initial meetings often took place in synagogues—here and overseas. In Singer's novel, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, there is a vivid scene depicting how a group of workers in Lodz congregates in a synagogue for the purpose of forming a union to improve by common effort their wretched lot. In reading a history of the Jewish labor movement in America, one is impressed by the astounding and almost awe-inspiring fact that the earliest strikes were not merely for hours and money, though men and women toiled fifteen hours a day and earned a pittance. Strikes were called also because an employer would not treat his workers like human beings, because he treated them like things and not like people.

I stake everything on this Messianic expectancy. I think it is deeply rooted in the Jewish mentality. I think it is part of the Jewish tradition and will not vanish, will not exhaust itself in America. It may be latent in the second and third generations, the children of immigrant parents and grandparents. But it cannot remain latent. It is bound to flower. Therein lies the great significance of what is

referred to as the Yiddishist movement, as Jewish Socialism, as progressive nationalism. These wedded the Messianic expectancy to a concept of social progress, and converted its transcendental eschatology—in simple language, its promise of “pie in the sky”—into a naturalistic eschatology, one that is to be realized here and now, on our earth. Curiously enough, the Hebrew term for the hereafter is *olam haba*, which does not mean *hereafter*, *otherworldliness*, but means the coming world, the world of tomorrow, the Kingdom of God on earth—the cooperative, the good, the righteous society. I stake everything on that Messianic expectancy. And I believe there is a task to be done by those who identify themselves with the cause of labor in general and specifically Jewish labor.

### *Fulfillment of the Democratic Ideal*

I have often been asked what kind of program there is now left for democratic, libertarian socialists—now that unions are so powerful and with socialism what it is in the world. (To begin with, whatever else we assert, this must be stated unequivocally: the Messianic fulfillment, if it ever is to come about, will be a fulfillment of the democratic process, it will not be a negation of America and what it represents in today’s world; it will indeed be a fulfillment of the premises and the promises of the American dream, of the American hope.)

One of the vital foundations of our democratic society is the notion that all men and women must be regarded as ends in themselves. This view, which has its source in the Bible and was carried forward by philosophers like Kant and the English thinkers, is necessary for democracy, for a decent society, but is not quite sufficient. Its source is in the Jewish Scriptures, but there it is found in an expanded and deeper context. By itself it is good but not good enough. It fits very nicely into a competitive society—a society based on free enterprise. Abstractly, there is the implication that each member of society is sovereign—in poverty or wealth—and that society is a kingdom of ends. Government is no more than an umpire. It regulates traffic but does not control traffic. It sees to it that the rules of common safety are not breached—and that is all. The rest is a matter of contractual relationships between individuals in the state (in the sphere of economic activities) and of personal philan-

thropy and morality. This suits a competitive society. Citizens are ends-in-themselves in many areas—but not in the economic sphere. In the economic area they are only commodities, and labor power is a commodity too—in effect, if not in law. For the citizen is a consumer, subject to the classical formula of *caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware (which Ruskin described as ungodly and unchristian)—and for the market in general the supreme commandment was the mechanism of supply and demand.

### *And a Still Higher Ideal*

What then is the expanded and deeper context? What is the truer principle? It is that we are all involved in a partnership, in a cooperative undertaking. One of our sages—Hillel, the Elder—summed it up: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me; and if I am only for myself, what am I?” That is, I must remember that I am an end, but must not forget that others are ends too; but above all, I must inscribe upon my heart that all of us together are brothers and sisters, children of a common destiny, and all of us are in the image of God. Paul caught a glimpse of this vision when he said: “Be ye members one of another.” Each of us is an *end* but also a *need*—we need each other for the good life.

