Special Articles
Jewish Theology in North America: Notes on Two Decades

by ARNOLD EISEN

If there is one point of agreement among students and practitioners of Jewish theology in North America, it is that not much creative work has been forthcoming over the last two decades. Eugene Borowitz, reflecting on “the Form of a Jewish Theology” at the start of the period under review here, wondered whether systematic Jewish thought could even be attempted in our time. “Holism” was essential, he argued, but it was perhaps unavailable.¹ Neil Gillman, for that very reason, titled his book, issued in 1990, Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew. Fragments were all we had at this point in the history of Judaism, he maintained. As a result, theology could not simply be written, it had to be “recovered.”² This sentiment is widespread. Few would disagree with Emil Fackenheim’s pointed lament in 1982 that “in the realm of purely theoretical Jewish thought, and despite claims in this or that quarter to having ‘gone beyond’ Buber and Rosenzweig, the main characteristic of more recent Jewish thought is, by comparison, its low level. . . . The consequence is that the pioneering work then accomplished still waits for adequate successors.”³

Our first task in this overview of the Jewish theology produced in America since Lou Silberman’s Year Book survey in 1969,⁴ then, will be to join practitioners of the craft in wondering why their number and productivity have remained so limited. To be sure, there has been a prodigious amount of Jewish religious reflection in America. Homilies, topical essays, halakhic opinions, guides for laymen, ideological statements, and prayerbook revisions abound.⁵ But the theological forms known to us from past eras in the

⁵For accounts of this outpouring in recent years, see Jack Wertheimer, “Recent Trends in
history of Judaism have largely been absent in the United States, particularly in recent decades. Understanding why that is so provides invaluable insight into the theological literature that has been produced—and tells us a great deal about the religious community that has produced it.

Our second task will be an interpretive sketch of the existing literature, focusing on the major figures and trends. Two issues clearly occupy center stage: the attempt to refine the "covenant theology" characteristic of much 20th-century Jewish thought; and the confrontation with the Holocaust that, as Silberman predicted, has received far more attention in the period than any other subject. This review completed, there will be an opportunity to consider the trends emerging in the 1990s and to reflect on what they portend for the decades to come. The outlook is not entirely bleak, but no responsible observer could possibly call it bright.

**Theology and Its Practitioners**

A word of definition is in order at the outset. As used here, the term "theology" refers to thought (1) of a relatively systematic character that (2) is informed by serious philosophical competence and (3) evinces real grounding in Jewish history and tradition. Most articles published in most Jewish journals by most scholars and rabbis in the past two decades are beyond the purview of this essay because they tend, in the nature of the case, to be occasional pieces, often homiletic, generally topical, and aimed at a fairly wide readership. Theology, by contrast, is an elitist pursuit directed at a limited audience, even if its impact on the mass of believers is far from inconsequential. In America today—by far the most egalitarian society in which Jews have lived—concern with theology is perhaps rarer than ever before.

Several thinkers, seeking to understand why this is the case, have pointed to the Christian connotations of "theology." Most normative Jewish thought, after all, has shunned the question of God's nature, believing it...
inaccessible to human understanding. All but the kabbalists have preferred to examine God’s interaction with and intentions for Israel and the world. Modern Jewish thinkers, for somewhat different reasons, have paid relatively little attention to God’s role as creator, and only slightly more to the divine activity of redemption. The focus has instead been on revelation—what God wants Jews to do, and how we know what God wants.

There is also a widespread sense that the term “theology” bespeaks a systematic form rarely adopted in Judaism, even when—as with biblical and rabbincic thought—one finds a wide range of issues addressed in more or less coherent fashion. If “theology” means form rather than content, Jews have rarely engaged in the enterprise, preferring other genres such as commentary, legal code, or responsa, or—in the modern period—the essay. Still, the form is amply represented in the history of Judaism, and the presence of systematic presentations of content in every period is striking. Jews have engaged in theology in the past, and indeed they continue to do so. The question is why it has not been more evident on the American Jewish scene in recent decades.

WHY NO THEOLOGY?

One is tempted to ascribe the lacuna to an alleged American proclivity toward praxis rather than theory. American Protestantism, after all, has also not generated the outpouring of theology produced in Germany. But neither has Protestant theology been utterly absent here. From the Puritan divines through Jonathan Edwards to Horace Bushnell to Paul Tillich and the Niebuhrs, America has developed a rich theological library. One gets closer to the mark with the observation that this library has not grown significantly in the past 20 years, anymore than American Judaism has found successors to Abraham Heschel and Joseph Soloveitchik. The suspicion arises that something in the social and intellectual context of America in this half-century, rather than America per se, has militated against the

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8The principal exception to this generalization is Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, tr. William Hallo (Boston, 1985)—but even Rosenzweig has far more to say about revelation and redemption than creation.


creation of theology. Three possible components of that something come immediately to mind.

First, theology is inherently particularistic.\(^{12}\) It primarily concerns a single faith community and its unique relationship to God. Theology arises when belief and practice are challenged from outside, the challenge being so serious, and internalized to such a degree, that it cannot be ignored. It proceeds by elaborating upon the distinctiveness of the inside path, and usually involves reaffirmation of the insiders’ special claim to truth. American Jews, seeking integration in America denied them elsewhere, have tended to emphasize what could readily be projected outwards. They have sought to be a part rather than apart, and so have downplayed or reinterpreted key theological ideas, such as chosenness, which might have proven offensive to others. In this they have not been alone.\(^ {13}\) In short, pluralism and egalitarianism have exacted their toll in terms of the articulation of difference. One cannot imagine a Rosenzweig writing in America that Judaism is the fire which burns at the core of the Star of Redemption, Christianity its rays; that we stand at the goal, while they are ever on the way.\(^ {14}\) At most one finds a Soloveitchik averring that no individual and no community is in a position to judge the God-relationship of any other. We regard our faith as true; about the others, within certain bounds of acceptability, we cannot judge.\(^ {15}\) More than this probably cannot be said in America. Yet, saying less is generally not productive of theology.

A second factor militating against Jewish theology on these shores has been the lack of Jews qualified to practice the discipline or to appreciate its products. Note the apparent prerequisites for the craft: (1) firm grounding in Jewish sources of various periods—halakhic and aggadic, philosophical and mystical, from the Bible to the present (meaning, increasingly, competence in the secondary literature devoted to the texts and their contexts); (2) serious acquaintance with modern philosophy (Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger seem basic, if we accept as normative the knowledge base assumed by the 20th-century Jewish corpus from Cohen to Fackenheim); and (3) some sense of how Christian thinkers in the modern period have responded to very similar challenges (recall Heschel’s use of Barth or Soloveitchik’s of Kierkegaard). As we approach century’s end, some understanding of social and literary theory has probably also become essential. This combination of talents is indeed a formidable demand.


Even if a given individual possesses it, however, he or she may well lack a fourth apparent prerequisite for the production of theology—a faith community on which to meditate. Theology in Judaism has meant both Halakhah—"life lived," as Jacob Neusner has put it—and Aggadah—life reflected upon.\textsuperscript{16} If American Jews have rarely done theology, it is perhaps because they by and large lack both Halakhah and Aggadah in this sense. Outside of Orthodoxy there is no defined faith community within which a distinct life is lived, and which may be reflected upon. Christian thinkers, too, suffer from the absence of such communities, but the problem is if anything more troubling for Jews, precisely because Jewish theology has tended not to inquire into the nature of God but rather to probe the way Jews are meant to behave, collectively, in God's presence. Without a visible community in which covenantal commitments are enacted, the meaning of the covenant becomes more difficult to articulate.

Theologians also suffer from an acute shortage of potential readers. Previous generations of theologians wrote either for each other (a problem today, when the number of active practitioners is so small) or for congregational rabbis (probably still the primary consumers of Jewish theology) or for colleagues at the university (who today are less and less inclined to take religious belief seriously) or for educated lay people (the number of whom has declined precipitously of late). Judaism is a leisure-time activity for most American Jews, and even the most committed religiously are far less concerned with systematic belief or observance than with appropriating selected elements of the tradition in their lives. They are better served by the sort of occasional (or introductory) literature produced in abundance than they would be by systematic work which they could not read and could not easily apply. The seminaries, meanwhile—and most theologians and potential theologians are still employed by them—often focus on denominational needs: new editions of the \textit{siddur}, revised statements of principles, reflection on the altered status of Halakhah, and so on. In this realm American Judaism has been absolutely prolific, never more so than in the past two decades.\textsuperscript{17} Explanations of what differentiates the several move-


\textsuperscript{17} That is not to say, of course, that American Jews have not engaged in religious reflection of very high quality. They have. But this reflection has taken shape within genres—essays, legal responsa, homilies, and historical research—which demand analyses of a different sort. For one such analysis, see Eisen, "American Judaism" (cited in note 5). \textit{Tradition} (published by the organization of modern Orthodox rabbis) often features sophisticated legal responsa and philosophical reflection on the nature and validity of Jewish law, while \textit{Conservative Judaism} and the \textit{Journal of Reform Judaism} tend to favor aggadic essays, debates on topical issues such as feminism or homosexuality, and analyses of Judaism in terms of disciplines such as anthropology and literary criticism. The Conservative movement has also given rise to impressive reflection on the nature (and legitimate revision) of Halakhah. See, for example, Elliot Dorff and Arthur Rosett, \textit{A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law} (Albany, 1988); Joel
ments are a far cry from theology, particularly when, as is often the case, they bear all the marks of authorship by committee.

The final obstacle in the path of Jewish theology in the United States is the doubly problematic character of contemporary Jewish belief. Van Harvey, writing about American Protestant theology at the same time that Silberman did his survey, gave eloquent expression to the dilemmas of what he called "the alienated theologian." Harvey described a Christian thinker "concerned with the articulation of the faith of the Christian community" but "himself as much a doubter as a believer." The doubt had been evident in Protestant thought throughout the modern period, Harvey argued, but it had emerged with particular force in the 1960s, posing "fundamental questions for the church concerning the future of theology itself." In this respect Jews have perhaps had a certain advantage. The Protestant, losing faith, may well leave the Church. The Jew may nonetheless retain a primordial commitment to the Jewish people. Still, the parallel with Christianity is rather exact. Modern Judaism is beleaguered by the same forces as modern Christianity (and often influenced by the latter in its modes of defense); it is also under siege of late from a new source of doubt, which has come to be known in theological shorthand as "Auschwitz." Religious ideology—partial in character, relying more heavily on images than concepts—can perhaps survive the twin doubts posed by modernity and the Holocaust far better than theology, which in the nature of the case must strive for system.

Still, some Jews continue to require theology. Hence the literature which we are about to survey. Borowitz, while all too aware of the dilemmas just recounted, has concluded that "it is difficult to see how one can escape the holistic question altogether." Fackenheim, writing eloquently on the im-

Roth, The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis (New York, 1986); and David Novak, Law and Theology in Judaism (New York, 1974). For a comparable work by a leading modern Orthodox thinker, see Eliezer Berkovits, Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halakha (New York, 1983). I would call attention, finally, to Simon Greenberg’s collection of essays, A Jewish Philosophy and Pattern of Life (New York, 1981), which—along with two volumes published previously, Foundations of a Faith (1967) and The Ethical in the Jewish and American Heritage (1977)—constitutes the most sustained attempt by an American rabbi since Mordecai Kaplan to provide a philosophy of Jewish living in America. Efforts such as these are probably far more influential on American Jewish belief and observance than the theological works analyzed in the present essay—but they will not be treated here, for reasons which I hope I have made clear.


possibility of "systems" in our time, has nonetheless sought—relatively systematically—to lay the "foundations of future Jewish thought." Gill-man has given us "fragments" artfully combined into a fairly systematic whole. All, in short, have proclaimed that a "new Jewish theology" is imperative, and have reached for syntheses which have eluded their grasp and that of their generation as a whole. We turn now to their imperfect, but nonetheless substantial, achievement.

Covenant: The Commanding Presence

A sizable portion of American Jewish theological literature of the last two decades has been focused on redefinition of the covenant relationship binding the Jewish people with God. In this respect American Jewish thinkers have carried on the line of inquiry that has preoccupied their predecessors throughout the modern period. The attractions of the covenant model for modern thinkers, and its pitfalls, are equally apparent. On the one hand, Jews seek ultimate purpose for their identity, ultimate authority for their observances, and personal relation to their Creator, and the covenant promises all three. On the other hand, the "suzerainty" paradigm of covenant (in which the sovereign binds his vassals to a set of obligations that he defines, in return promising his protection) has run afoul of the Kantian concern with autonomy and the related reluctance by many modern Jews to bear any "yoke of obligation" imposed by their religion. Commandments from on high, according to liberal thinkers, compromise human dignity and insult human reason. In short, the authority of the King of Kings has not emerged unscathed from the assault on all earthly monarchies.

The "parity treaty" model of covenant (which stipulates reciprocal obligations) has proven somewhat more attractive to modern Jews because it stresses mutuality of obligation and emphasizes partnership and relation rather than subordination and command. But the modern period has seen a lessening of personal religious experience among Jews, and a falling away from religious observance. Moreover, even before the Holocaust, Jews displayed an increasing disinclination to view history as the arena in which God rewards or punishes them for covenantal fidelity or betrayal. The fabric of the putative partnership has, as it were, frayed at both ends, and even been torn right down the middle. Jewish thinkers have found themselves drawn more and more to a theological concept which—given what they do and do not believe about revelation, commandment, and the historicity of the biblical narrative—has become less and less theologically defensible.

American Jewish theologians in recent decades have had to wrestle with

21Fackenheim, To Mend the World, ch. 1.
22Gillman, Sacred Fragments.
all these problems, plus others. Thus, they have come to recognize that Jewish religious knowledge, practice, and experience can no longer be assumed. The leading thinkers of the previous generation (e.g., Heschel and Soloveitchik) grew up in European settings of traditional practice and belief. Neither the current generation of thinkers nor their readers can call upon such experience. Much of the effort by current thinkers, in fact—one thinks especially of Borowitz's *New Jewish Theology in the Making* (1968), *How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today* (1969), and *The Mask Jews Wear* (1973)—has been devoted to the question of whether American Jews can be brought to any degree of Jewishly authentic faith or observance. Borowitz, more than any other contemporary theologian, has been intimately involved with lay believers, through his work in the Reform movement. It is telling that he has consistently articulated the alienation of the theologian from his or her fellow Jews most clearly, even as he has relied more heavily than any other thinker on the concept of Israel’s covenant with God. Giving meaning to the covenant in the American setting is never without pathos.

**EUGENE BOROWITZ**

Borowitz's systematic exposition of *Liberal Judaism* (1984), addressed explicitly to the lay audience, is a case in point. The title conveys fidelity to the German liberal tradition rather than to the far more radical bent of American Reform. The organization of the book follows the traditional triad of Israel, God, and Torah. Borowitz is uncompromising in his insistence that God is real and is involved with our world. God's age-old covenant with Israel is still binding. In fact, a good Jew is defined as one who has "a living relationship with God as part of the people of Israel and therefore lives a life of Torah." Prescribed duties—both ethical and ritual—flow from this relationship. So does involvement in the life of the Jewish people as a whole and with the State of Israel: "The Covenant, being a collective endeavor, can best be lived as part of a self-governing Jewish community on the Land of Israel. A good Jew will seriously consider the possibility of *aliyah*..."24

Borowitz knows, however, that the vast majority of Reform readers will not give that option serious consideration, any more than they will assume their covenantal duties in more than rudimentary fashion. What is more, he himself cannot accept the Torah (written or oral) as divine revelation,

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and is unwilling to compromise his commitment to the autonomy of each individual believer. The author emphasizes that he makes "no special claims to 'authority,'" hoping only to persuade. He can suggest appropriate behavior but he cannot guide, let alone command. If each Jew decides how to live the covenant out of the depth of knowledge and in terms of his/her own deepest commitment, Borowitz avers, "whatever we choose from the past or create for the present should rest upon us with the full force of commandment."  

One notes that ethics remains the heart of mitzvah in Borowitz's liberal Judaism, although ritual is highlighted to a degree still unusual in American Reform. But the force of both sets of obligations is not clear. Halakhah is rejected on principle, and normative communities—in practice nonexistent—would be objectionable if they did exist because of their infringement on individual autonomy. What authority remains? Borowitz seems to rely (as did Kant and Buber, in differing ways) on an inborn sense of duty or conscience that summons each and every human being. He relies, too, on his Jewish readers' unwillingness to sever the ties linking them to their parents, grandparents, and the Jewish past more generally, however much they might strain these ties to the breaking point. Conservative colleagues wrestling with the same issues—and appealing to "mitzvah" and "tradition" rather than "covenant" and "ethics"—find themselves in a similar sociological situation, with similar theological results.  

IRVING GREENBERG  

One sees these same dynamics at work in the notion of "the voluntary covenant" developed by Orthodox thinker Irving Greenberg. Once more the appeal of the idea is clear: just as the rabbis had reassumed and reinterpreted the covenant with God following the destruction of the Temple, so today's Jews must undertake the more radical reinterpretation and reassumption of covenantal responsibilities mandated by the more radical destruction accomplished by the Nazis. Prophecy was gone even by the rabbis' day. Their focus on study of God's word shifted the weight of the Jewish role from passive reception of commands given on high to active partnership, often initiated from below. In another favored rabbinic metaphor, Jews enjoyed a marriage bond with God and carried it on with full devotion.  

The word "voluntary" is crucial to Greenberg. It emphasizes that the initiative—now, more than ever—is on the human side rather than on

25Ibid., p. 125.  
27Irving Greenberg, The Voluntary Covenant (New York, 1982).
God's. It suggests that we will be faithful, we will uphold the covenant, even if God in the Holocaust did not—precisely the reverse of what the prophets said to Israel in the wake of Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C.E. Issues of heteronomy and sovereignty fall away. Activism, freedom, the rescue of dignity from degradation are pronounced. "By every right, Jews should have questioned or rejected the covenant" after Auschwitz, Greenberg writes. Instead,

the bulk of Jews, observant and non-observant alike, acted to recreate the greatest Biblical symbol validating the covenant, the State of Israel. . . . [I]n the ultimate test of the Jews' faithfulness to the covenant, the Jewish people, regardless of ritual observance level, responded with a reacceptance of the covenant, out of free will and love. For some, it was love of God; for others, love of the covenant and the goal; for others, love of the people or of the memories of the covenantal way. In truth, it hardly matters because the three are inseparable in walking the covenantal way. 28

Greenberg builds daringly on Soloveitchik's idea of the twofold covenant of fate and destiny, the former involuntary and symbolized by Pharoah (or Hitler), the latter involving free acceptance of the yoke of the commandments, and symbolized by Sinai. The "voluntary covenant" also extends Soloveitchik's teaching that the Jewish people, committing itself to the covenant of destiny at Sinai, "had committed their very being . . . the covenant turned out to be a covenant of being, not doing." 29 In Greenberg's reading, the commitment to "being" after the Holocaust is virtually equivalent to the "doing" of commandments. One wonders, however, whether he means it to include existence a hair's breadth away from assimilation. Is it really true that "it does not matter," that any Jewish commitment inevitably carries with it all the others? Greenberg exaggerates, I believe, to make the important points that in our generation any and all Jewish commitment is remarkable, and that such commitment often takes the form of caring for the Jewish people (Israel, Ethiopian Jews, Operation Exodus) rather than shul-going or observance of the commandments. But a price is paid for this exaggeration: the concept of covenant is strained to the breaking point.

MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD

In The Body of Faith (1983), Orthodox thinker Michael Wyschogrod challenges the reigning theological paradigm of voluntarism and its accommodation to the realities of American Judaism. Where Jewish thought since Mendelssohn has stressed human adequacy and brought religion before reason's stern bar of judgment, Wyschogrod pictures a humanity largely in

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28Ibid., pp. 16-28.
29Ibid., p. 17.
the dark, its reason blocked at every crucial turn. Only a few shafts of light guide our way—and Torah is the brightest. Where most modern Jewish thinkers, particularly in America, have apologized for the idea of Jewish chosenness, universalizing it to include all righteous Gentiles and interpreting it to stress fulfillment of covenantal obligation, Wyschogrod writes that “the election of the people of Israel as the people of God constitutes the sanctification of a natural family.” God did not choose according to a spiritual criterion. “He chose the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. . . . The election of Israel is therefore a corporeal election.” Finally, where thinkers such as Borowitz have affirmed autonomy, Wyschogrod argues that “the ethical is not autonomous in Judaism. It is rooted in the being and command of God, without which no obligation is conceivable.”

Most recent Jewish thought in America has skirted the issue of God, preferring when it does speak of God to employ the rationalist discourse of “spirit” or “intelligence.” Wyschogrod (with brilliant use of both the Bible and Heidegger) argues the necessity of a personal God whom he calls by His personal name—“Hashem,” literally, “The Name.” The argument, briefly, is that Heidegger was correct in claiming that beyond Being there can be only Non-Being. Identification of God with being, in the manner of Spinoza, cannot avoid the threat posed to the meaning of all human endeavor by the encompassing power of non-being. Only a God beyond both being and non-being can satisfy our demand for ultimate meaning and ultimate grounding. Only Hashem can conquer death and create life: “On the one side there is being and thought, the enterprise of Heidegger. On the other side is Hashem and faith, the enterprise of Judaism. And then there is man, who attempts to understand himself in the setting provided by these concepts and in light of the tensions generated by them.” Where rational language must fall silent in its search for description of the Lord of Being, unable to transcend the limits of our world, “the power of Hashem acts through the language of revelation,” the Bible, and gives us the power of speech. “Hope conquers the despair of silence,” Wyschogrod asserts.

Wyschogrod’s argument is Jewishly and philosophically learned, captivating in its break with the conventional givens of American Jewish theology—and, of course, not without serious problems. For one, the magnificent interpretive freedom derived from Wyschogrod’s refusal to demythologize the Bible’s descriptions of God depends on the belief that the text is somehow divine. That belief is never argued in the book, let alone justi-
fied. Unless Moses really did write the text in accord with divine instruction, it is hard to see how we can resist reason's demand for reinterpretation of the text's descriptions of God.

Second, and no less important, the conviction that Israel's is a "corporeal election" transmitted from generation to generation by the organs of generation rather than a "spiritual election" dependent upon observance of the covenant raises obvious empirical and moral dilemmas. Are Jews really one race? Are non-Jews so utterly beyond the covenant? Wyschogrod observes: "What, now, of those not elected? Those not elected cannot be expected not to be hurt by not being of the seed of Abraham, whom God loves above all others. The Bible depicts clearly the suffering of Esau. . . . The consolation of the gentiles is the knowledge that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness." Wyschogrod has preferred the minority view of election in Judaism—associated with Yehudah Halevi, the Maharal of Prague, and the Kabbalah—over the predominant stream represented by Maimonides and Mendelssohn. It is as if he wants to shout to the Jews described (and accommodated) by Boro-witz: You are bound, like it or not, to an eternal covenant. Its mark is imprinted on your flesh. You cannot escape it. There is no meaning to your life—or being itself—outside the reach of Hashem. Embrace your destiny! Any other option—all the options preferred by reason and recommended on grounds of social acceptability—means suicide.

DAVID HARTMAN

The polar opposite to Wyschogrod's book in virtually every respect except the shared centrality of covenant is David Hartman's *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (1985). Hartman, now an Israeli, writes that his attempt to articulate a "covenantal anthropology" stressing human freedom and adequacy grew out of his experience of American pluralism, his graduate work among the Jesuits at Fordham, and his conviction that secularism can be the framework for meaningful life and rigorous ethical commitment. It also emerged from the reality of Israeli society—a feature that separates him from all the other theologians considered in the present article. Hartman has "Halakham" and "Aggadah" in the sense discussed earlier: a communal reality in which to live and on which to reflect. That reality has affected his thinking decisively.

One should note, before considering his views, that the subject of Is-

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Ibid., p. 64.

rael is virtually absent from American Jewish theology. That is not to say that the state does not matter, and matter deeply, to American Jews, including the theologians. Israel's existence, however, has had no major impact on Jewish religious life here. Some synagogues celebrate Israel Independence Day, and many recite a prayer for the state; sermons, now as before, are full of Israel's troubles and achievements. But Israel has not seriously altered religious observance and is not a topic for American Jewish thought except (as we will see below) in the context of the Holocaust. The sacredness of space—a prominent theme in current Israeli thought—is an alien notion to American thinkers content with Heschel's dictum that Judaism sanctifies time and not space. The possibility that our time is witnessing the first footsteps of the Messiah—as some in Israel forcefully contend—tends to frighten American Jewish thinkers rather than to receive serious consideration.

Hartman sets out to counter both the excessive zealotry of the Israeli messianists and the ethereal quality of much Diaspora thought with a call to collective covenantal responsibility. Sinai, not Exodus, is his paradigmatic event, and Sinai is interpreted as a divine "invitation" to partnership and intimacy rather than as an act of dictatorial command. Hartman's favored metaphor, in fact, is neither the suzerainty covenant nor the parity treaty but the marriage vow. God and Israel need each other. Only their partnership can bring mitzvot into the world. The covenant, far from precluding human initiative, creativity, and freedom, presumes it at every turn. Tradition does not merely allow innovation, it demands it. God counts on Israel's participation in the building of His kingdom. Jews freely accept this invitation because they love God and appreciate the meaningfulness of the life shaped by God's commandments.

Hartman's thrust is twofold. First, he is carrying forward a theological agenda begun in our era by Soloveitchik and the Israeli thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz, both of them inspired by Hartman's principal teacher: Maimonides. The stress falls on human activism, the centrality of human reason, the role of human initiative and creativity, the dignity of halakhic observance—all this in contrast to Christian (and classical Reform Jewish) depictions of the Halakhah as rote behavior under a burdensome yoke. Hartman rejects Soloveitchik's call for a degree of submissiveness and resignation in the face of divine decrees. Covenantal activism, he writes, enabled the rabbis (and enables us) to counter and contain the experience of life's tragedy and

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Similarly, Hartman adopts Leibowitz’s call for halakhic creativity while rejecting his restriction of the covenant to halakhic observance. The total human being is required, Hartman writes—precisely as he or she is required in a marriage. Nothing less will do. Eloquently and with characteristic passion, Hartman argues the case for human adequacy, human reason, and Jewish openness to the wider world.

This points to the second task undertaken in the book: the attempt to redirect the religious understanding of Israeli society. On the one hand, Hartman seeks to break down the dichotomy between dati (religious) and lo dati (secular), not by the creation of a middle ground but by the encouragement of mutual respect. Secular readers are brought to see a halakhic life which insists upon innovation and open-mindedness. Religious readers are challenged in their assumption that faith and it alone can provide a foundation for ethics or a life of ultimate meaning. Hartman offers a covenant, not the covenant. He urges his readers, religious and secular alike, to see their shared history not as Exodus, i.e., divine manipulation, but as Sinai: an opportunity to actualize the covenant in an entire community. Borowitz, in the American context, can speak of ethics and ritual; Orthodox colleagues in America can call for greater halakhic observance; Hartman, as an Israeli, can discuss a Jewish society and culture. A thinker who does “not wish to divide my world into two separate realms, one of which is characterized by autonomous action based upon human understanding of the divine norm and the other by anticipation of and dependence upon divine intervention” requires an arena in which human beings can “unite the two realms and exercise autonomous action.” Israel is that realm.

One wonders whether the split between dati and lo dati can be overcome in this manner, even on the level of theory. If God really is present in our world, how ignore that presence with impunity? If God really did command Israel at Sinai, how can disobedience to His commands be taken as morally neutral? And if both these claims are in fact delusions, their consequences pernicious, how could one possibly remain placid or indifferent? Hartman’s generosity, like his equanimity, seems difficult to maintain. He purchases them by robbing both secularism and faith of potent energies, and not a little profundity.

There is a related problem with Hartman’s model that seems even more intractable. As we have seen, he rejects the division of his world into one realm “characterized by autonomous action based upon human understanding of the divine norm” and a second realm in which human beings await, in dependence, the “divine intervention.” Hartman rather “prefers

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39Ibid., chs. 3-4.
40Ibid., ch. 5.
41Ibid., pp. 232-33. See also p. 148.
to see God's will . . . as channeled exclusively through the efforts of the Jewish community to achieve the aims of the Torah given at Sinai.  

But what happens when the awesome realities of God's presence intrude uninvited upon personal and collective life? What are we to do with the human failure and self-destructiveness which so often preclude fulfillment of covenantal responsibility? The effort to keep fear and trembling outside the bounds of covenant may be futile; moreover, it may rob the life of mitzvah of much pathos and passion. Hartman's model of covenant is adequate to some portion of human and Jewish experience, but not to the rest, in which darkness is pervasive and human adequacy far from unquestioned.

Each model of covenant proposed in the past two decades has the disadvantages of its own virtues. All attest to the difficulties which modernity has cast up before traditional belief. No less, they demonstrate the continuing resiliency of the covenant idea, despite and because of the fact that most Jews no longer feel bound by its traditional stipulations, the commandments. It seems likely that autonomy will remain precious to Jewish believers, and commandment fundamental. Covenant will therefore continue to feature prominently in Jewish theology, even as it continues to risk degeneration into cant—a traditional trope deprived of all traditional content. Like the bodily wounding which most symbolizes it, covenant will hold Jews, in large part, through the power of their own ambivalence.

God's Saving Presence—and Its Absence

American Jewish theology concerning the Holocaust falls broadly into two categories. Either the Holocaust was a unique event in human history which makes all the difference in the world to Jewish reflection—or it was not, and does not. The former claim can likewise be of two sorts: that of Richard Rubenstein, who holds that "after Auschwitz" the God of history, the God of the covenant, can no longer be affirmed, that Jewish existence is an absurd given, no more and no less meaningful than the existence of any other group of mortals in a senseless universe; or one can hold, with Irving Greenberg, Emil Fackenheim, and Arthur Cohen, that theological business as usual cannot continue, that existing models have been ruptured, that a "caesura" has opened in human thought and history dividing before

42Ibid., pp. 232–33.
43Richard Rubenstein, After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism (Indianapolis, 1966).
from after Auschwitz—but that Judaism can and must go on, somehow. This latter version of the claim that the Holocaust makes all the difference borders so closely on the claim that it does not make all the difference as to make the two, to my mind at least, virtually indistinguishable. The two views are separated by a process of thought rather than its end-point; or, rather, one group insists on making the process explicit and devising new language to describe it, while the other regards the process as highly traditional and, therefore, not worthy of extended discussion. Eliezer Berkovits argues that the Holocaust is not unique, places it against the background of millennial persecution, cites the bewilderment of Job and the anger of Psalm 44—and claims that nothing has changed. Fackenheim, Greenberg, and Cohen argue that everything has changed and devote many pages to explaining how, but end, like Berkovits, with the affirmation that Jewish life, Jewish obligation, the study of Torah, the service of God, must continue.

Not surprisingly, then, theological concentration on the subject has diminished of late. The point, after all, is “To Mend the World” (Fackenheim), not just to document its rupture; to “build a bridge over the abyss” (Cohen), not just to face up to “The Tremendum.” As Rosenzweig, the crucial mentor of both Cohen and Fackenheim, put it at the close of The Star of Redemption: “into life.”

RICHARD RUBENSTEIN

Rubenstein, in an eloquent critique of Cohen’s book, summarized his own point of view most concisely. “The Holocaust renders faith in either the God of classical theism or the God of classical covenant theology exceedingly difficult,” if not impossible. “Judaism makes the fundamental claim that God is uniquely concerned with the history and destiny of Israel,” meaning that “the classical and logically inescapable mode of interpreting a monumental national catastrophe such as the Holocaust is that of divine punishment of a sinful people.” This view of the Holocaust, Rubenstein writes, is unacceptable. Covenantal affirmation is thus precluded, and Jewish movements which strive to get around the problem are all of them unsatisfactory. Reconstructionism, proposing what Rubenstein calls “ethnic religion,” fails to offer “a compelling rationale for maintaining Jewish religious identity.” Zionism fails to attract most Diaspora Jews. All attempts to detach Judaism from belief in the Lord of History inevitably involve departure from the “Jewish religious mainstream.” In short, Jews

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4Rosenzweig, Star of Redemption, p. 424.
must choose between a God who is absent from history, "functionally irrelevant," or regard Hitler as "the instrument of an all-powerful and righteous God of history. I wish there were a credible way out of the dilemma. In the thirty years that I have spent reflecting on the Holocaust, I have yet to find it."47

One should note that for Rubenstein the Holocaust is not unique—far from it; its importance lies in the quandaries that it makes unavoidable in our time. In fact, Rubenstein argues, terms such as "the tremendum" are attempts to "mystify a phenomenon that can be fully comprehended in terms of the normal categories of history, social science, demography, political theory, and economics."48 Rubenstein does not move from the Holocaust to an altered theology, therefore. He leaves God behind altogether and focuses the inquiry on the human decisions which led one group of people to persecute and then murder another. In this respect, ironically, Rubenstein is closer to Berkovits—who likewise denies the Holocaust's uniqueness, and likewise places the blame squarely on human evil rather than divine indifference—than to the theologians for whom, as for him, the Holocaust mandates a radical response.

EMIL FACKENHEIM

Fackenheim is perhaps the best example of the latter. His earliest essays, collected in *Quest for Past and Future* (1968) and *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (1973), sought to establish that the tenets of traditional faith, revelation first of all, were still philosophically respectable options. One expected, on the basis of these works, that he would proceed to a species of covenant theology more traditional than Borowitz's but, unlike Hartman's, non-halakhic. (It has in fact recently appeared, in popular form: *What Is Judaism?* [1987]). Instead, there came a break—presaging the claim that such a break is inevitable in contemporary Jewish faith as such. *God's Presence in History* (1970) laid the groundwork for Fackenheim's new direction by setting forth the two categories of "root experiences": historical events in which Jewish faith originated and "epoch-making events" that make a "new claim upon Jewish faith," testing it in light of historical experience. Exodus and Sinai are examples—probably the only ones—of the former; the destruction of the Temples, the Maccabean revolt, the expulsion from Spain, and now the Holocaust, are examples of the latter. Jewish faith had to remain open to the incursions of history if

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48 Ibid., pp. 51–54.
it were to remain vital, alive, true. Yet what faith could emerge from Auschwitz?49

In this book Fackenheim had only one reply: the "614th commandment." Jews were forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. For secular Jews to abandon their people, or religious Jews their faith, would be to aid and abet the Nazis. Secular Israelis knew well what Fackenheim wished to teach: that "after the death camps, we are left only one supreme value: existence."50 Fackenheim carried this lesson forward—particularly regarding the importance of the Jewish state—in *The Jewish Return into History* (1978). His most coherent statement, however—and his finest work of theology to date—came in *To Mend the World* (1982). The book is striking on two counts. First, it perceptively situates itself in the history of modern Jewish theology, so as to lay the "foundations for future Jewish Thought." Recognizing that one cannot do everything, Fackenheim focuses on key thinkers (Spinoza, Buber, and Rosenzweig) and confronts them with philosophical (Hegel, Heidegger) and historical (modernity, Holocaust, Israel) challenges. As Fackenheim puts it, "It is clearly necessary for Jewish thought (and not for it alone) to go to school with life."51 Theology had to catch up with what history had wrought, and item number one in the curriculum was of course the Holocaust.

The second striking feature of the book is indeed Fackenheim’s treatment of the Holocaust. Unrelentingly, and always thoughtfully, Fackenheim looks at the awful face of the facts and in that context asks "the central question of our whole inquiry . . . how Jewish (and also Christian and philosophical) thought can both expose itself to the Holocaust and survive." The ability to survive should not, he insists, be taken for granted. Fackenheim concedes that his previous, Kantian, confidence that "we can do what we ought to do" was a lapse into "unconscious glibness."52

Some 200 pages later, after situating Rosenzweig opposite Spinoza and Hegel, after confronting the challenge of Heidegger’s philosophy and the conundrum of his support for the Nazis, and (less satisfactorily) after a highly judgmental survey of "Unauthentic Thought After the Holocaust," Fackenheim arrives at the effort of repair or *tikkun*. Resistance to Auschwitz, repair of Auschwitz, is possible now because it occurred then. German philosophers in the name of their philosophical convictions opposed the Nazis, on pain of death. Christian martyrs opposed Hitler in the name of Christianity. Jews defied him in Warsaw and elsewhere—and out of the ashes of the Holocaust created the single most important *tikkun* in the

50Ibid., pp. 79–98.
51Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, p. 15.
52Ibid., pp. 24, 200.
world today, the State of Israel. "The Tikkun which for the post-Holocaust Jew is a moral necessity is a possibility because during the Holocaust itself a Jewish Tikkun was already actual. This simple but enormous, nay, world-historical truth is the rock on which rests any authentic Jewish future, and any authentic future Jewish identity." Israel, the Jews' emergence from powerlessness, "has been and continues to be a moral achievement of world-historical import."

The principal problem with the work, as Cohen noted in a review, is that the depiction of rupture is so convincing that the promise of repair lacks all credibility. The book, he wrote, "utterly collapses" this side of the Holocaust. It is not so much that one can do what one ought to do, as that one ends up doing what one must do, what one knew all along one would do. Tikkun must be possible or there is no foundation of future Jewish thought, and Rubenstein's answer to Auschwitz is decisive. Fackenheim had to cross the abyss—or violate the 614th commandment. The question was never whether, but only how, he could cross. But if that is the case, if the circle of covenant must remain unbroken, how is Fackenheim different from Berkovits?

It seems that in To Mend the World Fackenheim has backed off somewhat from earlier unequivocal claims about the Holocaust's uniqueness. After devoting a page to a brief statement of five arguments for that uniqueness—"a complex subject that will require much space in the present work"—Fackenheim writes that "all this is by no means to deny the existence of other catastrophes equally unprecedented, and endowed with unique characteristics of their own." Still, Fackenheim does not proceed from the repair of one rupture to the depiction and repair of the others. Auschwitz matters in a way Hiroshima does not because Fackenheim believes in the Hegelian notion that some peoples and events are of "world-historical" significance while others are not. In the Holocaust fully one-third of the people most associated with the God of the Bible were destroyed by the people most associated in the modern period with the project of philosophy, the crowning achievement of the human spirit. That claim, outside the Hegelian framework, is difficult to defend. Even inside it, however, Cohen's charge that the rupture cannot be so speedily repaired requires an answer which Fackenheim does not provide.

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53Ibid., pp. 300-304.
56I owe this insight to Michael Morgan—but bear full responsibility for its formulation.
Greenberg's argument, very similar to Fackenheim's, is best expressed in an essay entitled "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity After the Holocaust" (1977). He convincingly lays out the damage done to traditional notions of covenant and redemption, argues that "the Holocaust challenges the claims of all the standards that compete for modern man's loyalties" and allows no "simple, clear or definitive solutions," and then propounds one definitive principle. "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children." Greenberg proposes a "dialectical faith" which holds fast to the disbelief in divine redemption occasioned by Auschwitz but is also open to "moments when the reality of the Exodus is reenacted and present." The Holocaust challenges prevailing secular conceptions no less than it does religious faith; it teaches us to recognize the dangers of powerlessness as well as of power. "The cloud of smoke of the bodies by day and the pillar of fire of the crematoria by night"—powerful relocations to Auschwitz of the biblical marks of God’s presence in the wilderness—"may yet guide humanity to a goal and a day when human beings are attached to each other; and have so much shared each other’s pain, and have so purified and criticized themselves, that never again will a Holocaust be possible." In the meantime, Greenberg counsels return to The Jewish Way (1988) entailed by the covenant—apparently finding it not only credible but necessary in the face of "burning children."

Arthur Cohen

Cohen's premise is more radical; he assumes, in effect, that nothing whatsoever is credible by that criterion. The question must be refocused, moved from religious observance to the classical ground of theology: the nature of God.

My interest—first, last and always—is about the God who created the world, not the God who provided the occasion for religion. What Jews do about their religious life . . . of the conferred and optional requirements of living as Jews I can hardly speak. . . . I might almost assert as a first principle of any modern Jewish theology that it should begin by thinking without Jews in mind.

Cohen finds it necessary to undertake this effort—to engage in theology despite the fact that "there is virtually no modern Jewish theology"—because the Holocaust marked a novum, "the election of the Chosen People to be the first people in human history to be systematically an-
nihilated. . . . Such a theological novum entails theological response."58

Cohen's response is as follows.59 One must not deny either God's presence in the world or the reality of evil. God must be seen as related to every aspect of creation. God confronts us then, first of all, not as Father or King but (borrowing Rudolph Otto's classic term) as the Tremendum—a Power both awesome and mysterious. We cannot return after Auschwitz to the classic categories of Western philosophical theism. There has been a rupture, a "caesura." To repair or at least cross it, Cohen turns from the rabbis to the Kabbalah, which penetrated Western philosophy, reaching Rosenzweig and then Cohen, through the person of Schelling. "The human affect," Schelling taught,

is toward the overflowing, the loving in God; his containment, however, the abyss of his nature, is as crucial as is his abundance and plenitude. These are the fundamental antitheses of the divine essence . . . the quiet God is as indispensable as the revealing God, the abyss as much as the plenitude, the constrained, self-contained, deep divinity as the plenteous and generous.60

God had made room in the divine plenitude for human beings endowed with freedom and speech. The space in which we abide, in which God gives us leave to abide, is therefore full to overflowing with our "enduring strife and tension, enlarged and made threatening by our finitude," enhanced and made more dangerous by our freedom.61 Cohen is not seeking language adequate to God's nature. We do not have it, he believes, for reasons that his theology helps to clarify. He seeks only to be adequate to the caesura, and this he may well have achieved—at the cost of belief in the covenant as traditionally (that is, nonmystically) understood. Like the rabbis, and without explanation, Cohen affirms the unique connection between the being of the Jewish people and the being of God. There can be no explanation of that connection, he avers. We will understand the nature of "Jewish being, Jewish history, and the meaning of God's self-narration" only "when it is done and past or else completed in the last minute of redemption."62 As Rosenzweig put it, "not yet"; the meaning is present, but not yet apparent. "Redemption" is, significantly, the final word of the book. The covenant may be broken theologically, but its observance continues despite and because of the caesura.

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60 Ibid., p. 90.
61 Ibid., pp. 92–94.
62 Ibid., p. 110.
Silberman, concluding his survey of American Jewish theology two decades ago, wrote that confrontation with *hurban* (destruction) was the inescapable task of Jewish theology. Jewish thought could ignore Auschwitz only at its own peril.\(^6\) Two decades later one can say that the task of confronting Auschwitz has probably been undertaken as thoroughly as possible at this juncture, and that the refusal to make the move of repair linking Cohen, Fackenheim, and Greenberg to Berkovits is to present no less a peril than the other to future Jewish thought. Survival, the 614th commandment, demands an answer to the question: survival for what, in what faith, with what obligation? Survival, if it is to be continuous with the Jewish past, entails some relationship to the 613 commandments which, according to the 614th, Jews are forbidden to abandon. The next generation of Jewish thinkers, while not entirely ignoring the Holocaust, will likely move on to efforts—dialectical or otherwise—to make sense of Jewish life, the previous generation having focused, perhaps necessarily, on the threat posed to Judaism by unprecedented Jewish death. That effort, in fact, is already under way, informed by recent currents in American society and undertaken by a new generation of theologians. We turn now to two of its most noteworthy exemplars.

*Experience, Tradition, Community*

It is doubtful that either of the two themes that have preoccupied American Jewish theology for the past 20 years will continue to hold center stage in the next 20. A new generation of theologians is now at work, and it has announced its intention (as did the previous generation) to reorient theological discourse rather substantially. Two reasons for that reorientation have already been noted: the problems besetting covenant theology in the absence of either a satisfactory notion of revelation or a community intent on covenantal observance; and the need—articulated even by those for whom the Holocaust has been central—to move from (or through) confrontation with the “rupture” or “caesura” of Auschwitz to *tikkun*: renewed Jewish commitment. The question becomes what sort of commitment, grounded in what authority, inside what sort of community? The answers emerging from a variety of quarters come in terms which have not loomed large in recent decades but which have a venerable theological history in Judaism as in other faiths: experience, tradition, and community. I will illustrate this emerging trend with the work of two thinkers who will, I expect, assume increasing importance as the decade unfolds.

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\(^{6}\)Silberman, “Jewish Theology,” p. 58.
The first is Arthur Green, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and as such the intellectual leader of Reconstructionism. Green is trying to take his movement, and American Judaism as a whole, in a new theological direction centered on the renewed religious experience of the individual believer. Green’s approach was adumbrated in a 1976 address before Conservative rabbis and further elaborated (albeit implicitly) in his masterly biography of Nachman of Bratslav, *Tormented Master* (1979). It has received its fullest expression to date in a programmatic essay entitled “Rethinking Theology: Language, Experience and Reality” (1988), the subtitle of which offers a précis of Green’s argument.

First, the matter of religious language. Green begins with “one of the great tragedies of Judaism in modern times”—the widespread perception that Judaism is “empty of, or even opposed to, the depths of individual religious experience.” In fact, Green argues, Kabbalah and Hassidism have bequeathed “a rich vocabulary . . . for discussion of religious states”; the problem is that that vocabulary (as we have seen in the present essay) rarely figures in contemporary Jewish discourse. Green aims to reintroduce it, thereby helping to create “a religious language that will speak both profoundly and honestly to Jews in our time.” Honesty, to Green, demands that Jews admit their distance from traditional symbols and beliefs. We are necessarily both insiders and outsiders to our inheritance. Profundity connotes the effort to penetrate to the wellspring of faith deep inside every human being. We should, like Hassidism, seek “spiritual wakefulness and awareness . . . cultivation of the inner life.” Judaism does not so much demand leaps of faith as intensity of vision. The path does not lie in more adequate theories of revelation, but more penetrating searchings of the soul.

The key, in other words, is experience. All human beings know transcendence at some moments of their lives. Religion exists to “make constant, or at least regular, [the] level of insight that has already existed in moments of spontaneous flash,” and to design ways of life appropriate to the illuminations that transcendence provides. Like his teacher Abraham Heschel (albeit in language more attuned to the counterculture of the 1960s), Green begins with wonder, awe, transcendence—“we praise before we prove,” as Heschel put it—and only then moves to God, whom Heschel regarded as

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the only satisfactory "answer" to the "questions" made imperative by our wonder. Green's understanding of God, however, diverges from Heschel considerably and—ironically enough, given the Hassidic language in which it is couched—brings Green remarkably close to the teaching of Mordecai Kaplan. "YHWH is, in short, all of being, but so unified and concentrated as to become Being." God is "the universe . . . so utterly transformed by integration and unity as to appear to us as indeed 'other,' a mirror of the universe's self that becomes Universal Self." God is "none 'other' than we ourselves and the world in which we live, transformed as part of the transcendent vision." Kaplann, I think, could have assented to all of these formulations, and certainly to Green's caveat that "the figure of God imaged by most religion is a human projection.

Where the two thinkers would differ, perhaps, is on Green's belief that human beings need to pray to God, that psychology should not be employed to explain away "supernaturalism" but rather to underline its importance as a mode of expression. In his words, "'God' is in that sense a symbol, a human creation that we need to use in order to illuminate for ourselves, however inadequately, some tiny portion of the infinite mystery." And, besides, "our imagination, we should always remember, is itself a figment of divinity."

It is clear from the quotations just cited that Green's God is far from the real personal God encountered by Heschel or Buber. Green's notion of mitzvot must therefore be different as well; the idea of divine covenant is utterly inapplicable. Mitzvot enter Green's Judaism from two directions. "The religious life is a life lived in constant striving for this awareness [of relation to the transcendent] and in response to the demands made by it." And we turn to Judaism for the pattern of that striving and response, "not because it is the superior religion, and certainly not because it is God's single will, but because it is our own . . . our spiritual home." Green prefers the "tradition in its most whole and authentic form" because "traditions work best when they are least diluted. . . . Serious Judaism means serious engagement with mitzvot."

This statement of the Jewish religious situation is, I would suggest, remarkable in more ways than one—not least in its adaptation of Kaplan to the very different cultural milieu of the 1990s. "Such a religious viewpoint" is indeed, as Green claims, "that of mystic and naturalist at once."
Moreover, Green may well articulate the assumptions of a large number of contemporary American Jews (particularly intellectuals), just as Kaplan did for the generation of the 1930s. Note that the vision starts and ends with self: the experience of transcendence, the search for God leading "through our deepest and most pained emotional selves," the turn to tradition because it fulfills that quest in a "whole" and "authentic" form. This is not to accuse Green of narcissism. Quite the opposite. He has simply worked with, and for, the prevailing reality of Jewish life which Kaplan urged upon his readers over half a century ago: namely, that Judaism will either be a palpable source of meaning, enriching life in tangible ways, or Jews will not choose to accord it a central place in their lives. Moreover, like Kaplan, Green has sought to encourage that move to Judaism by couching it in language which does not challenge prevailing conceptions of reality and by deemphasizing claims of guilt or obligation. Mitzvot deepen life, heighten awareness, proffer the authenticity available only (or most readily) in one's natural "spiritual home"—and necessitate community. One discovers the self, and so God, when one joins with other searchers who share one's language, one's "spiritual home," one's life. "Our 'liberal' views should not serve as a cloak for cavalier desertion or disdain of our traditions," Green writes. The force of that "should not" bears attention: not because God has willed it, nor even because our ancestors have covenanted with God in a way which binds us, but because what we seek in and for ourselves is achievable through no other route than "serious engagement with mitzvot."

JUDITH PLASKOW

A similar appeal to experience, grounded still more powerfully in the life of a particular community of Jews, underlies Judith Plaskow's groundbreaking effort to formulate a feminist Jewish theology. If the history of Judaism written to date largely ignores the role played by women; if the tradition's classical texts were written by and for men, according little space to female characters and evincing little interest in female consciousness; if the founding moment of the Jewish people, the covenant at Sinai described in Exodus 19, excluded women entirely (the injunction "do not go near a woman" seems to indicate that "Moses addresses the community only as men")—then, asks Plaskow, where is a woman to find entrée to this tradition? How is she to appropriate it, carry it forward? Jewish women can either "choose to accept our absence from Sinai, in which case we allow the male text to define us and our relationship to the tradition," or they can

"Ibid., p. 11.
"Ibid., p. 12.
"Ibid., p. 13.
"stand on the ground of our experience, on the certainty of our membership in our own people."  

Note that the authority invoked to correct and supplement the "partial record of the 'God wrestling' of part of the Jewish people"—Plaskow's understanding of Torah—"is experience: Plaskow's, her community's, and that of the readers to whom she appeals. Accepting that authority, one can "begin the journey toward the creation of a feminist Judaism." All interpretation relies upon experience to some degree, of course. One reads the text into and out of the world as one has come to know it. One adapts tradition to reality and reality to tradition. In Plaskow's work, however, the role of experience is necessarily greater—because of the perceived lack of female consciousness and presence in the tradition that she wishes to adapt.

Plaskow's book *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990) draws upon efforts by Jewish feminists over the past two decades to create new midrash, design new rituals, and explore areas of Jewish history previously untouched, weaving them into the first systematic effort at feminist Jewish theology. After a quite sophisticated methodological introduction, Plaskow proceeds to take up each of the three topics in the classic triad—Torah, Israel, and God, adding a fourth discussion (sexuality), which is apparently central to feminist theology but which seems far less accomplished than the others. We shall focus here on several points which seem to presage the emergence of a new orientation for American Jewish theology.

First, already noted, the appeal to experience—here, in the feminist context, an experience neither purely personal nor purely human but rather gender-specific and communal. Plaskow is sophisticated enough methodologically to avoid the trap of appeal to a putative feminine mind or sensibility unified in itself and easily distinct from the masculine. She relies instead on the reasonable claim that women's experiences, however diverse they may be, have found little expression in Judaism thus far. The few women present in classical texts are either condemned outright or given short shrift; this has given rise in recent decades to a widespread feminist experience of exclusion from the tradition, suspicion of it, disenchantment with it. Plaskow also can point, however, to powerful experiences of transcendence—her own and those of others—which have engendered deep connection to the tradition. The community of feminists in which those experiences occurred becomes, for Plaskow, a point of reference in deciding the direction of feminist Judaism; it becomes, in a word, her authority.

To say that this community is my central source of authority is not to deny the range of ideas or disagreements within it, or the other communities of which I am part. It is simply to say that I have been formed in important ways by Jewish

78Ibid., p. 29.
feminism; without it I could not see the things that I see. It is to say that my most important experiences of God have come through this community, and that it has given me the language with which to express them. To name this community my authority is to call it the primary community to which I am accountable.\(^7\)

Buber said that one carries forward that part of the tradition which speaks to one with "inner power." Kaplan stressed the role of the Jewish people in constantly redefining Judaism in accord with their highest ideals. Plaskow is less subjective than Buber, less universal than Kaplan, but like them she has dispensed with the need for revealed authority, in the belief that it is nowhere to be found. Community is all one has. It is, in fact, all one needs. "The experience of God in community is both the measure of the adequacy of traditional language and the norm in terms of which new images must be fashioned."\(^7\)

Plaskow realizes that "to locate authority in particular communities of interpreters is admittedly to make a circular appeal."\(^7\) Group X of Jews defines Torah as it does, on the grounds that—Group X has experienced it this way. Yet this circularity "has always been the case. . . . When the rabbis said that rabbinic modes of interpretation were given at Sinai, they were claiming authority for their own community—just as other groups had before them, just as feminists do today."\(^8\) This claim of similarity to the rabbis, the second to which I wish to draw attention, features prominently throughout the book. It links Plaskow's work to a principal current both in recent Jewish theology and in philosophy more generally, namely: the argument that quests for objective authority will always be futile; that there is no ultimate foundation for any worldview or ethical system; that the most one can hope for is a community committed to certain norms and the view of reality that undergirds them; that one must define and fashion tradition as one goes. Time and again Plaskow argues that no other authority than one's community is available—and never was.

Hence her use of the rabbis as a role model, horrified as they might have been by the comparison. They too, after all, "expanded Scripture to make it relevant to their own times," they too "brought to the Bible their own questions and found answers that showed the eternal relevance of biblical truth."\(^9\) The issue of revelation, which has so bedeviled Jewish theology in the modern period, is sidestepped entirely here. One need not ask what is true, but only what authentically carries on the tradition. One leaves the answer to the decision of Jewish communities.

The thrust here, as one would expect in a feminist theology, is radically

\(^7\)Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, 1990), pp. 19–21.
\(^7\)Ibid., p. 122.
\(^7\)Ibid., p. 21.
\(^8\)Ibid.
\(^9\)Ibid., pp. 35, 53.
egalitarian. Plaskow expresses even more discomfort with the idea of the chosen people than Kaplan had, and no inclination whatever to sneak the doctrine in with euphemisms such as mission or vocation. Plaskow utterly rejects "Judaism's long history of conceptualizing difference in terms of hierarchical separations," and her suspicion of hierarchy extends not only horizontally (Israel's relation to the nations) but vertically (its relation to God). She rejects the "image of God as dominating Other," criticizing a "relationship [that] is never balanced," in which "the intimacy of the 'you' addressed to a listening other is overshadowed by the image of the lord and king of the universe who is absolute ruler on a cosmic plane." Plaskow goes so far as to claim that "such images of God's dominance give rise to the terrible irony that the symbols Jews have used to talk about God as ultimate good have helped generate and justify the evils from which we hope God will save us." She prefers feminine or gender-neutral images of bountiful nature, of community, of "God as lover and friend." The chapter on God concludes as follows: "In speaking of the moving, changing ground and source, our companion and our lover, we name toward the God known in community that cherishes diversity within and without, even as that diversity has its warrant in the God of myriad names."