Secondly, we speak of individualism and collectivism and of the great political and cultural struggle between them. These, too, are not appropriate terms or categories. We cannot build a world upon the basis of individualism, and God forbid that we build it upon a basis of collectivism. There are other concepts and categories that are far more suitable and express more cogently the *ethos* of a good society—these are *community* and *personhood*. There is a sense in which the Jewish people has been the only people with a consistent democratic tradition. Neither collectivism nor individualism is a new idea. The king, the despot, the tyrant, the feudal lord, the military dictator—these always arrogated to themselves the privileges and prerogatives of individuals. The people, the slaves, the serfs, the commoners—these were always herded together as a collective, non-descript mass without rights and without status. There was one exception in history—the Jewish people. At Sinai the Israelites were informed: “You are a kingdom of priests, and a holy people unto Me,” and if you extend Jewish history back far enough, you get this kind

of democratic, spiritual history—a history in which all are equal, in which there is community. The individual attains personhood in community, and community is neither dependence (upon king or tyrant) nor independence (as competition between man and his fellow), but interdependence, a sharing in a common destiny and a common dignity and a working together for the common welfare. In community, whenever men come together for a common purpose—there is God. In community is redemption and in community is hope.

This is a sublime and yet a realistic conception. It is a conception that is congruous with socialism, with progress, with labor. It is an idea, a message, that has its roots in Jewish history. But it is a universal message. And it would be a pity, if in the second half of the twentieth century there were to be no movement articulating these ideas and ideals and trying to incarnate them in American life from the aspect and viewpoint of a Jewish perspective.

### *A Voice for Jewish Labor*

There should be an agency to serve as the direct organ of Jewish labor and of those who identify themselves with its social philosophy. Indeed, there are such organizations. There is the Workmen's Circle, representing 70,000 families, fraternal and cultural in character, professing and practicing to an extent this kind of social philosophy in the Jewish community. Then there is the Jewish Labor Committee, an instrumentality of some 500,000 workers holding actual membership in various unions, which participates in the Jewish community as representative of labor and in the world of labor as a spokesman and guardian of Jewish rights. There is need among us for a clear and generous and courageous social philosophy for the welfare of the Jewish community, for America, and for the world.



A Chassidic rabbi once said—probably with a twinkle in his eye—“Dear God, if you do not want to redeem Israel, why then please redeem the Gentiles.” The point is unmistakable—redemption is indivisible. It must be simultaneously a redemption of the Gentiles and of Israel—of all the world and of all mankind. And there is another Chassidic utterance—profound and touching: There is only one whole thing in the entire world, and that is a broken heart. How beautiful and how true! As long as the Messianic expectancy has not been fulfilled, as long as the total redemption has not been achieved—our hearts cannot be whole. Let this be the gift, the blessed gift, that we offer American Jews—the paradoxical gift of a broken heart, so that they may be whole.

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# The Significance of the Jewish Labor Movement

by Irving Howe

**T**HE only real and serious way of viewing the future is to look at the past, and the past of the Jewish labor movement has grown dim. It is half-forgotten, and perhaps, in significant sections of the American Jewish world, has been deliberately repressed.

In retrospect it should now be clear to us that no aspect of American Jewish immigrant experience can possibly be discussed except in regard to the great turning point, the great cultural flowering of Jewish social and intellectual life in the late nineteenth century in Eastern Europe. This is especially true of the American Jewish labor movement, which drew mainly upon immigrant workers. To understand something of this, we have to bear in mind what is meant by a transitional moment in the historical development of a culture. A transitional moment is characterized above all by a condition of high self-consciousness created by pressures brought to bear by a still active past as it is partly being repudiated, and, equally, by an oncoming future, sought after, yet threatening and uncertain.

## *The Transitional Moment*

The idea of a transitional moment in the history of a culture involves, above all, the assumption that at a certain point in its flow everything is questioned. That is to say, all of the underlying values and assumptions by which a culture lives, those values and assumptions which in a state of what might be called organic health are simply taken for granted, now are brought to disturbed and critical consciousness. Everything becomes uncertain; everything becomes a subject of debate. It is a time when there is a variety of conflicting world outlooks that actively clash for the domination of men's minds.