It would appear that more than feminist antagonism to "patriarchalism" is at work here. Plaskow is carrying forward the democratization of "God talk" evident throughout the modern period, never more so than in America in recent decades. The redefinitions of covenant surveyed earlier represent an attempt to reconcile traditional belief in the "master of the universe" with the growing self-importance of humanity in the age of science. Solo-veitchik, in his famous essay "The Lonely Man of Faith" (1965), correctly saw the Adam I of majesty and honor standing in tension with the Adam II of covenantal relationship; Borowitz only testified further to the tension with his reinterpretation of the covenant so as to make ample room for autonomy, and Hartman provided still more evidence with his reconception of the covenant as an egalitarian marriage bond (not at all like the marriage bonds pictured in, say, Hosea!). Recent Jewish theology, in short, seems content to imagine God as all of Being (Green), and is eager to reconnect alienated modern selves with that Being within and without them. But there is growing evidence of a disinclination to accept a God who has mastery over individual or collective life, who stands over against us as a real, personal deity demanding obedience—and having the right to it, because God is God, and we are not. Only Wyschogrod in the 1980s ventured the

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82 Ibid., p. 96.
83 Ibid., pp. 128-69.
84 Ibid., p. 169.
claim. One suspects that it will find few exponents in the 1990s, barring an Orthodox successor to the theological mantle of Soloveichik.

**Conclusion**

There is reason to believe that Jewish theologians in the coming decades—whatever their denominational affiliation—will be more likely to engage in a combination of the strategies evinced by Green and Plaskow. They will probably move away from personalist conceptions of God in favor of neo-mystical formulations that ring true to contemporary experience of the transcendent. Cohen’s turn to Kabbalah is a case in point. Efforts to demonstrate God’s presence in history will continue unavailing; convincing answers to why “bad things happen to good people” now, as ever, will continue unavailable. Revelation will not be easily reconceived. The authority for covenant, more and more, will probably be the experience of meaning which the covenant provides. “Voluntarism” and “creativity” will be paramount concerns. Authority will reside within the subcommunity of Jews with which one identifies, rather than in any given, objective set of norms binding the Jewish people, ever and always, as a whole.

If the experience of personal transcendence within such subcommunities is powerful enough to resist dismissal as illusion, higher authority than this may well prove unnecessary, at least in the short run. Jews will likely continue in their present tendency of seeking tradition rather than faith—“sacred fragments” of meaning rather than entire systems of truth. If theologians find meaning in engagement with texts no matter whether they are divinely authored or even inspired, and find transcendence in rituals no matter how literal their status as divine commandment, they are unlikely to devote serious effort to proving the authority of text or ritual. It will be enough to demonstrate their profundity, their groundedness in what Gillman would call Jewish myth, their centrality to what Green would call Jews’ spiritual home, their place in the lived experience of a community such as Plaskow’s. It will be enough to postulate some reality underlying the various images we have of God, some link between the life we lead as Jews and the nature of ultimate reality. More than this may not be required, and so it will not be forthcoming.

The extent of this tendency should not be exaggerated. Theologians may reject Green’s theology as they did Kaplan’s, preferring to work with more traditional terms even if they cannot assent to them entirely. They may

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prove suspicious of the appeal to experience, particularly when religious experience among the highly rationalist, upper-middle-class American Jewish community is if anything even rarer than belief. There is no doubt, however, that appeal to "tradition" (rather than, say, "ethics" or "Halakhah") is now widespread, from moderate Reform on the "left" to modern Orthodoxy on the "right," and no doubt either that the entrance of women into the center of Jewish religious activity—ordained as rabbis, fashioning new rituals, composing new liturgy, and now writing new theology—paves a major shift in the character of American Jewish thought. Given the waning of focus on the Holocaust and the problems besetting covenant theology, the sheer energy underlying feminist theology and the existence of a substantial readership for that theology mean that its role in American Jewish theology as a whole will only increase in coming decades, and will probably increase dramatically.

If in conclusion we were to pose for the next two decades the question that Borowitz asked 20 years ago—the "problem of the form of a Jewish theology"—the answer would seem to be that American thinkers are likely to follow the example of Irving Greenberg's *The Jewish Way* or the acclaimed collection of essays *Back to the Sources* (1986), edited by Barry Holtz. They are likely, that is, to prefer exposition of the meaning to be found in the cycle of the Jewish year over systematic statement of the truth or essence of Judaism; they will turn to modern midrash, examples of how to read traditional texts, with no reading claiming exclusive truth or correctness, rather than to interpretations that claim to give the authoritative account of "Judaism for the modern Jew." The advantage of the former approaches is apparent. One circumvents the problems of revelation that no theologian in the modern period has yet managed to solve, at the same time as one provides what readers, lay and theologically sophisticated, both seem to want. One does not argue for Jewish commitment, at least openly, but rather presumes it—and then suggests content for that commitment. The work of theology takes its place alongside literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, and so forth, much as Rashi greets us on a page of *Mikra'ot Gedolot* alongside Ramban and Ibn Ezra.88

The project of going "beyond Buber and Rosenzweig," then, may well lead American Jewish thinkers to explicit embrace—without apology—of the fragmentary forms which their immediate predecessors had seemed to

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88These features of the "market" for Jewish thought in America probably account for the prevalence of introductory volumes such as Emil Fackenheim's *What Is Judaism?* (New York, 1988), Borowitz's *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*, or even Gillman's *Sacred Fragments*—which concludes with a chapter entitled "Doing Your Own Theology." That is possible for the average reader, of course, only given an understanding of the enterprise radically at variance with the one assumed in the present essay.
adopt of necessity: responsa and commentary, essay and homily; fragments of Halakhah—Jewish “life lived,” and of Aggadah—Jewish life reflected upon. They will offer divrei torah, words of Torah, along with designs for communities in which these words can be heard. And they will hope, somehow, that it will be enough to carry Jews forward to a time when acts of faith once again come more wholly and more easily.
American Jewish Fiction Turns Inward, 1960–1990

by SYLVIA BARACK FISHMAN

Over the past 25 years a remarkable literary trend has occurred within the fiction of a significant group of contemporary American Jewish writers. These writers have produced a new, inward-turning genre of contemporary American Jewish fiction which explores the individual Jew's connection to the Jewish people, to Jewish religion, culture, and tradition, and to the chain of Jewish history. Although sometimes witty, this body of work wrestles with weighty spiritual matters: Jewish conceptions of faith and redemption in a post-Holocaust world; the conflict between free will and predestination in the light of Jewish belief and Jewish history; and the notion of the Jewish people as an am segulah, a chosen nation.

The new genre of American Jewish fiction has been unabashedly religious in its sensibility; in the words of Cynthia Ozick, one of its main practitioners, it is "liturgical in nature" and "centrally Jewish in its concerns."\(^1\) It thus differs dramatically from the Jewish fiction of the previous quarter century, which had flourished largely by regarding Jews as a species of court jesters or existential heroes—as insightful outsiders who have special value to the Gentile world. Rather than depicting Jews primarily in terms of their universal interest or utility, the new body of fiction treats Jews, Jewish values, and idiosyncratic Jewish topics as intrinsically compelling. In addition, much in the new American Jewish fiction has moved beyond solipsistic preoccupations to an involvement in communal concerns, and has found new vitality in exploring the interaction between the two. For many contemporary American Jewish writers, the exploration of Judaism is more than a personal quest for spiritual identity—it provides an opportunity to investigate the confrontation between individual freedom and group continuity.

Fiction that focuses on Jewish spirituality has not developed in a vacuum, either in terms of the Jewish or the general literary environments. Rather, it draws upon the increased interest in religion among American intellectu-

als in general. As Philip Zaleski suggests, “Not so long ago religion seemed
to many intellectuals like a beached leviathan gasping for air, impaled by
the glittering harpoon of science. Today, graying baby boomers pack the
church pews and meditation halls, and fundamentalists prosper from Te-
heran to Texas.”

Moreover, American Jewish fiction that focuses on Jewish
spirituality is one aspect of a larger, extensive trend toward Judaic subject
matter among American Jewish writers. There has been a dramatic increase
in fiction, memoirs, essays, and poetry which explore themes in Jewish
history, culture, and tradition. Much of this literature has been distin-
guished by a knowledgeable fascination with the internal details of intensely
Jewish experience now and in the past.

Jewishly literate fiction can be found today at every brow level; it has
attracted a broader reading audience than anyone might have predicted.
The past two to three decades have seen the “birth of an authentically
Jewish American writer, growing out of and appealing to American-born
generations, and enjoying great popularity,” testifies Bonny Fetterman,
Senior editor and director of Judaica at Schocken Books. Fetterman notes
that the vigorous sales of books on Jewish topics encourage publishers to
acquire and publish ever more numerous volumes of American Jewish
literature, as well as to reissue Jewish and Hebrew classics long out of print
or unavailable to American audiences.

In fiction ranging from highly seri-
ous to middlebrow to frankly pulp, aspects of Jewish life which earlier in
the century might have seemed to be inaccessible esoterica have been trans-
formed into fascinating exotica instead.

The exploration of intensely Jewish subject matter is now evident both
in the works of relatively new authors and in the return to internally Jewish
concerns by some established authors. Thus, to touch on a few highlights
of change, Elie Wiesel and Chaim Potok pioneered the extensive explora-
tion of Jewish spirituality in American fiction; Arthur Cohen, Cynthia
Ozick, and others developed and intensified the treatment of these issues;
and Philip Roth responded to a transformed cultural landscape by produc-
ing The Counterlife (1987). After the notoriety that greeted Roth’s early
work, leaving him putatively traumatized by adverse reaction from a Jewish
reading public uncomfortable with the intimate exploration of Jewish
themes and environments, Roth virtually abandoned extensive treatment of
overtly Jewish themes for three decades. The Counterlife brilliantly exam-
ines the paths that Jewish life can take today, from aggressive assimilation
to Jewish renewal, from conspicuously complacent suburban America to militantly pious West Bank Israel, and ends by affirming positive Jewish connections. This extraordinary inside look at contemporary American Jewish challenges and options—the most thoughtfully Jewish book he has written since “Eli the Fanatic” and “The Defender of the Faith” appeared in the Goodbye, Columbus collection (1959)—is significant not only in terms of Roth’s own career but also as a response to the Jewish spiritualist phenomenon in contemporary American fiction.

The spiritualist genre of Jewish fiction is best seen as the dense innermost section of a forest, with diverse flora supported by common nurturing elements and by each other as well. This mutually supportive Jewish spiritual fiction is surrounded by larger but less intensive circles of fiction focusing on diverse Jewish themes, with outer circles which grow progressively less interactive and coherently Jewish. In the outermost areas are numerous pieces of American Jewish fiction written by authors such as Norman Mailer, Erica Jong, and many younger writers, which exhibit only marginal interest in Judaism and Jewish culture.

A marginally Jewish literature might well have been expected in contemporary America because it reflects certain strong trends away from distinctive Jewish attitudes and behaviors, trends often linked under the term “assimilation.” Particularistic Jewish themes in contemporary American Jewish literature, in contrast, might be considered to run counter to expectations. Indeed, American Jewish fiction of the past quarter century has often seemed polarized—as has much of American Jewish life—between literature which explores Jewish subject areas, characters, and environments and that which is essentially indifferent to them.

This essay examines recent fiction which draws on Jewish sources and/or deals with Jewish themes. Special attention is devoted to stories and novels that focus on Jewish religious or spiritual issues. Thus, the essay begins with a brief documentation of the broad scope of renewed interest in Jewish topics on the American Jewish literary scene, a phenomenon that is expressed through new works of American fiction, through translations of Jewish fiction originally written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and European languages, and through reissues of earlier Jewish classics. The essay then proceeds to its main focus, an analysis of spiritual American Jewish fiction, through a close look at several significant works by authors such as Chaim Potok, Elie Wiesel, Arthur Cohen, Cynthia Ozick, Hugh Nissenson, Allen Hoffman, Jay Neugeboren, and Rebecca Goldstein. The essay indicates the thematic interrelationships between these works and some earlier pieces of American Jewish fiction and notes the impact which these themes have had.

4 Complete citations are provided for books closely analyzed or quoted. Only publication dates are provided for other books mentioned.
on some established Jewish writers as well. Finally, the essay explores possible reasons for the receptivity of reading audiences to particularistic Jewish fiction and suggests potential directions of such literature in the near future.

THE VARIETIES OF JEWISH EXPRESSION

Particularistic Jewish fiction is now a commonplace on the literary scene. The new literature has, perhaps paradoxically, included a wide range of topics: an attraction to historical periods and religious environments which are more idiosyncratically Jewish than those of contemporary suburban America, especially Orthodox, biblical, Jewish-socialist, or other identifiable Jewish societies; an intense and continuing interest in the human and historical implications of the Holocaust; a proliferation of literature by and about Jewish women; an increased availability of, and readership for, Jewish literature which had previously been inaccessible or unappealing to American Jewish audiences, such as out-of-print books from the immigration period and Hebrew, Yiddish, and European Jewish literature in translation; and, not least, books which focus on or are set in contemporary or historical Israel.

One has only to look backward to the fiction of the celebrities of American Jewish fiction in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s to see the change. During the middle years of the 20th century, American Jewish literature was characterized by a universalistic orientation which defined the Jew through his/her relationship with Gentile Diaspora existence. As Ted Solotaroff perceptively notes, a quarter century ago, American Jewish writing won critical prominence because it brought to the American reading public the perspective of marginality, which "had the implication of standing apart, as the American-Jewish writer was perceived to do with respect to both sides of the hyphen." The American Jewish writer was acclaimed, Solotaroff posits, precisely because he was "an outsider in both the American and Jewish communities" and thus "was enabled to see what more accustomed eyes would miss."

Thus, the Jewish character of the extremely popular Jewish-authored American fiction of the 1950s and 1960s had usually been other-directed: the Jew was presented as an obligatory outsider coping with American society, and/or Jewishness was presented as a theatrical species of ethnic comedy, full of streetwise Jewish humor and peppered with pungent Yiddishisms. This literary stance was probably influenced by the fact that

until the late 1960s most American Jews assumed assimilation was the irresistible trend of the future, and much of the most celebrated (and notorious) American Jewish fiction focused on the process of assimilation. Philip Roth’s Alexander Portnoy articulated the assimilatory hunger of his generation: “O America! America! It may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest memories are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Faye, America is a shikse nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!” (Portnoy’s Complaint, 1967).

Orthodoxy in New Jewish Fiction

In contrast, one of the most striking features of contemporary American Jewish fiction is how often it speaks from the inside of the Jewish experience. One aspect of this insider’s vision is the depiction of a bewildering array of diverse Orthodox societies and characters. This is a trend that differs markedly from American Jewish literature of the past, where Orthodox characters tended to be cranky old men or force-feeding mothers and aunts. Orthodox Jewish characters and settings now enjoy an unprecedented and variegated focus in new American Jewish fiction. In addition to the authors and works which will be examined more closely later in this essay, Curt Leviant’s most recent book, The Man Who Thought He Was Messiah (1990), reimagines and retells the life story of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav in a narrative suffused with both spirituality and sensuality. The prolific Isaac Bashevis Singer’s novella The Penitent (1983) is a tour de force, rejecting what the protagonist characterizes as the nihilistic libertinism and empty materialism of current Western society and championing every legal and spiritual aspect of right-wing Orthodoxy. Daphne Merkin’s novel Enchantment (1986) is set in the little-publicized world of upper-class Orthodox German Jews on New York’s West Side. Nessa Rapoport’s first novel, Preparing for the Sabbath (1981), portrays a young woman struggling with the conflicting demands of youthful passion and spirituality, Orthodoxy and secularism, in both American and Israeli settings. Both the title of Allegra Goodman’s first collection of short stories, Total Immersion (1989), and the themes, imagery, and subject matter of many of the stories reflect her childhood in an Orthodox family in Hawaii. Steve Stern, in Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven: Stories (1986), creates a mythical Jewish neighbor-

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hood in the South, the land of Pinch, which is inhabited by a band of emaciated, cabbalistic yeshivah boys. Savagely humorous depictions of the idiosyncrasies and foibles of Orthodox environments are found in the pages of Tova Reich’s *Mara: A Novel* (1978), which knowingly depicts wealthy contemporary Orthodox New Yorkers, and *The Master of the Return* (1988), which satirizes the spiritual searchings of a motley collection of *ba’alei teshuvah*, born-again Jews, who have gathered under the aegis of the Bratzlaver Hassidim in Israel.

The recent focus on Orthodox Judaism is a reflection of the intense interest which Orthodox societies have evoked among some contemporary American Jews. Examples of both this interest and the reasons why it has grown are found in Anne Roiphe’s popular *Lovingkindness* (1987), a tale of an ultra-assimilated, intermarried, and widowed feminist whose daughter becomes a devoutly Orthodox Jew, much to her mother’s initial astonishment and distress. The novel illustrates the turn toward Jewish topics both within fiction and within the author’s life so directly that it can be viewed as a fable for our times. Born into a casually Jewish New York family on Christmas day in 1935, Roiphe has undergone a dramatic reversal in her professional relationship with Jewish topics. She established her reputation by writing witty books which articulated the conflicts implicit in the feminine mystique; one of the best known was *Up the Sandbox* (1972), a humorous exposé of the angst in a young mother’s restricted life. She also wrote, and continues to write, articles promoting feminist causes, such as abortion rights and equal-responsibility parenting. However, an article that Roiphe authored on being an assimilated Jew at Christmastime aroused so much furor and reader response that Roiphe found herself reevaluating her own relationship with Judaism. Discovering that her knowledge base was woefully inadequate, Roiphe began to study Jewish texts in earnest. She soon began to write both about her own voyage of discovery and also about Jews, both knowledgeable and assimilated, in American Jewish environments; one product of her voyage of self-discovery is her nonfiction book *Generation Without Memory: A Jewish Journey in Christian America* (1981).

*Lovingkindness*, a fictional exploration of Roiphe’s recent Jewish interests, accurately reflects a sociological reality: acculturated American Jewish parents sometimes say they might feel more comfortable having their child marry an Episcopalian than a Hassidic Jew; the characters in Roiphe’s novel do both. Annie, the protagonist, holds vehement beliefs in individual freedom and secular Western humanism, which are tantamount to fanatical religious convictions. Those convictions are challenged when her daughter, Andrea, after passing through a series of drugs and experimental life-styles, becomes a docile and obedient daughter of Israel in an ultra-Orthodox community in Jerusalem. Andrea’s defection to Orthodox Judaism is, in
Annie’s eyes, virtually an apostasy into an alien culture. However, Annie subsequently searches her soul and recognizes that assimilation was her own agenda, not necessarily an objectively superior path. In addition, Annie is moved by the genuine warmth, stability, and generous sense of community which she finds among Orthodox Jews. When given the opportunity to tear her daughter away from Orthodoxy, she chooses to side with the administrators of the yeshivah and to support her daughter’s new life.

This fascination with Orthodox settings extends to mystery novels and to popular fiction as well. For example, Faye Kellerman’s homicide-detective hero meets the widow of a kollel yeshivah student in The Ritual Bath (1987); their relationship continues, with the detective serendipitously discovering in a sequel, Sacred and Profane (1987), that he has Jewish origins and is thus an appropriate romantic interest for the Orthodox widow. Even the jacket blurb for the latter novel says much about the mainstreaming of Orthodoxy in American Jewish fiction: “Juxtaposing orthodox Judaism against a brutal and brilliantly drawn homicide investigation. . . . The central character of Peter Decker, cop burnout and would-be-orthodox Jew, is unforgettable.” Indeed, naming books aimed at a broad trade audience with titles such as “total immersion” and “the ritual bath,” which refer to the laws of family purity and the mikveh, would have been almost unthinkable 25 years ago.

Naomi Ragen’s Jepthe’s Daughter (1989) brings a beautiful young Orthodox woman from the affluent American Jewish world to the extremism of a cloistered Jerusalem neighborhood in a disastrous marriage to a rigid and unpleasant Hassidic Jew; she escapes the nightmare by falling in love with a seemingly Gentile gentleman who turns out to have had a Jewish mother. The protagonist of Rhoda Lerman’s God’s Ear (1989) is first a Hassidic rabbi, then an affluent insurance salesman, and finally once again a rabbi and spiritualist in unlikely Kansas. Herman Wouk, whose prolific and popular fictional output had previously seldom made reference to his personal adherence to traditional Judaism, produced protagonist I. David Goodkind, an Orthodox Jewish presidential speechwriter and adviser, in Inside, Outside: A Novel (1985).

Historical Novels

Like Orthodox culture, settings that are placed in earlier, more unambiguously Jewish societies from the Bible onward also provide opportunities to explore issues of Jewish identity. In particular, a fascination with the more recent Jewish past and with definitively Jewish environments, such as the shtetl or Jewishly intense Eastern European urban areas—often in combination with or leading up to modern American Jewish life—is evident.
in many different types of American Jewish literature, ranging from difficult and critically acclaimed fiction to easily accessible popular narratives. Many authors turn backward to explore the transformation of Jewish life in American Jewish immigrant societies and then trace the progress of that transformation forward through contemporary times. Some of Harold Brodkey’s award-winning, experimental fiction follows this trajectory, as do several of Gloria Goldreich’s best-selling popular historical sagas. Romances especially have mined the exotic settings offered by biblical, Eastern European, Sephardic, and Orthodox worlds, often in combination with American Jewish settings. In scores of popular romances by authors such as Cynthia Freeman, Belva Plain, Julie Ellis, and Iris Rainer Dart, landmarks of Jewish history previously relegated to textbooks have become plot devices in the pages of glossy-covered novels.

American Hybrids

A major focus of American Jewish fiction continues to be the interface between Jewish values and mores and contemporary American life-styles and demographics. One paradigm of such transitions is found when a gay man’s lover and his former wife both show up at his son’s bar mitzvah in Marian Thurm’s short-story collection *These Things Happen* (1988). Another area of changing American Jewish demographics is explored in Linda Bayer’s *The Blessing and the Curse* (1988) and in Julie Salamon’s *White Lies* (1987), which depict the special pressures which infertility and adoption create for Jews. Indeed, Jewish peoplehood, in all its permutations, continues to attract much literary attention. Johanna Kaplan’s fiction richly and often humorously captures the flavor of urban Jewish middle-class life; in Kaplan’s work (*Other People’s Lives*, 1975; *O My America*, 1980), conflict between Jewish-radical ideals, the more traditional historical Jewish heritage, and classical American dreams is played out alongside the conflict between several generations of American Jews. Roberta Silman also depicts the volatile relationships between Eastern European Jews and their assimilated offspring in books such as *Somebody Else’s Child* (1976), *Blood Relations* (1977), and *Boundaries* (1979).

Fiction about Sephardic Jewish Americans is beginning to appear more frequently as well: Sally Benforado’s stories tell of a Turkish Sephardic community descended from Spanish Jewry, some of whom find their way to the United States; stories by other new Sephardic-Jewish American authors such as Gloria Kirschheimer and Ruth Setton, each portraying a warmly human and humorous, idiosyncratic world, have been appearing in diverse journals and magazines.

Jewish socialism, another historically important element in shaping
American Jewish life, has appealed to some authors as an authentic voice of the Jewish psyche, and many authors have set their works in the urban, socialist environments of the American Jewish past. Among the best of these books, Grace Paley's short-story collections (Enormous Changes, 1974; Later the Same Day, 1985) depict a divorced daughter of two Jewish socialists as she develops her own calling to social activism and as she visits her parents in the Children of Judea retirement home. Vivian Gornick's memoir, Fierce Attachments (1987), vividly portrays the Jewish socialist Bronx and its colorful denizens. The historical role of socialism in American Jewish life is explored more prosaically in the novels of Meredith Tax.

**Holocaust**

Among the most striking of all the preoccupations of contemporary American Jewish fiction has been its obsession with the Holocaust and the lost communities of Eastern Europe. Sometimes the connection is indirect. Dozens of novels have been published over the past three decades which bring a 20th-century sensibility to persecutions, massacres, and expulsions in earlier Jewish history. Among the more notable authors dealing with subjects such as Jewish life during a variety of historical persecutions are Joanne Greenberg (The King's Persons, 1963, 1985) and Roberta Kalechofsky (Bodmin, 1349: An Epic Novel of Christians and Jews in the Plague Years, 1988). More often, Holocaust themes are explored directly in recent fiction. Elie Wiesel himself once trembled at the notion that one might transform the unutterable suffering of the victims of the Holocaust into art, and consoled himself only with the knowledge that it was his sacred duty to bear witness to the enormity of what had occurred. However, judging by the proliferation of both serious and popular fiction dealing with the Holocaust today, this anxiety no longer seems to deter many authors.

During the past 25 years, scores of Holocaust-related novels, both autobiographical and fictional, and memoirs have been published in the United States. The Holocaust motif in American Jewish literature runs the gamut from simply told personal tales to philosophical explorations of the meaning of evil to lightly fictionalized historical chronicles to cinematic soap operas in which scenes of agonized suffering are interspersed with graphically depicted sexual activity. The expansion of Holocaust-related American Jewish fiction has also given rise to an accompanying critical literature, much of which has been published by university presses, additional testimony to the critical status which Jewish literature continues to enjoy.7

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7For example, a thorough and sensitive exploration of treatments of the Holocaust in American Jewish literature can be found in S. Lillian Kremer, Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature (Detroit, 1989); see also Dorothy Bilik, Immigrant
Holocaust themes, along with other motifs of Jewish history, tradition, culture, and ethnicity, have been thoroughly mainstreamed, even among the most cosmopolitan of American Jewish writers. Significantly, most major contemporary American Jewish writers have at least one work which focuses on the Holocaust. Among Saul Bellow’s most powerful works, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), which won a National Book Award in 1971, depicts a fastidious elderly Polish Holocaust survivor living in Manhattan during the heyday of the youth culture, who finds himself shocked and sickened by the barbarism of life in New York. In Bellow’s recent novella *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989), the story’s most impressive character is obsessed with facilitating the meeting between her husband and Billy Rose, who saved her husband and other Jews from the Holocaust by secret ministrations. Bernard Malamud deals with Holocaust themes obliquely but powerfully in *The Fixer* (1966), a reworking of the Yakov Beilis blood-libel case in Russia. Malamud’s last novel, *God’s Grace* (1982), draws more overtly than his previous work on Jewish materials and is informed by a Holocaust-related motif. Significantly, in his earlier novel *The Assistant* (1957), Malamud’s protagonist has little interest in Jewish literature, liturgy, or ritual, and states that to be a Jew means “to do what is right, to be honest, to be good” and to “suffer” for other people. In *God’s Grace*, however, the protagonist is a descendant of a rabbinic genealogy and has himself studied for the rabbinate; in his postnuclear Holocaust argument with God, he utilizes Jewish sources in theology, liturgy, and rabbinic literature. Norma Rosen’s *Touching Evil* (1969) and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s *Anya* (1974) are each stirring depictions of the Holocaust and its impact. Seymour Epstein’s *A Special Destiny* (1986) sensitively portrays the friendship between a young German-Jewish refugee who becomes a successful playwright and the son of an unhappy Bronx Jewish family who is obsessed by the Holocaust.

Some American Holocaust literature has been controversial because of the ambiguous nature of its Jewish characters. For example, Leslie Epstein’s *King of the Jews: A Novel* (1979) stirred up feelings of betrayal among some Jews with its focus on Jewish collaboration; his more recent *Goldkorn Tales* (1984) tells stories about an atheistic Holocaust survivor who contrasts his love of civilization’s delights with the decline of New York City life. Jerome Badanes’s *The Final Opus of Leon Solomon* (1989) presents a complicated man—survivor of Auschwitz, thief of Judaica documents from the New

Survivors: Post-Holocaust Consciousness in Recent Jewish-American Fiction (Middleton, Conn., 1981); Sidra Ezrahi, By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature (Chicago, 1980); Alvin Rosenfeld, A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature (Bloomington, 1980); and David Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture (Cambridge, 1984).
York Public Library, and suitor of a black radio personality; both witness and obsessive personality, Solomon is far from the stereotypically heroic survivor. (Badanes earlier gained recognition as the author of the 1981 award-winning documentary *Image Before My Eyes*, an homage to the rich Jewish life of prewar Poland.) Popular American novels have also drawn on Holocaust-related subject matter. Indeed, it often seems that the use of the Holocaust as a plot device has become *de rigueur* in American Jewish fiction.

**Israel**

Israel, both as a separate subject and in combination with other aspects of Jewish history, including the Holocaust, continues to figure prominently in American Jewish fiction, albeit no longer through the romantic glow it had enjoyed earlier in Leon Uris’s *Exodus* (1958). Ted Solotaroff cogently notes that “the survival of Israel has been the paramount concern of organized Jewish life and probably the paramount source of Jewish identity” during the past quarter of a century. American Jewish fiction dealing with Israel, which has increased in recent years, can be divided into three basic types: serious explorations of Israeli life, society, and history; popular fiction, including romances and mysteries, which make use of Israel as an exotic and appealing locale; and works which, rather than portraying Israeli life as an entity unto itself, present the Jewish state in its relationship to American Jewish life, as an alternative or as a source of revitalization.

Many of the motifs in Mark Helprin’s *Refiner’s Fire*, for example, are emblematic of the wellsprings of Jewish renewal which American Jewish writers find in Israeli history and settings. Helprin gathers the most unlikely and seemingly dejudaeized characters from a wide variety of settings and shows how their lives are given shape and meaning through their encounters with the land and people of Israel. In the novel, a Virginia gentleman goes first to New York in an attempt to give his life more Jewish content and consults a rabbi “whose advice consisted of coldly instructing him to purify his pots and pans by boiling water in them and dropping a hot brick.” However, it is not until he bravely volunteers to serve as captain for a ship bearing illegal Holocaust survivor victims past hostile British marines into Palestine that “Paul Levy became a Jew.” Helprin portrays Israel as being suffused with deep Jewish meaning, so that a gravely wounded soldier, an orphan who has been presumed doomed more than once in his life, looks out at trucks driving along the road and feels “that even the light and

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1Solotaroff, “American-Jewish Writers.”
motion of a truck blasting down the sea road were at every moment linked to an artful and all-powerful God." For Helprin and other American Jewish authors, ideas such as the ingathering of Jewish exiles and divine ordering of the life of the individual and the people seem to thrive on Israeli soil.

On a less edifying plane, note must be taken as well of the extraordinary proliferation of thrillers, mysteries, and political fantasies set in Israel. Paul Breines terms this "the Rambowitz syndrome," and comments that he knows of "roughly fifty" novels which "are linked by their idealized representation of Jewish warriors, tough guys, gangsters, Mossad agents, and Jews of all ages and sexes who fight back against their tormentors. . . . In their tough Jewish fantasies we meet muscular, manly Jews who have left behind their historic neuroses and nearsightedness in favor of fighting and fucking. We might . . . call them the first normal Jews in all of modern literature."10

Feminism

If Israel, the Holocaust, and intensely Jewish societies are some of the specifically Jewish themes and settings most utilized in contemporary American Jewish literature, feminist exploration is one of the most significant new generic movements.11 In fact, feminism is often linked with Israel, the Holocaust, and Jewish societies in American Jewish fiction. Most commonly, however, feminist issues within Jewish and American culture have been explored in familiar American Jewish settings. The protagonists of American Jewish feminist literature, which includes a number of accomplished and promising writers, must struggle with a multiplicity of identities: they are Jewish, they are Americans, they are women, they are daughters and wives and lovers and mothers, they are moderns, they are heirs to an ancient tradition—not necessarily in order of importance. Among the most significant fiction dealing with Jewish feminist issues is that written by Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, Tillie Olsen, Alix Kates Shulman, Francine Prose, Vivian Gornick, Rebecca Goldstein, Anne Roiphe, Marian Thurm, Lynn Sharon Shwartz, and Marge Piercy. Jewish mythic exploration of feminist issues can be found in the fiction of E. M. Broner and Kim Chernin.

It is a mark of how pervasive all these trends are that even some writers who previously seemed remote from Jewish life subsequently wrote on more particularistic Jewish themes—notably Joseph Heller (God Knows, 1984),

11For a fuller exploration of Jewish feminist literature, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, Every Life a Song: Changing Portrayals of Women in American Jewish Fiction (Hanover, N. H., forthcoming, Fall 1991).
Stanley Elkin (*The Rabbi of Lud*, 1987), and E.L. Doctorow (*The Book of Daniel*, 1971; *World’s Fair*, 1985). However, the Jewish consciousness of these skilled writers is expressed primarily in a depiction of attenuated Jewish ethnicity. Even Philip Roth, who probably knows and understands the hearts of a large segment of American Jewry better than any other living writer, and whose novel *The Counterlife* does explore aspects of Jewish spirituality, primarily composes variations on psychological or sociological realities. Fundamentally, therefore, the Jewish interests of these writers differ profoundly from the central and earnest Jewish spirituality of the authors who are the true subject of this essay.

**THE SPIRITUAL QUEST**

Within the works of the spiritual genre of recent American Jewish writers, characters are not merely or even necessarily religiously observant themselves, but they are embarked upon spiritual or religious quests, either as individuals or as part of a group. The environments in which they live range from those that are densely Jewish to those that are openly hostile to Judaism, but the characters search within these environments for sources of faith and redemption as articulated by richly diverse strands of Jewish tradition and as informed by a post-Holocaust awareness of the absolute existence of evil.

Within Jewish spiritualist fiction, several important motifs emerge repeatedly. First, and perhaps most surprisingly, supernatural agents of redemption, messiahs and/or golems, figure in the works of many, including Elie Wiesel, Chaim Potok, Arthur A. Cohen, Cynthia Ozick, Allen Hoffman, Curt Leviant, Hugh Nissenson, and Rebecca Goldstein. Second, orphans—symbolic of a people who have become, in Paul Cowan’s poignant phrase, “orphans in history,” due to persecution and assimilation—are protagonists in the works of Wiesel, Cohen, Ozick, Nissenson, Jay Neugeboren, Mark Helprin, and others. In addition, fiction by Potok, Neugeboren, Roth, and others focuses on the divergent spiritual paths taken by two brothers, with the subsequent death of one brother and the survival—and guilt feelings—of his sibling. The dead-brother motif illustrates the continuing relevance of the divine injunction to “choose life” in the midst of the bewildering and momentous choices open to Jews today. In Potok and Neugeboren the introduction of Levirate marriage also speaks to issues of Jewish continuity. In addition, the “accident”—the sometimes half-intentional, sometimes random, sometimes externally imposed occurrence which profoundly affects individual Jews and Jewish societies, emerges as a major and spiritually symbolic plot element in the fiction of authors as different as Wiesel,
Potok, and Neugeboren. Moreover, many books testify to the amazing survival of the spark of Jewish spirituality, *dos pintele yid*, in the hearts of Jews who might seem externally lost to Jewish life, as Jews scattered across the Diaspora or lodged in the heart of Israel continue to reimagine themselves, to reinvent themselves, and to ask, "What is a Jew?"

The authors who focus on Jewish spirituality often seem to share a symbolic language, a loosely connected system of themes and metaphors. In some cases, this linked symbolic language appears to be consciously allusive, with authors commenting on and developing issues broached by their colleagues. In other cases, shared symbolism seems to grow out of shared concerns rather than out of deliberate commentary. It is not the purpose of this essay to delineate the precise literary kinship between each of the works under discussion, but rather to define and document the overarching Jewish spiritualist concerns that distinguish them individually and as a group. However, the fact that such a kinship exists is significant and notable, because it indicates the richness of this most intensive incarnation of contemporary particularistic American Jewish fiction.

**Chaim Potok**

Spiritually focused American Jewish fiction emerged as a recognizable phenomenon in the 1960s with the memoirs and stories of Elie Wiesel, which gripped the moral imagination of American Jews, and the fiction of Chaim Potok, which rapidly gained a rather surprising widespread popularity. Potok's fiction flew in the face of conventional wisdom, which in the 1950s and 1960s assumed that traditional Jewish life-styles would be washed away in the rising tides of assimilation. Much of Potok's literary career has been devoted to a sympathetic depiction of traditional Judaism in its various shades and forms, from Hassidism to "modern" Orthodoxy to the careful liberalizations of Conservative Judaism. In each of half a dozen novels, Potok tackles a major aspect of contemporary American Jewish life; each protagonist struggles to reach a compromise solution which creatively blends the demands of Jewish survival, on the one hand, and intellectual integrity, on the other.

In two popular early novels, *The Chosen* (1967) and the subsequent *The Promise* (1969), Potok creates a duo of likable young heroes, one the scion of a Hassidic dynasty, one the son of an Orthodox liberal, a passionately Jewish intellectual. The plot line of *The Chosen*, which blends such appealing elements as baseball and parent-child relationships with the intricacies of American ultra-Orthodoxy, made the latter world accessible to readers largely ignorant of its existence. The two books also exposed the American Jewish reading audience to traditional Jewish life-styles which, far from
being monolithic, offer different types of spiritual answers to different kinds of people. Indeed, Potok’s novels repeatedly demonstrate that moving away from the most stringent forms of Orthodoxy does not necessarily imply abandoning a commitment to Jewish ritual, culture, and peoplehood.