Such a great historical moment occurred in England in the Elizabethan period. In the history of the East European Jews it came during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and ran to the First World War. In East European Jewish life, all intellectual, political, social, cultural and religious issues were examined with a peculiar intensity—in part because of the deep-rooted Messianic impulse which runs through the whole Judaic tradition. The harder it is to solve immediate problems on a small scale, for example, the problem of an anti-Semitic policeman standing on the corner in the *shtetl*, the more tempting it is to consider all things from the perspective of a grandiose world historical outlook, to subsume everything under headings of eternal values and eternal questions. This has obvious disadvantages of which we are very aware today. On the other hand, it has advantages we may too easily tend to dismiss in the conservative climate of our time.

A number of major intellectual traditions came into play in the East European Jewish world—the Haskalah enlightenment, Yiddishism (which in itself is a sign of a break from a coherent religious world), socialism and Zionism. But all of these appear within the context of a deeply religious culture. And all of them are colored by the very religious culture which they oppose. Meanwhile, there were great pressures from the Western secular world—greater pressures, I would say, than most of the rather sentimental historians of *shtetl* life like to acknowledge. This clash of opposing intellectual and cultural forces was fought out by East European Jews with a purity in direct ratio to their helplessness. It gave rise to an intellectual fervor, a purity of dialectical prowess, a transplantation of

Talmudic sharpness to secular concerns, a diffusion of the Messianic impulse into worldly movements lacking in worldly power.

### *Our Heritage from East European Jewry*

Almost everything strong and intense in Jewish cultural life in America during the past 50 to 60 years comes from the milieu of Eastern Europe. Whether for good or bad, the American Jewish community has lived off the intellectual and cultural capital of East European Jewish life. Sometimes this dependence has been direct and obvious, at other times elaborately disguised. But it has always been there. And one of the reasons that the American Jewish world finds itself today in so bewildering a variety of crises is that this capital is approaching exhaustion.

Jewish immigrant life and the Jewish labor movement, though obviously shaped by American conditions, are primarily the consequence or outgrowth of both the passion and the impossibility of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. The intellectual and social tensions which the Jewish immigrants brought over from Eastern Europe were transplanted in a new soil and were further aggravated and intensified when faced with a whole set of new problems in America.

It is possible—though I think it would be a vast oversimplification—to say that the whole of Jewish socialism in this country, the whole of the Jewish labor movement (and, until recently, the distinction between Jewish socialism and the Jewish labor movement was not a very important one) can be regarded as a sign of the painful adjustment of old-world expectations to new-world conditions. Put this way, the statement is a terrible vulgarization. But it is also a vulgarization that has an element of truth in it. It is a point of view which some modern sociologists are particularly prone to favor: to look upon the whole outbreak of social idealism and Jewish intellectual fervor as little more than a symptom in the process of adaptation and assimilation of Jews into American society. But, even if the social idealism and intellectual fervor of Jewish immigrant life did serve this objective function, it would be a gross error to deny the independent value and vitality of the intellectual materials that were put to the service of this adaptation and assimilation into American life.

## *Old Values in a New World*

In any case, it is important to notice that by contrast to other immigrant groups one of the unique features of Jewish immigrant life was that the Jews brought over with them a relatively full and developed culture. As a consequence, the East Side, which I speak of not only as a physical place but as an historic symbol containing within itself a whole outlook and way of life, became a miniature Pale, and the *landsmanshaften* became miniature *shtetls*. They were, in part, efforts to create in an alien world an enclave of modes of behavior and outlooks that had been brought from the other world. So, at its best, life in the East Side involved a kind of intellectual fervor, a degree of intellectual intensity, which is conspicuously absent from American society today. I don't know whether fervor and intensity can be regarded at all times as values in themselves; but when life becomes as slack as it has tended to become in this country during the last ten years, there is a great temptation to look upon intensity and fervor as values in themselves.

In addition to intensity and fervor, there was a great deal of intellectual substance to the debates that raged among the immigrant Jewish workers in the East Side. One of the things that happened in the East Side—and the East Side does not mean only New York, there were East Sides in other cities—was that a number of new social types arose among the immigrant Jews.