Perhaps one of Potok’s most powerful and interesting works is *In the Beginning*, a novel whose rich literary antecedents enhance its depth and literary nuance. The novel’s young protagonist, David Lurie, is a sensitive child growing up and maturing among pious yet politically active Jews in an ethnically diverse, lower-middle-class Bronx neighborhood in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. David’s personality and life situation both recall and contrast with those of Henry Roth’s young protagonist, David Schearl, in a ground-breaking novel of the Jewish immigration experience, *Call It Sleep* (1935), which was republished and lionized in literary circles in the 1960s. Indeed, both the resemblances and the differences between the two novels are instructive. Like David Schearl, David Lurie is precocious and innately spiritual; like Schearl, Lurie’s father displays violent (albeit not sociopathological) tendencies which had a more natural outlet in the farms and fields of Eastern Europe than in the teeming streets of New York City, and his mother has a romantic past which somehow impinges on his identity; like Schearl, Lurie often shrinks from confrontations with both Jewish and anti-Semitic non-Jewish bullies in the mean streets surrounding his apartment house; like Schearl, Lurie finds solace and relative safety in a sickbed and “sleep.”

However, whereas Schearl’s world could offer him little sustenance aside from maternal love, having sheered off from the supporting matrix of Jewish communal and religious life, in Lurie’s world it is religion which gives life substance, structure, and strength. As such, Potok’s novel is a telling exemplar of religiosity and spirituality in contemporary American Jewish fiction: in both books, immigration brings pain and dislocation; however, in Potok’s novel the religious fervor and communal concerns of the parents repeatedly draw them out of their own pain, discipline and stabilize their personal lives, and allow them to rebuild family and community.

Through the eyes of the at first very young and later the growing David, *In the Beginning* explores answers to the biblical question “What does God require of man?” David’s father, Max, once a young activist who fought in the Polish army against the enemies of the Jews, works all of his life in an attempt to live up to the responsibilities which he has assumed. When his brilliant younger brother is murdered, he marries his former sister-in-law and names their eldest son David after his dead brother, in fulfillment of the biblical Levirate law. When their European friends pool their funds to

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send the Luries to the United States, Max works tirelessly in his new land until he has brought every contributor over to join him. When the stock market crashes, erasing the funds which he had invested for their communal self-aid group, the Am Kedoshim society, Max ruins his physical and emotional health in the attempt to pay each person back. He faces the Holocaust with an activism undertaken by few (and mostly immigrant) American Jews, with unfortunately little to show for his energies in the end. Seeing the helplessness and vulnerability of even those people who, like his parents and their friends, do active battle with fate, David dreams of a "Golem," a powerful creature who might come to save the Jews from their non-Jewish enemies.

Learning from both his father’s example and teaching, David comes to think of duty as a form of spirituality and communication with God. He learns that it is the "job" of man to bring God into each of the places in which he resides; to sing praises to God no matter what befalls him, just as the grasshopper sings the most intensely just before he dies; to help other Jews around the world, especially those who are in danger or enslaved; to befriend widows, the vulnerable, and the lonely; perhaps to "pay back" the enemies of the Jews with vengeance; and to live up to promises which are made to other people, even when they are expensive or difficult.

David struggles until he emerges into his own unique life-affirming mission. He finds his calling in a typically Potokian activity: the rebuilding of Jewish life through an honest but loving scholarly exploration of biblical texts. He has been told since childhood that all beginnings are difficult and painstaking, and that he must be patient. However, he learns that beginnings, however difficult, are humanity's only weapon against death. Out of pain, struggle, and chaos, the Jew defeats the deathly accidents of history by imposing order, by rebuilding, and by naming the new world he creates.

Potok's protagonists continue their attempts, in differing settings, to synthesize the best of traditional Jewish values and behaviors with the best of secular Western humanism. In My Name Is Asher Lev (1972), for example, Potok highlights the conflict between the callings of art and Judaism, each of which essentially demands that "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." A conflict that had immense historical and sociological impact on American Jewish life in the first half of the 20th century is examined in Davita's Harp (1985), which deals with the tension between the universal ideals of socialism and the particularistic prescriptions of Judaism: how can one be simultaneously a member of a chosen people and a citizen of a classless and religion-free world?
Elie Wiesel

Potok’s popular yet serious novels were a major initiating force in the exploration of Jewish spiritual themes. Immense strength was continually added to the critical appeal of such fiction by the moral weight of more than a score of memoirs, short stories, novels, and essays in over three decades of writing by Elie Wiesel. Although he writes in French, Wiesel is surely the dean of American Jewish Holocaust writing. A 1986 Nobel Prize winner, Wiesel achieved international prominence as the voice of the Holocaust survivor. He has devoted his life to bearing witness to the horrors of the Holocaust, “to wrench the victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death.” While only one of his earlier books, Night, deals directly with his experiences at Auschwitz, all of his works are ineradicably informed by those years.

Wiesel can never forget—and he never lets the reader forget—that the Holocaust has profound spiritual implications for contemporary Jews. Indeed, one recurring motif in Wiesel’s work is the agonizing conflict between the prophetic ideals of justice and mercy, on one hand, and the physical and emotional strength needed for Jewish survival in an evil world, on the other. Having witnessed the utter indifference of much of the world to the near destruction of the Jewish people, Wiesel comes down firmly on the side of Jewish survival. However, he is ever cognizant of the spiritual price that survival exacts. Ultimately, one may say that Wiesel’s anguished argument is at least as much with God as with humankind, for having created a world in which even caring and kindly people are forced sometimes to kill innocent creatures.

In Dawn (1961), Elisha, the protagonist, is a young man who has survived the Holocaust and joined Jewish soldiers in then Palestine who are fighting to free the land from the hold of the British. Gad, a colleague who indoctrinates new soldiers, insists that only bloodshed will convince the English to leave. He reminds Elisha that the world—which will condemn such bloodshed—repeatedly stands silent when Jews are slaughtered. “The commandment Thou shalt not kill was given from the summit of one of the mountains here in Palestine, and we were the only ones to obey it. But that’s over; we must be like everyone else. Murder will be not our profession but our duty.” A masked stranger tells Elisha that they now have an “eleventh commandment: Hate your enemy.” Thanks to this stranger, Elisha says, “I became part of a Messianic world. Why has a man no right to commit murder? Because in so doing he takes upon himself the function of God. Well, I said to myself, if in order to change the course of our history we have to

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become God, we shall become Him.” When Elisha is assigned the role of executing John Dawson, a British soldier who is innocent of any specific crime but whose death will teach the British a symbolic lesson, he declares that “the victim” and “the executioner” each “is playing a role which has been imposed upon him... The tragic thing is the imposition.”

From the vantage point of Dawn, Jews must redeem the world and deliver the Messiah by learning how to defend themselves with force. Wiesel’s bottom line is that Judaism forbids turning the other cheek in life-threatening situations, because it is tantamount to suicide. Judaism requires that one kill in self-defense a pursuing agent of death; however, in the modern world, the distinction between a pursuing killer and the civilization supporting that killer is sometimes difficult to draw. In reacting to the necessity for Jewish violence, Wiesel’s protagonist demands, “Don’t judge me. Judge God,” because God “created the universe and made justice to stem from injustice. He brought it about that a people should attain happiness through tears, that the freedom of a nation, like that of a man, should be built upon a pile, a foundation of dead bodies...” Wiesel's protagonist comes to the startling conclusion that Jews must learn “the art of hate” in order to guarantee their physical survival. “Otherwise,” he argues, “our future will only be an extension of the past, and the Messiah will wait indefinitely for his deliverance.”

Wiesel’s writing is powerful, however, not only because of the moral authority which it draws from his Holocaust experiences, but also because it is steeped in the vibrant, rich spectrum of Jewish history and tradition. The sights, sounds, and preoccupations of the streets and yeshivahs of his native Transylvania are woven through all of his fiction and nonfiction. In A Jew Today, for example, Wiesel provides a glowing depiction of a Sabbath day in Sighet, a day that was not only restorative in the modern sense, not only punctilious in terms of Jewish ritual, but which was a living testimony to the humanitarian morality of Jewish law:

... with the advent of Shabbat, the town changed into a kingdom whose madmen and beggars became the princes of Shabbat. I shall never forget Shabbat in my town. When I shall have forgotten everything else, my memory will still retain the atmosphere of holiday, of serenity pervading even the poorest houses: the white tablecloth, the candles, the meticulously combed little girls, the men on their way to synagogue. When my town shall fade into the abyss of time, I will continue to remember the light and the warmth it radiated on Shabbat. The exalting prayers, the wordless songs of the Hasidim, the fire and radiance of their Masters. On that day of days, past and future suffering and anguish faded into the distance. Appeased man called on the divine presence to express his gratitude. The jealousies and grudges, the petty rancors between neighbors could wait. As could the debts and worries, the dangers. Everything could wait. As it enveloped

the universe, the Shabbat conferred on it a dimension of peace, an aura of love. Those who were hungry came and ate; and those who felt abandoned seized the outstretched hand; and those who were alone, and those who were sad, and strangers, the refugees, the wanderers, as they left the synagogue were invited to share the meal in any home; and the grieving were urged to contain their tears and come draw on the collective joy of Shabbat. The difference between us and the others? the others, how I pitied them. They did not even know what they were missing; they were unmoved by the beauty, the eternal splendor of Shabbat.

It is no wonder that Wiesel recalls, "Like God, I looked at the world and found it good, fertile, full of meaning." Readers find in his works, especially in his novels, such as *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1964), *The Gates of the Forest* (1966), and *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970), a mystical conviction of the profound spirituality of the universe and the unavoidable special destiny of the Jewish people. *Souls on Fire* (1972) retells and reinterprets the lives of the Hassidic masters; *The Testament* (1981) depicts the martyrdom of Russia's greatest Jewish poets at the hands of Stalin, as symbolized by the life and death of poet Paltiel Kossover. These works are suffused not only with the bereavement of the Holocaust but with a piercing, almost unbearable awareness of the spiritual riches of the world which the Nazis destroyed.

*Hugh Nissenson*

The moral dilemmas which Wiesel explores have particular resonance for post-Holocaust Jewish communities. A Jewishly conscious generation of American Jewish writers has looked to a wide variety of contemporary and ancient Jewish source materials in their literary confrontation with human and natural evils. One such writer is Hugh Nissenson, who has reported on the Eichmann trial in Israel (*Commentary*, July 1961), the progress and aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War in Israel (*Notes from the Frontier*, 1968), the impact of the Yom Kippur War (*Present Tense*, Autumn 1974), and the trial of Klaus Barbie in Lyons in 1987 (*The Elephant and My Jewish Problem*, 1988), among other events.

Like Wiesel, Nissenson writes about the bitter irony that the morality of survival often necessitates actions which may seem immoral. In "The Crazy Old Man," a story which in some ways recalls Wiesel's *Dawn*, two Sabras (native Israelis), are trying to torture information out of a terrified young Arab boy. An older and thoroughly professional Arab lieutenant watches the brutal interrogation without flinching. Suddenly, a seemingly unbalanced elderly Orthodox man who lives across the hall interrupts the interrogation and demands in Yiddish that the Israelis release their prisoners, quoting to them from Isaiah, "No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous

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beast shall go up thereon, it will not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there." Ignoring the old man, the Sabras prepare to shoot the boy. The old man grabs the gun and, when the lieutenant tries to escape in the confusion, shocks everyone in the room by shooting the lieutenant: "The first round hit him in the chest, throwing him on his back. The old man walked over to him and emptied the rest of the magazine into his forehead, holding the gun a yard from his face." The boy screams out the necessary information so fast that they can scarcely write it down. Clearly, killing the lieutenant rather than the boy was a tactically superior move, but why was the religious old man willing to perform such a cold-blooded execution himself? Later, the protagonist realizes the motivation—seeing that the killing is unavoidable and longing for the coming of the Messiah, the old man acts as a kind of shabbos goy to preserve the purity of the land of Israel and its native-born inhabitants.

The twin upheavals of modern intellectual and social movements and the emigration to the United States, which worked in tandem to subvert the spiritually coherent world of Eastern European Orthodox Judaism, are explored in bleak and bitter detail in Nissenson's novel *My Own Ground.* Schlifka, a vicious, sadistic pimp on the Lower East Side of New York, reveals the concepts which he learned and loved when he was a youngster in an Old World Gemara heder and knew *Maseches Shabbes* by heart by the time he was 11. After rewarding his 15-year-old assistant with a prostitute for betraying Hannele, a rabbi's impoverished daughter, Schlifka shares his belief that "for guys like us there are better things. Higher things. . . . Spiritual things." All of the characters in Nissenson's tragic little book—criminals, idealistic socialists, pious old men, and young people caught in the wake of forces larger than themselves—end badly in the wreckage of Eastern European Jewish civilization. As Hannele's father discards lifelong convictions by performing a ritual cleansing of his daughter's suicidal corpse, he instructs onlookers in Yiddish, "Israel speaks to God: When will you redeem us? And he answers: When you have sunk to the lowest level, at that time I will redeem you." A socialist friend of Hannele's, also a lapsed Jew, explains, "He believes we can force the End and bring the Messiah." And the old man continues, "You might live to see the rest: all the sparks restored, the Exile ended, death swallowed up. The Temple, you know, will be rebuilt, and the divine lovers will embrace again in the Holy of Holies, face to face. The King and His bride, who is also called the Shekinah, the Matronit, and Earth." However, as is crucial in Nissenson's fiction, not only is each of these characters ravaged by history, each one of them, in some imperfect way, retains *dos pintele yid,* some spiritual remnant, some tiny spark of the lost Jewish world.

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Arthur Cohen

Such spiritual struggles are the novelistic flesh and blood of the late Arthur A. Cohen, a major figure on the Jewish literary scene, primarily through the searching intellectualism of his nonfiction books on Jewish philosophy and thinkers. Cohen's versatile works are often driven by the desire to make Jewish sense out of history. He argues that he is not alone in his enterprise, since his "quest" is much demanded by the times. In the introduction to his reader on Jewish thinking in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Cohen comments that "the return of the third generation of American Jews to the Synagogue is motivated by an uninstructed quest for life meaning and the conviction that the Synagogue possesses or should possess a body of insight and instruction." This "quest" is fueled, according to Cohen, by the fact that "the reasons for escape have disappeared," while "a renascent pride . . . founded upon ethnocentrism, or the admiration of a powerful and militant Israel redivivus, or the brandishing of the sword of guilt and anger over a culpable non-Jewish world" has emerged. That pride, in turn, grows out of the knowledge that during the Holocaust "human beings died because they were thought to represent an alien meaning, because they, in fact, did represent a believed meaning, and because they transmitted the value of that meaning." Cohen dedicates his anthology—as he often does his fiction—to the search for these particularistically Jewish meanings.

The protagonists of Cohen's novels are each chosen by providence for a special and specially Jewish role in the world. Some of them respond by fulfilling their Jewish destiny and redeeming the spark of Jewishness within their souls, and some try to escape it. In an early novel, The Carpenter Years, both the protagonist, a Jewish apostate, and the rabbi in his largely Gentile community, tire of the burden of chosenness. The rabbi's inner thoughts articulate what he experiences as the relentless responsibilities incumbent upon a serious participant in the nation of priests: "It was as if he had been appointed to come out from New York to be himself a Sabbath for the Jews. . . . He was tired of being something apart: a utensil of God."

The theme of Jewish chosenness is explored most fully in Cohen's complexly layered In the Days of Simon Stern, which weaves together messianic strands from diverse periods of Jewish history and varying religions, cultures, and literary forms into a fable with strong political implications. The novel presents Jews as chosen by a repeatedly hostile and genocidal world.

and chosen as well by their own special culture, life-style, and values. Simon Stern is a Messiah, within the context of the novel, because he labors to physically redeem a group of Holocaust survivors despite the graphically detailed apathy and obstruction of Allied leaders and official agencies. One narrator, Nathan Gaza, reflects on his "Messiah," Simon Stern, and on the nature of the messianic redeemers and their capacity to suffer. Cohen's terms recall both Wiesel's *Dawn* and Nissenson's *In the Reign of Peace*: "Why should one be able to bear suffering? Why should one be able to tolerate the suffering of others? There can be no reason other than the fact of having given suffering to another. Not willingly but involuntarily. The hardest guilt to bear is for the crime one could not have chosen to commit. . . . That I live and another perish."

Stern and his colleagues labor to build a utopian walled city of refuge, modeled on the historic rabbinic colony in B'nei B'rak, for the cherished remnant saved from the concentration camps. Their purpose is betrayed by a false survivor who attempts to turn their peaceable society into a heavily armed, nihilistic machine for vengeance. However, Stern and the aristocratic Dr. Klay warn the group that reasonableness and "tenacity of will" are the truly Jewish attributes, and that "beyond madness there is still judgement." Although Stern's walled city is destroyed through his own heedlessness, his society endures, for, in this novel's final analysis, endurance through commitment to justice and mercy is the most Jewish attribute of all.

Cohen depicts the persistence of *dos pintele yid*, the spark of Jewishness, in a variety of settings, even in the rocky soil of Communist Russia. Yuri, the Russian Jewish protagonist of *A Hero in His Time*, is traumatized as a young boy watching both Ukrainian Whites and Ukrainian Reds serially executing innocent old Jews as "Jew hoarders." He understands that even Gentiles who hate each other share a mutual hatred of Jews. Yuri learns to survive the brutal Communist system by evading any taint of specialness, by behaving in such a nondescript fashion that he is perceived as being safe. He comments frequently that "anyone who tries to do something to moderate the magisterium of the official view was courageous but misguided, and therefore a fool." However, despite the fact that Yuri has been baptized and that he claims to be a "real atheist," he acknowledges to himself that his parents were "Jew believers," that "they locked up a secret name" inside him, and that he believes unwaveringly in his own personal deity, whom he calls "my Lord, my Adonay, my Elohim, my El Shaddai." To Yuri, these names "mean love and father and spirit and creator and good person," and he utters the names of his personal deity "twice or three times a day."

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finds himself secretly but irresistibly drawn to Jews who exhibit artistic and personal courage and discovers that he himself has a religious passion for justice. Finally, when Yuri can choose either to escape to freedom or to become a useful pawn in the Communist system, he rejects the relative safety of both options; instead, he bravely betrays the system and goes back to meet his fate, loyal to his destiny as a poet and a Jew.

Cynthia Ozick

Similar concerns are shared by the brilliant doyen of contemporary American Jewish fiction, Cynthia Ozick. One of the most influential Jewish authors writing today, Ozick's interests are emblematic of the new American Jewish literature at its highest level. She draws on classic Jewish source materials, ranging from biblical and rabbinic texts to Yiddish writers to contemporary fiction. Ozick openly and articulately espouses the creation of "liturgical" spiritual American Jewish literature; she feels that an English rich with Judaic materials must replace the role that Yiddish occupied in Ashkenazi Jewish cultures in expressing the inner heart as well as the external rhythms and concerns of Jewish life. She uses not only all aspects of her own contemporary Jewish reading, thinking, and experience in her writing, but also her broad knowledge of Jewish texts.

If Ozick has one signature preoccupation, it is the conflict between the Jewish intellectual, spiritual, and cultural tradition, on one hand, and the Hellenistic sweep of artistic creativity and secular Western humanism, on the other. The conflict between art and Torah is no mere intellectual game for Ozick; she expresses it in numerous stories and novels as a deep, ongoing, even a mortal struggle. In "The Pagan Rabbi," for example, she takes to its logical extreme the talmudic prohibition against delight in nature because it may detract from Torah study or serve as a temptation to paganism. The pagan rabbi is a young Orthodox father of many children who eventually abandons his beautiful and pious wife—and loses his life—in an attempt to cohabit with a wood nymph. Too late he discovers that to separate from his Jewish soul is tantamount to death; at the very moment that he is erotically ravished by his mossy beloved, his soul appears as the archetypical wandering Jew, a ragged, bearded old man lugging a tractate of the Mishnah down a dusty road:

Incredible flowers! Of every color! And noble shrubs like mounds of green moss! And the cricket crackling in the field. He passes indifferent through the beauty of the field. His nostrils sniff his book as if flowers lay on the clotted page, but

the flowers lick his feet. His feet are bandaged, his notched toenails gore the path. His prayer shawl droops on his studious back. He reads the Law and breathes the dust and doesn’t see the flowers and won’t heed the cricket spitting in the field.

Disgusted with his weary and studious soul, the odorous wood nymph—a *belle dame sans merci*—abandons the pagan rabbi. His soul also tells him he will abandon him because he has been faithless:

“If you had not contrived to be rid of me, I would have stayed with you till the end. . . . In your grave beside you I would have sung you David’s songs, I would have moaned Solomon’s voice to your last grain of bone. But you expelled me, your ribs exile me from their fate, and I will walk here alone always, in my garden”—he scratched on his page—“with my precious birds”—he scratched at the letters—“and my darling trees”—he scratched at the tall side column of commentary. . . . “The sound of the Law,” he said, “is more beautiful than the crickets. The smell of the Law is more radiant than the moss. The taste of the law exceeds clear water.”

In the end, the pagan rabbi hangs himself, and the story’s narrator symbolically flushes three green houseplants down the toilet.

Ozick’s familiarity with intensive Jewish environments suffuses much of her fiction. She is a knowledgeable observer and sometime critic of contemporary Jewish life. As a result, her fiction has the kind of dense Jewish texture that is more typical of the Yiddish writers. The disappearing world of American Yiddish writers is itself evoked in the bittersweet story “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” in which literary fame seems to depend on the acquisition of a competent translator. While this and some other fictions are set in New York, Ozick’s focus in her novels and short stories frequently departs from the typical Eastern European Jewish immigrant/urban milieu. She often deals with the uniqueness of Jewish life and history and the doomed attempts of individual Jews to flee their common destiny with the Jewish people. In the story “A Mercenary,” for example, a Holocaust survivor who attempts to drown his Jewish identity in the black African nationalist struggle unwittingly circles back to the frequent historical fate of Jews; perceived as a middleman, a hybrid and therefore a quisling, he may meet his doom at the hands of the black official he helped the most. Jewish suffering and the incapacity of most Gentiles to truly enter into Jewish history are explored in “Levitation.” The story is told from the viewpoint of Lucy, the converted daughter of a minister married to a Jew. Lucy is putatively a sympathetic fellow traveler, but she loses patience with what she sees as the Jews’ obsession with the Holocaust and other “historical atrocities” committed against them; Lucy comes to the conclusion that

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Jews are “intense all the time . . . the grocers among them were as intense as any novelist.” Such suffering is only interesting and real to her if she thinks of Jews dying, like Jesus, to redeem the world. Thus, Lucy decides that “every Jew was Jesus.” As Lucy’s husband and his friends continue to talk so incessantly that they float to the ceiling, she sees her Gentile friends as “compassionate knights,” gallant and gracious and well-behaved.

Lucy’s uncomprehending attitude toward, and eventual boredom with, Jewish suffering serves as a critique of universalist attitudes such as those found in Bernard Malamud’s 1957 novel The Assistant. Malamud’s protagonist, Morris Bober, is indeed a grocer who is as intense as the novelist who created him. Morris and his family suffer long and deeply. Frank Alpine, his Italian grocery assistant and disciple, puzzles over the Jewish capacity for suffering: “What do you suffer for, Morris?” Frank asks. ‘I suffer for you,’ Morris said calmly.” Morris informs Frank that Jews suffer in order to teach other human beings how to relate empathetically with each other. However, Ozick’s Lucy illustrates the naivété of such a hope. After picturing Jews suffering like Christ, after picturing the martyred Jews of history “as if hundreds and hundreds of crucifixions were all happening at once,” after visualizing “a hillside with multitudes of crosses” —Lucy decides that “she is bored by the shootings and the gas and the camps . . . they are as tiresome as prayer.” The world causes and tolerates Jewish suffering and is finally bored by it and resentful of hearing about it, Ozick shows us in “Levitation.” In Ozick’s eyes, it is wrong to try to explain Jewish suffering as a Christological activity; Jews do not suffer in order to redeem the world, they suffer because the world inflicts suffering upon them and then looks away.

Ozick examines the real impact of Jewish suffering on the lives of Jews in her recent works The Scarf and The Messiah of Stockholm. Her novella The Scarf illustrates the devastation of one individual life. The protagonist, Rosa Lublin, watches her beloved little daughter brutally murdered in a concentration camp—but refuses to accept her death. She constructs an entire existence for the girl, whom she imagines to be “a tigress” of strength and beauty. Ozick portrays survivors as idiosyncratic, flawed human beings, rather than as bland symbols, and at the same time makes their pain and confusion palpable.

Ozick explores the lasting destruction which the Holocaust inflicted upon the lives of survivors and indeed upon entire societies. She argues that the riches of Eastern European Jewish intellectualism have been lost despite the rescue of a few pieces of literature. Lars Andemening, the orphaned protag-
onist of *The Messiah of Stockholm*, imagines that he is a kind of Messiah, that he is "Europe's savior," because "he wanted to salvage every scrap of paper all over Europe... in all those shadowy places where there had been all those shootings—in the streets, in the forests." But Lars eventually realizes that the shootings and the chimneys that consumed millions of individual Jews consumed their culture as well. Even if he could "save" Bruno Schultz's lost manuscript, "The Messiah," he cannot save Schultz, his colleagues, and his culture.

In *The Messiah of Stockholm* Ozick addresses the paradox that there is no higher, human life without imagination, and yet "there's more to the world than just imagination." Achieving the higher life is ostensibly the goal of Midwestern parochial-school principal Joseph Brill, protagonist of the novel *The Cannibal Galaxy*. Like Lars Andemening, Brill aims for intellectual glory while neglecting human beings and eventually fails them both. "To the stars, ad astra," Brill proclaims, as he devises and implements goals and methods for an all-day school with a dual-curriculum, Jewish and secular, educational program. Ozick's sharp pen provides a scathing critique of Jewish suburban pretensions and mediocrity in this novel, skewering smug Jewish physicians who spend Sundays wearing shorts and beepers, self-serving pedagogues who cheat their students by not taking them seriously as cherished, individual, developing human beings, and school administrators who hope to ride into excellence vicariously on the reputations of their most talented students.

In addition to the obvious Jewish themes of the story—the Holocaust experiences of the principal and his family, the works of Jewish synthesizer Edmund Phlegg which obsess Brill, the dual educational curriculum which he devises—the novel is rich with Jewish allusions. The novel's heroine, Hester Lilt, whose philosophical specialty focuses on the secular field of linguistic logic, delivers a brilliant university lecture in which she interweaves stories about Rabbis Akiva, Gamliel, Elazar, and Joshua with the natural sciences. Using midrashic methods and materials, Ozick's celebrated secular philosopher passionately articulates Jewish distinctiveness and the Jewish triumph over those who would have destroyed them and the Torah down through the ages. Hester's name itself recalls the Hebrew word *hester*, "hidden," as God's face was "hidden" from the Jews during the Holocaust; the biblical heroine Esther, who saved the Persian Jews from annihilation; and also Hester, the isolated adulteress of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, who lives with her little daughter as a social pariah. Lilt is a melody but also Lilith, the demonic independent woman first given to Adam and then removed to make way for the more pliant Eve. Such wordplay, involv-

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ing the full, 2500-year sweep of Jewish literature and tradition, is one of Ozick's trademarks.

Allen Hoffman

Among other fictions depicting intense, idiosyncratic Jewish themes and environments, one which stands out for its Jewish spirituality as well as its high literary quality is the title story—really a novella—of Allen Hoffman's *Kagan's Superfecta*. "Kagan's Superfecta" takes place in an environment which many might perceive as antithetical to spirituality, a corrupt urban environment in which the protagonist, Moe Kagan, is both an Orthodox Jew, a kohen—descendant of the priestly tribe—and a compulsive gambler living on New York's upper West Side. The richly diverse, contradictory, Runyonesque urban world through which Kagan moves is almost exclusively a world of men, as thoroughly known to him as the inside of an old shoe. Fran, his well-meaning but uncomprehending Connecticut-born wife, is an alien in this milieu. In this unholy and imperfect universe, special sections of the synagogue service are auctioned off to the highest bidder, and unpleasant, power-hungry men chant the most sacred passages. However, there is more to Kagan's world than meets the average eye. Kagan sees visions and is accompanied by his own personal angel, Ozzie.

"Kagan's Superfecta" takes the protagonist on a bizarre, picaresque adventure played out on the streets and in familiar buildings within a few-block radius of Kagan's apartment. Early in the story, Kagan lolls in the steamy water of the mikveh (ritual bath) before Yom Kippur, surrounded by the white "submerging and resurfacing" bodies of other men, momentarily losing his anxiety to "the harmony of this purifying pool." Once seated in the men's section of his synagogue, however, he is tormented by visions of his superfecta, the numerical combination which he is sure will win a horse race held on the holiest day of the Jewish year: "The wiggly Hebrew print kept turning into horses before his eyes and the page numbers distracted him to the point of madness. How do they expect a person to pray with numbers on every page?" Struggling to resist the temptation to place a bet and trying to immerse himself in holiness, Kagan notices for the first time that in the Torah portion, "the High Priest drew lots" on two goats—which means that "gambling decides the most important event of Yom Kippur!" Kagan's head aches; shall he violate the sanctity of Yom Kippur to win a huge amount of money, a sure thing, which would change his and Fran's whole life for the better? Hoffman sums up the conflict between man's sacred and profane impulses in prose which manages to be simultaneously hilarious and visionary.

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Confused by frenetic, vivid hallucinations, Moe Kagan struggles to understand the terms of the world he lives in and to redeem his own soul. He stands at the very threshold of heaven's closing gates during the ne'illah service, blessing the congregation with the other kohanim (priests), tallit over his head. Kagan prays for his wife, for the imperfect men around him, even for his own evil impulse in the person of the angel Ozzie—Azazel. Even one's evil impulses, Kagan comes to understand, can be disciplined to serve good purposes. He sees at last that each man gambles on his own soul, each Jew through his own actions and thoughts can choose God, life, and peace even at the last moment, at the very brink of disaster. Kagan realizes that "The Lord is the Mikveh of Israel. Through his unity, His oneness, we can be redeemed."

Hoffman is fascinated by the opportunities for holiness which lie directly beneath the surface of everyday life. His narrative voice is pungent with the inflections and reference points of observant, urban, contemporary Jews. Each of his stories might legitimately carry the aphorism which occurs early in "Beggar Moon":

"So this is a story about Jews. But it is much more than just a story about Jews; it is a Jewish story." The protagonist, a synagogue regular, gets involved with Bluma, an urban character, a talkative beggar-lady in red knee socks; he does not mean to get involved with her, but after he gives her a few rather generous handouts, she simply adopts him as her own. Moved by the soul-stirring sounds of the shofar during Elul and the High Holidays, he does not have the callousness to get rid of her. Bluma protects him from phony beggars, and she even insists on giving him used clothing for his family. Needless to say, his wife is appalled when she hears things moving in Bluma's hand-me-down bags and sees some rather impressive cockroaches emerging.

The relationship continues, with Bluma always refusing to accept any favor which she cannot in some way reciprocate or which will make her feel helpless or inadequate. Bluma becomes fused in the narrator's mind with both the moon, doomed always to be the lesser and subservient of the luminaries, and with the position of the Jews in what is fundamentally and irrevocably, until the coming of the Messiah, "a Goyishe world." Bluma grows crazier and crazier, until even her friend cannot help her. Grieving for her, not resigned to her fate, he has no choice but to wait hopefully, alert to any sign that the world—or Bluma—may be waking to some fundamental change.

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Jay Neugeboren

One of the great spiritual conundrums from the Bible onward, the conflict between predestination versus free will, is explored in Jay Neugeboren’s *The Stolen Jew,* played out in the murky arena of family life. The story of the novel is seen through the eyes of Nathan Malkin, a 64-year-old author and wealthy businessman whose brother Nachman dies on the first page of the novel. Returning from Israel to New York to join his family for shiva, the period of mourning, Nathan reviews the life that he and Nachman shared, in painful detail. The family in which the Malkin brothers grew up epitomizes the wreckage of Jewish values on the rocky soil of American materialism.

One vignette which Nathan recalls is an especially effective symbol for the loss of an entire belief system. Nathan’s father, a gentle, scholarly man but poor provider, who loved his large library of Jewish books, entrusted Nathan, the older child, who identifies strongly with his father’s values, with the task of taking these sefarim outside before Passover each year to dust and air them. One year, however, the mother, an ambitious, domineering woman who derives joy from degrading her husband, sets her sweet, gentle, innocent younger son, Nachman, to do Nathan’s task. Nathan pleads with her to let him take the books inside, because dark rain clouds threaten certain disaster to his father’s library, but his mother sadistically prevents him from saving the books. As the rain pours down on the pages, turning them to pulp, the father returns home from work to witness his wife’s triumphant glee at his irrevocable loss. Nathan is bitter, furious, tearfully empathetic, and little Nachman bewildered. The parents fling insults at each other and the two children huddle under the bed; Nathan retreats into the one task he can accomplish, to comfort his younger sibling, to be his brother’s keeper.

Witnessing her repeated assaults on his father’s dignity, Nathan hardens his heart against his mother; in response, she flaunts her favoritism, lavishing Nachman with affection and taunting Nathan with his putatively hard, cold nature. So malicious is her need to undermine her husband that she even subverts his attempt to provide Nachman, who is a musical prodigy, with violin lessons. Thus, Nachman’s destiny is stolen from him; partially as a result, he matures into a sensitive but troubled adult who drifts in and out of mental institutions. He is his mother’s favorite, but he emulates his father’s tragically passive persona.

At the other end of the equation, Nathan writes no more books after his brilliant first novel, because he feels he must earn money to acquire for Nachman the professional help he needs. Nathan goes into business, suc-

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ceeds brilliantly, helps his parents and his brother—and abandons his craft; his destiny also has been stolen from him. Determined that he will never be treated as his father has been treated, he emulates his mother’s ambition and callousness. Nachman is “chosen” to be Abel/Jacob, the mother’s favorite, the gentle dweller of the tents, and Nathan is left with the role of Esau, forced into a rough-and-tumble life of necessity.

However, Nathan’s mother too is cheated of her dreams: like many Jewish women described in immigrant fiction, she takes on American values more rapidly and completely than her husband. Trapped in a lower-middle-class milieu with a husband who cannot or will not achieve the successful American life-style she longs for, Nathan’s mother lashes out in frustration. She derides her husband’s love for Jewish scholarship, Nathan recalls, and “even on Shabbos she would yell at him that he should go out and try to find an extra job, that she didn’t have enough money to feed us, that Nachman and I would become sick and weak like him. It was terrible. . . . She would cry out to us. Oh you should have seen him! He was so handsome and strong! But in America, look at him.” In this richly complex dance of betrayal, all are guilty and all are bereaved. All are stolen Jews.

In a novel within the novel—Nathan’s one critical and popular success—Neugeboren examines the role of the Diaspora in exacerbating a different kind of theft, the theft of Jewish integrity, unity, and ahavat yisrael, love for other Jews, in the setting of 19th-century Russia. The story centers on the conscription of Jewish boys into the czar’s army, specifically, the practice of rich parents buying substitutes for their sons—or even the kidnapping of poor boys by the Kehillah, an organization of Jewish communal leaders which served as a liaison between the czars and the Jewish masses. A father who has condemned these practices—citing Maimonides: “Not a single Jewish soul shall be delivered”—is later cruelly forced to choose between seeing his own son, a musical prodigy, drafted, or hypocritically allowing his son to be replaced by a poor, brilliant Talmud student. He chooses to save his own child, rather than to follow Maimonides’ dictum of communal unity and self-sacrifice. The years of army service understandably strip the Talmud scholar of both his innately gentle nature and his scholarship; his spiritual birthright is stolen from him by an “accident,” an external selection process. Thus, Malkin’s fiction has a strong symbolic relationship with the “real” characters. And just as the characters in a novel are “free” to behave as they wish—although the novelist decides what they will in fact do—human beings are free to determine their own destiny—and yet freedom is a delusion. The frontispiece to Nathan Malkin’s novel The Stolen Jew quotes from Pirkay Avos, “The Sayings of the Fathers”: “Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted. . . .”
Rebecca Goldstein

Another interesting new author in the spiritualist mode is Rebecca Goldstein, whose short stories and novels are grounded in a thorough familiarity with traditional Jewish life. Her work explores topics as different as the difficulties experienced by children of Holocaust survivors and the difficulties experienced by urban New York Jews in preppy suburban Princeton. Goldstein’s story “The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish”32 depicts the daughter of Holocaust survivors whose childhood is subsumed by her father’s sadness and the “quite blue fury” of her mother’s total “goodness”—a goodness later revealed to be flawed indeed.

Goldstein’s protagonist in The Mind-Body Problem13 is a “beautiful, brainy” young woman, Renee Feuer, who grew up in a strictly Orthodox home. After leaving home for college and then graduate school, Renee moves incrementally away from her training. She does her undergraduate work at Barnard, where she discovers modern Orthodoxy, sexuality, and totally secularized Jews, and is working on a Ph.D. in philosophy at Princeton during the action of the novel. The scope of her religious antecedents allows her to experience particularly poignant varieties of knowledgeable spiritual ambivalence. Although Renee is no longer religiously observant, she is repeatedly drawn to the richness of Orthodox life, both as she remembers it from her parental home and as she observes it in the home of her brother and sister-in-law, a pious young couple living among others of their kind in Lakewood, New Jersey.