One type was the intellectual *manqué*, the almost or pseudo-intellectual who did not have quite the equipment to be an intellectual, but who certainly had the desire and the ready references for display. Another type was the intellectual *déclassé*, the intellectual who had the equipment and the desire, but not the opportunities for developing his gifts, and consequently tended to drop on the social scale to the level of the poorest workers. But most important of all for our present purposes, there arose a unique social group in this country (to my knowledge no other ethnic constituent of American society produced a similar group), the *intellectualized worker*. Here is the greatest achievement of the Jewish labor movement in this country. Not the institutions, not the millions of dollars, not the speeches; but the fact that there arose a certain admirable type of Jewish worker—now disappearing in old age—with little education but with an enormous impulse toward knowledge and understanding, with a

desire for self-definition, for discovering, for becoming aware of the nature of his own life. Let me quote an illustration from the biography of Emma Goldman:

When I first came to New York, I used to attend the joint gathering of anarchists and socialists, among whom there were also the brothers Hillkowitz. One occasion of those days had been particularly memorable. It was a Yom Kippur celebration held as a protest against Jewish orthodoxy. [Nowadays, the protests against orthodoxy are often held in the name of orthodoxy.—I. H.] Speeches on free thought, dances and plenty of eats took the place of the traditional fast and prayer. The religious Jews resented our desecration of their holiest Day of Atonement, and their sons came down in full force to meet our boys in pitched battle. While the fray was going on in the street, anarchist and socialist orators were holding forth inside the hall, young Morris Hillkowitz having the floor at the time. Over two decades have passed since then, Hillkowitz has changed his name to the more euphonious Hillquit, and became a successful lawyer and an important personage in the Socialist Party. We have no common ground. He has risen high in the estimation of respectable society, while I remain a pariah.

I quote another passage from an article written by Abe Cahan in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1898, trying to explain something of the nature of Jewish immigrant life to Americans. It is a bit poetic, but it has truth:

The Russian Jew brings with him the quaint custom of a religion full of poetry and sources of good citizenship. [Already at that time Cahan was, alas, seeing poetry and good citizenship as linked closely together.—I. H.] The orthodox synagogue is not merely a house of prayer; it is an intellectual center, a mutual aid society; a fountain of self-denying altruism and a literary club, no less than a place of worship. The study rooms of the hundreds of synagogues where the good old people of the Ghetto come to read and discuss words of law as well as the events of the day, are crowded every evening of the week with poor street peddlers and gray-haired, misunderstood sweatshop hands of which the public hears every time a tailor strike is declared.

And here is Abe Cahan in an editorial in the *Jewish Daily Forward* of 1911, arguing against those radical groups of the East Side which insist upon conspicuous rites of denunciation during Jewish holidays:

The most comical, and at the same time the saddest thing is to see an atheist turn his irreligion into a cold, dry, unfeeling, heartless religion. And this is something most of our unbelievers used to do.

One must not sit at a Seder. One must extend no sympathy to the honest, ignorant mother who sheds tears over her prayer book. One must deeply wound traditional Jews by eating and smoking on Yom Kippur in front of the synagogue. The former unbelievers were in their way just as fanatical, just as narrow-minded, just as intolerant as the religious fanatic on whom they harped.

In his autobiography, Cahan describes one of the first meetings of Jewish workers, held in 1882, in a New York synagogue, where speeches were made in German and Russian, and where he rose with the revolutionary demand that he be allowed to make a speech in Yiddish. This threw the meeting into utter consternation because, as everyone knows, Yiddish is a "mere jargon." After much conflict and persuasion he was allowed to make his speech in Yiddish—but was put last on the program. I do not know whether, in regard to Yiddish, conditions have changed much after all.

### *Elements Within the Jewish Labor Movement*

The essential problem in regard to Jewish working class life in America among immigrant Jews, was this: the turning from other-worldliness to this-worldliness, while retaining in their this-worldliness some of the spiritual contours and Messianic fire of traditional other-worldly Judaism. I very much doubt whether this is still true, but it certainly *was* true for a good deal of Jewish immigrant life. All immigrant movements, however different in their ideology, had a similar psychic and cultural impetus. The impetus behind all of these movements, whether anarchist, socialist, Zionist, Labor-Zionist, Yiddishist, was expressed in a sentence that the Yiddish poet, A. Liesen, wrote in 1910, when the famous cloakmakers' strike took place. He said: "*The 70,000 zeros became 70,000 fighters.*" This was the general motif of Jewish immigrant life, the general motif especially of Jewish labor immigrant life.\*

But, if we are to be honest with ourselves and not engage in romanticizing, we have to recognize a mixture of elements behind this. First, the drives and the outlooks of East European Jewish life were brought to America. Something of the traditional Messianic fervor, the principled refusal to accept the present as forever and irrevocably given, was infused into secular life. Secondly, there was

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\* For some of the material in the preceding paragraphs, I am indebted to the excellent research of a former student, Jules Bernstein.



the obvious need for an improvement in the immediate life conditions of the Jewish workers. For the East Side, in addition to serving as the center of intellectual fervor and excitement, was also the scene of a great deal of moral degradation stemming from physical poverty and suffering. Thirdly, there was the element of political idealism. Fourthly, and here things become ambiguous and complex, one must consider the problem of making a transition to a new world in which political movements of rebellion against dominant social conditions served as a mode of adaptation to that new world. Fifth, the myth of education strongly and often pathetically seized the imagination of the immigrant Jew. The tremendous hold that the idea of education had upon Jewish immigrants forms a myth in which the yearning for the social improvement of their children is indistinguishable from a pure respect for learning. When one examines a yearning that was at once so innocent and so ambitious, one cannot make any real distinction between purity and impurity. Finally, and most complicating of all, together with all these elements, the old Messianic fervor was transplanted into new social forms, so that the immigrant Jews, even as they clung to the social idealism of the labor movement, were also imbued with the values of success, that bitch goddess of American society. For many decades there could be no clear distinction between the secularized Messianic fervor and the hunger to grasp success for oneself or one's children. And this passion for success stemmed not only from American life, but from East European Jewish life. The peculiar power, as well as the inner contradictions, of the Jewish world, and especially the Jewish labor movement, are due to this intermingling of elements. And we all know how often Jewish socialism and the Jewish labor movement served as a transitional step toward worldly success.

### *The Contribution of the Jewish Labor Movement*

The Jewish unions made enormous contributions. They made enormous contributions in terms of raising the material standards of the Jewish masses; and those of us who are concerned at the moment with other things should be hesitant to brush aside this growth of material security. It is easy, and a little demagogic, to dismiss these gains by saying that the kind of worker who lived in a dreadful slum on the East Side may now live in a somewhat less dreadful housing project in Queens. For we should remember that

material problems lose their significance only to the extent that they are solved.

More important than this, however, is the sense of dignity and capacity for struggle which was infused in the Jewish workers, particularly a curious form of class-consciousness unlike the traditional Marxist ideas of class-consciousness. It was something rather special, the sense of dignity and struggle in which thousands of Bontscha Schweigs became human beings. It was a vehicle for the spreading and diffusion—and afterwards the disappearance—of socialist ideas in America.

The American Jewish labor movement served as a civilizing and cosmopolitanizing influence upon the American labor movement as a whole. This is a point which has generally been neglected, but is very important. Whatever decrease there has been in the intellectual parochialism of the American labor movement is, to a very considerable extent, the result of the work done by its Jewish constituent. The Jewish labor movement also served as the parent, although largely the unacknowledged parent, of a very important generation of American Jewish intellectuals, much of whose writing shows no particular immediate relationship to the source, but in whom there is nonetheless an important psychic connection. The fervor, for example, which you find in the writings of men like Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld has a psychic relationship to the whole immigrant Jewish labor world.

### *The End of an Epoch*

Finally, what now? And here, of course, we come to the difficulty, and here is where I can only ask questions rather than answer them. One thing is clear: we are reaching the end of an epoch. Whether we are going to enter into a new period of development of a distinctive Jewish labor movement or not, I have no way of knowing. I am not part of it in a close sense; I speak simply as an observer from the outside.

We are entering a new period for a number of reasons that are quite obvious. There has been a major shift in Jewish social composition. In the narrow sense there soon may no longer be—and by soon I mean decades—any distinctive Jewish working class, in the narrow sense of industrial workers. There will be Jewish workers, of course,

but white collar workers and technical specialists. But among shop workers there are new ethnic groups replacing the Jews. This trend is merely part of a larger movement of social mobility in the American Jewish community.

Secondly, we must mark the passing of a generation, a fact that is painful and tragic to observe. It struck me as extremely interesting that the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, probably the most important Jewish union in the country, announced recently that the average age of its Executive Board is between 60 and 70, and that they are deliberately seeking out replacements, one young man for each old one. In other words, they are facing what is called in institutional terms, a "crisis of leadership." They find that for all their millions of dollars, the one thing they have great difficulty in acquiring is the kind of person who is committed to something more than a job and something more than mere business unionism. And I have myself found it a matter of some considerable irony that some of the people from the I.L.G.W.U. have come up to Brandeis, where I teach, and have asked me if I know of any dissident or liberal or radical students who are willing to work for the I.L.G.W.U. at rather low wages. And they ask me to appeal to the social idealism of these students, at a time when I am no longer sure that there is enough of this idealism left in the Union to warrant urging the handful of interested young people to devote themselves to it.

And so you have the fact that the dominant generation of the American Jewish labor movement, the leading figures, the most powerful figures, are getting old, and there are no available replacements.

Thirdly, and more important, we have the new nature of social problems in American life. The American Jewish labor movement today faces a unique problem, a more difficult problem than any it has faced so far, namely, what to do with success. This is not merely the problem of how best to invest its money, though I gather that, too, is a problem, but rather what to do with itself as an institution, as a force in American life. Something curious seems to have happened, and here I am guessing. For some decades there has been a drift by the American Jewish labor leadership toward an adaptation to ordinary American business unionism, but in the last few years some of these people have caught themselves up. Partly as a consequence of the success problem, partly as a consequence of their aging,

they ask themselves: *Wherefore are we different from all other people?* It is getting hard to answer that question, but the mere fact that they want to ask it is, I think, a very good sign.

Fourthly, we must at least notice the general changes in the American Jewish community, changes in values and status toward a middle class and conformist psychology.

Fifthly, we observe the approaching and incipient end of Yiddishism as a phenomenon of American Jewish life, but a very glorious end, since Yiddish literature in the last two or three decades has experienced one of its strongest and best creative outbursts.

There remains, finally, the question of what to do. I can only list a few things. First, I think one of the greatest possibilities for the American Jewish labor movement would be for it to devote itself to the transmission, which means, above all, the translation, of Yiddish culture to English. I think one of the most appalling facts about American Jewish communal life is its utter indifference to the genuine values and treasures of Yiddish culture, literature, historical writings; its indifference to making these things available to the American community as a whole.

### *The Past as a Key to the Future*

It is also necessary to engage in a serious, dignified and critical evaluation of the past, to look upon and to write and to examine the history of the American Jewish labor movement. What is sorely needed is a major history, for example, of the East Side as a social community, so that its values may be absorbed into the awareness and consciousness of American life.

Finally, we need to search for ways to achieve the diffusion of the traditional values of the Jewish labor movement and Jewish socialism in new forms. Despite the rise in economic standards—much to be valued and appreciated—I think that the moral impetus which led people to give their lives to the American Jewish labor movement remains true for our own time or should remain true; for we live in a society in which new social problems arise from within the solution of old economic ones.

Let me sum up by saying that in the *past* of the American Jewish labor movement is to be found the meaning, the value and perhaps the sources of renewal of its future.