One of the pleasures of Goldstein’s novel is that religious environments are depicted unself-consciously and with a balanced awareness of both their strengths and weaknesses. One aspect of Orthodoxy which troubles Renee has to do with the position of women within Orthodox societies, especially when life circumstances put women into marginal positions. Both Renee’s sister-in-law, Tzippy, and her childhood girlfriend, Fruma, have experienced negative attitudes toward women because of their infertility problems; in societies which assume that divine providence has reasons for everything, even physical problems can acquire moral significance. And yet, despite living in a world in which their women friends, rather than their husbands, must coach them through labor, because their husbands will not be bothered with the weibszachen of natural childbirth after infertility problems are solved, Tzippy and Fruma enjoy religious depth, meaningfulness, and serenity which Renee envies. Goldstein captures Tzippy’s spirituality, which extends into her daily actions, in a tender vignette:

All at once I was crying, and Tzippy silently joined in. She had only known my father in the last year of his life, but a strong and special closeness had developed almost immediately between them. It was she who had shown my numbed family the way when he lay dying in the final days. We had already distanced ourselves from the man lying there, smelling of death and wearing the face of martyrdom. That wasn’t my father suffering; my father had already gone. But little Tzippy had shown us who that person was, had walked into the room and straight over to him, kissing him, holding him, talking to him as she always had. How he had smiled at her with that wasted face.

Renee ascribes much of her own attachment to the spiritual aspects of Judaism to her beloved father, a genuinely sweet-natured, “scandalously underpaid” cantor whom she describes as “passionately religious” and “supremely content” with his lot:

His pure, sweet song was like a picture of his soul. Snatches of chazzanes would escape from him all day long, pieces of the internal singing that must have been almost constant with him. He had loved his work in all its aspects: chanting the prayers on behalf of the community, comforting the sick and the sad, instructing the boys in preparation for their bar mitzvahs. His teaching powers were legendary. He was sent all the unteachable boys from around Westchester County—the retarded, the disturbed, the hyperactive. Each yielded to his softness and managed to be bar mitzvahed. . . . And he maintained his sweet outlook throughout his final terrible illness. One of the more illustrious members of his congregation said to me, as we watched my father limping in great pain up to his place on the bimah shortly before his death, “There’s not a man I envy more.”

When Renee abandons religious ritual for the study of philosophy, there is more than a little religious intensity and spiritual searching in her choice. She marries a mathematical genius, and once again her choice is related to a search for definitive spiritual answers. Much to her surprise, she finds that her scholarly, Jewishly ignorant husband is as sexist—perhaps more so—as her ultra-Orthodox brother. Her college best friend, Ava, has divested herself not only of feminine dress and feminine wiles but also of any gentleness, supportiveness, or sweetness, such as those retained and deepened by Tzippy and Fruma. Renee takes a lover, a thoroughly assimilated German Jew, who gives her a splendid time in bed but shocks her by his disinterest in taking her on as a soulmate for life.

Renee finds herself increasingly disoriented and spiritually hungry. Moved by a rereading of I. B. Singer’s “Short Friday” to prepare an authentic Sabbath meal, Renee prepares traditional foods: challah, cholent, gefilte fish. Her classmate Ava sees her behavior as atavistic and mocks her unmercifully; her husband and her lover are so ignorant that they do not even have any conception of the significance of their luncheon cuisine. Chilled by the intolerance and apathy of her Jewish companions, Renee notes that she “had never felt quite so separate”:

I stared out at the winter-stripped elms and remembered Shabbos at home. I could hear my father’s singing, the sweet warm tenor rising up in his love. Beside it,
the secular chatter of the Jewish goyim I had surrounded myself with, circumcised by doctors and not knowing what it is to yearn for the coming of the Messiah, sounded insignificant and despicable. But I had despised the religiosity of my past. How could I expect anyone to share my outlook, contradictory as it is?

**CONCLUSION**

The quandary experienced by Rebecca Goldstein’s protagonist is paradigmatic of realities affecting the lives of American Jews. American Jewish life during the past two decades has undergone a simultaneous attenuation and intensification among different segments of the population. Anyone who currently teaches in a Judaic studies department on a college campus can testify that today’s young adults—third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation American Jews who are increasingly the plurality in American Jewish communities—carry little in the way of Jewish cultural baggage. At the same time, they are far less hostile to traditional Judaism than many of their parents or grandparents may have been. They express feelings of empowerment and comfort in an open culture which they take for granted, and many of them also express a yearning for greater knowledge of their spiritual and cultural roots.

The current openness to Jewish exploration was preceded by two decades of intense ethnic awareness in the intellectual and emotional lives of select sectors of American Jewry. Unlike second-generation American Jews in prior periods of American Jewish life, third- and fourth-generation Jews in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s felt little need to “prove” their patriotism, their sophistication, or their modernity by jettisoning their Jewishness. During this period, groups of young American Jews interested in creative interaction with Jewish tradition formed *havurot* in which to worship and study together. Jewish studies departments proliferated on college campuses across the country. Books and films on earlier periods of American Jewish history were extensively reissued and enjoyed broad new audiences.

Both the authors and the reading audiences of American Jewish literature were profoundly affected by events in Israel, especially after the 1967 Six Day War, which marked a watershed in American Jewish involvement with Israel. That war awakened in American Jewry a terrified recollection of the Holocaust, while the reunification of Jerusalem and apparent strength of the Israeli state created widespread feelings of Jewish pride and confidence.

Moreover, Jews who once fled from the sights, sounds, and social pressures of the urban ghetto are now anxious to read literature which recaptures for them scenes and experiences from their childhood and youth. In addition, rising tides of international anti-Semitism, revisionist attempts to
deny the Holocaust, and the twin challenges of intermarriage and assimilation have led many self-proclaimed Jewish secularists to take a more sympathetic view of traditional Jewish life and thought.

The combination of a cultural acceptance of ethnic particularism, increased Jewish awareness and pride, and diminution of hostility to explicitly Jewish concerns has contributed to the growth of a wide reading audience for an American Jewish literature which differs in kind from the American Jewish literature of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Contemporary American Jewish literature, reflecting the realities of American Jewish life itself, inhabits a world that is by its nature “contradictory.” But unlike the situation in the past, today’s American Jewish writers draw freely on Jewish tradition and culture, as they strive to regain the richness and warmth of Jewish tradition, while retaining the broad-ranging opportunities of American culture and society. They are unafraid to confront their own spirituality, and more and more they are finding that it is a specifically Jewish spirituality. They quest for meaningful Jewish concepts of faith and redemption. They long for a messianic age; they long for a sense of community; and yet they also long for the kind of personal fulfillment which seems to run counter to communal survival and spiritual goals. Few protagonists in American Jewish fiction succeed in achieving a total integration of the secular and Jewish worlds. More often, they simply struggle with their own counterlives. Their writing has attracted a broad audience among American Jews; the pieces of the worlds they juggle effectively evoke the yearning of American Jews toward often contradictory impulses of individual freedom and dynamic continuity with the Jewish past.

Ironically, there has been considerable critical speculation that American Jewish writing may have passed its peak. The late Lothar Kahn, for example, wrote, “If there was, indeed, an American-Jewish literary Renaissance it probably commenced in the mid-fifties and extended for some fifteen to twenty years into the late sixties and early seventies. Since then Jewish literature has enjoyed a diminished critical vogue and its popularity has also lessened considerably.” Similar opinions have been voiced by Louis Harap and others. This essay has argued that a rebirth and revitalization of

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American Jewish literature has taken place and is still in the process of developing, at the very moment in time when others have predicted its demise. The new Jewish fiction is qualitatively different from works which preceded it and is, in fact, more intrinsically and particularistically Jewish than most American fiction of the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, this essay has demonstrated that spiritual or religious Jewish themes have flourished in a literary environment which is both more Jewish and more receptive to spirituality than at any previous time in American Jewish literary history.

It does seem likely that, as Cynthia Ozick has indicated, ethnic or sociological Jewish writing is past its prime, if for no other reason than that the ethnicity of American Jews is fast being blended into oblivion. When sociologists are pessimistic, they document the vastly diminished distinctiveness of American Jews; when they wish to be optimistic, they speak of the "transformation" of American Jewish life and culture. In either case, whether viewed through positive or negative lenses, the inescapable fact is that the particular ethnic distinctiveness which used to make American Jews feel and appear Jewish, even when they had abandoned their ties to Jewish ritual and organized Jewish life, is rapidly disappearing with each succeeding American generation.

With the passage of the angst of the assimilatory struggle, and lacking the bite of that dynamic so brilliantly articulated by the American Jewish literary coterie in the middle years of the 20th century, descriptions of acculturation become insipid and cease to be an engaging topic for fictional exploration. Religious and spiritual exploration, however, have emerged in American Jewish fiction as they have in American Jewish life, as gripping, often painful, and productive themes. There is every reason to believe that, at least in the near future, we will continue to witness in American Jewish fiction portrayals of the psyche of the American Jew fired to white heat, refined, redefined, and reforged on the anvils of the literary artists who articulate the spiritual struggles of their age.

American Jewish Museums: Trends and Issues

by RUTH R. SELDIN

Museums devoted to Jewish content have been multiplying rapidly in the United States, becoming a significant feature of the cultural landscape. While the spotlight of publicity has been focused on the national Holocaust museum rising on the Mall in Washington, D.C., and on similar institutions in New York, Los Angeles, and points in between, these museums are in fact part of a larger phenomenon of Jewish museum growth that has been taking place, largely unheralded, since the end of World War II.

In 1950 there were only two major Jewish museums in the United States and several small synagogue-linked galleries of Judaica. At the beginning of 1991, the Council of American Jewish Museums (CAJM; itself established in 1977) numbered 35 members and associates. There were, in addition, an estimated dozen or more museums or galleries not affiliated with CAJM, among them the Seattle Jewish Museum and the Regional Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in Jackson, Mississippi. There were also at least 19 self-described Holocaust museums, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and the national Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

These museums vary widely in the size and nature of their collections, in their housing and exhibition space, in financial resources and staffing. They also vary in their program emphases, some being "general," i.e., featuring art, history, and culture, while others are more specialized, including the historical-society museums and the Holocaust museums. All Jewish museums are alike, however, in their basic function of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting the material culture of the Jewish people, "in order to further public knowledge and appreciation of Jewish culture."2

Note: In addition to the published sources cited in footnotes, the information in this article is based on annual reports, newsletters, and other publications furnished by museums. The author is grateful to the following individuals who agreed to be interviewed or otherwise provided assistance: David Altshuler, Margo Bloom, Phyllis Cook, David Eden, Morris Fred, Seymour Fromer, Marian Gribetz, Sylvia Herskovitz, Joanne Marks Kauvar, Reva Kirschberg, Norman Kleeblatt, Sara Lee, Joy Ungerleider Mayerson, Joan Rosenbaum, Anne Scher, Judith Siegel, Richard Siegel, Linda Steinberg, Jay Weinstein, Marjorie Wyler.

1 See full listing of council members and associates at the end of this article.

2 Yeshiva University Museum brochure.
Summarizing developments of the past quarter century, Tom Freudenheim, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, told the 1990 annual conference of the Council of American Jewish Museums that, in the 1960s, when he was a young art historian starting off on his career, employed as assistant curator of Judaica at the Jewish Museum in New York, there was no Jewish museum "field," no cadre of American-trained professionals in Judaica, no grants from the National Endowments (which were created in the mid-'60s), no accreditation by the American Association of Museums—in short, no sense that Jewish museums could compete in the larger museum world, or even a sense that ethnic pride was a valid basis for operating a museum. By the end of the 1980s, all this had changed, and Jewish museums had become respected members of the general museum world.

Along with the increase in their numbers and their rise in professional standing, Jewish museums have been changing their image. Once regarded primarily as repositories for ritual objects and antiquities, with a sprinkling of art on biblical and other explicit Jewish themes, today's Jewish museums are as likely to display a Hanukkah menorah fashioned from industrial parts as a brass or silver antique model, an abstract sculpture or videotape as a portrait of a bearded rabbi. Exhibits cover a seemingly limitless range of subjects relating to Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish experience, worldwide and throughout history. In addition, where programs for the public once consisted of the occasional gallery talk, today's Jewish museums offer lecture series and symposia, films, puppet shows, concerts, and parent-child "interactive" workshops, as well as extensive programs for schools that reach thousands of children, a high proportion of them non-Jewish.

Behind this transformation in image lies a growing assertiveness on the part of museums about their role—or as they term it, their "mission." In an age marked simultaneously by curiosity about things Jewish and great ignorance of them, the museum is uniquely positioned to make Jewish culture available to the widest possible audience. A recognizably Jewish institution, it is neither religious nor secular and thus transcends the ideologies, sects, and dogmas that otherwise divide and segregate Jews into factional ghettos. At the same time, as a general cultural institution, the Jewish museum offers a socially sanctioned place where nonidentifying Jews as well as non-Jews can safely sample Jewish culture.

Growth and change have inevitably given rise to new problems and challenges. The area of funding is one. Paradoxically, while Jewish museums have won increasing recognition and financing from the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, state and municipal arts agen-

cies, and private foundations, Jewish communal bodies accord them low funding priority. Another problem is that of heightened competition—particularly with the mushrooming of Holocaust institutions—for acquisition of objects, funding, and audience. At the same time, Jewish museums compete not only with each other but with a host of general cultural institutions, which places them under pressure to mount the kinds of crowd-drawing exhibitions and programs that will, it is hoped, attract new interest and support.

As Jewish museums have become more visible, reaching ever wider audiences, they have also come in for criticism. They have been accused, on the one hand, of being boring, of failing to touch viewers emotionally, and, on the other, of paying too much attention to popular taste and not enough to strictly Jewish educational purposes. Part of the problem may be that the museums tend to be scattershot in their activity, failing to articulate a clear definition of their identity and purpose, and being less effective as a result.

This article begins by exploring the factors contributing to the current flourishing of Jewish museums, followed by a discussion of the concept of a Jewish museum and the ongoing debate over its character and direction. It then presents an overview of the museums and their activities, examining the major issues they face and their prospects for the future.

THE GROWTH OF JEWISH MUSEUMS

The proliferation of Jewish museums over the last few decades represents a remarkable confluence of a number of trends—in society at large, in the broader museum world, and in American Jewish life.

There is, first, the emergence of the visual arts as an integral part of the middle-class life-style, thanks to increased wealth, leisure, and education, both formal and informal, the latter often by way of the television screen. This is expressed in ownership of art, visits to museums and galleries, participation in art classes, and the like. The spectacular growth of the auction art market in the 1980s, which was eagerly covered by the media, served to further heighten interest in the arts.

The rising attendance figures at museums are one indicator of public interest: from 200 million in 1965 to 391 million in 1984 to 500 million in 1987. The proliferation of new museums is another. The 1965 directory of

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the Association of American Museums contained 4,956 entries (a thousand more than in 1950); by 1990, the number had climbed to more than 6,700. (The directory includes all types of museums, of widely varying sizes and content—art, history, scientific, natural history, etc., as well as historic sites, monuments, zoos, and botanical gardens.) One feature of the museum boom is its spread and decentralization across the country, with new museums opening and existing ones adding substantial new wings. Nor is the phenomenon limited to the United States. Europe has experienced a museum-building boom, particularly West Germany. Since 1980, eight new museums have opened in Frankfurt alone (including the Museum of Jewish History in 1989).

Museum popularity has been boosted by, among other causes, new approaches in the presentation and marketing of works of art. "Beginning with the astonishing success of 'Treasures of Tutankhamen' in 1978, museums have been gripped by the 'blockbuster syndrome'—organizing exhibitions of opulent treasures or beloved masterpieces that attract stadium-size crowds."

The process of attracting new audiences to the museum has served to transform the nature of the institution from one inspiring awe and associated with high, largely European, culture, to a more open, informal, social gathering place. This trend has been expressed in the attention given to the public and commercial spaces: expansion of selling areas into large gift and book stores, the transformation of cafeterias into chic restaurants, and the building of auditoriums for public events. Perennially hard-pressed museums have even taken to renting out galleries, at exorbitant fees, for social events. While some critics deplore turning a museum into a "social gathering place and cultural department store," the same critics acknowledge that "the growing alliance between art museums and commerce . . . can also help to make their existence possible."

Yet another trend of recent years has been the spread of children's museums offering imaginative exhibits that provide for various forms of "interaction" between the viewer and the objects or technology on display. The success of these museums has not only helped to stimulate interest in museums generally but has raised audience expectations of what a museum experience should be.

The Jewish world has not been immune to any of these developments. Jews have played "a central role" in the American art world. Neither art history nor art criticism "would have much to show without its Jews." The commerce of art also "revolves heavily around Jews . . . and the role of Jews supporting cultural institutions in this country (including museums) has

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1Ibid., pp. 62, 70-71.
been a phenomenon almost as remarkable as the generosity of Jews to Jewish philanthropic causes. Although Jewish museum advocates claim that Jewish support of the general arts has not been accompanied by equivalent support for the Jewish arts, Jewish artists and Jewish museums have found benefactors, among them private collectors whose collections of Judaica or fine art form the basis of more than one of the new museums. The two oldest Jewish museums embarked on programs of expansion in the '70s and '80s—vastly increasing their collections, budgets, staffs, and audiences and undertaking major renovation or building plans with the aim of moving to greatly enlarged quarters in the early 1990s. Since the late 1950s, as will be described below, new museums and galleries have been sprouting at a steady pace.

While the impetus to create new Jewish museums, or to expand existing ones, has clearly been influenced by the popularity of museums of all sorts in American culture, it has been especially affected by the new respectability accorded specifically ethnic institutions, as evidenced by the spread of African-American, Hispanic-American, and similar museums in recent years. Neither factor alone, however, would be enough to explain the Jewish museum phenomenon. Critical to the process was the coincidental but simultaneous surge of interest among Jews in their own heritage and culture.

This development is part of what Charles Silberman has called "a major renewal of Jewish religious and cultural life" in the United States, reflecting a general openness to Jewish literature, music, and other forms of cultural expression on the part of third- and fourth-generation American Jews who are not in flight from their Jewish past—as were their second-generation parents—but who, on the contrary, are trying to recapture it. Included in the younger cohorts are growing numbers of third-generation Jews with yeshivah or day-school education who not only have embraced Judaism but have the financial means to acquire art and support Jewish cultural activity.

While Silberman may be overstating the extent of participation in the renewal, there is ample evidence of a Jewish cultural flowering in the '70s and '80s, one that produced a stream of Jewish books and periodicals, the proliferation of Jewish-studies courses in universities accompanied by an expanding Jewish scholarship, and the creation of Jewish theater and musical groups, as well as the spread of Jewish museums and galleries. Silberman and other students of Jewish life point to the establishment of Israel, which increased Jewish pride and identification, as one of the streams feeding this development. Another was interest in the Holocaust, which was slow to

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start but by the 1960s had become intense. The awareness of the Holocaust coupled with the shock and exhilaration of the 1967 Six Day War made American Jews painfully aware of Israel's—and perhaps their own—vulnerability and sharpened the focus on issues of Jewish survival. For many, this was translated into a new curiosity about their Jewish heritage.

David Altshuler, director of A Living Memorial to the Holocaust—Jewish Heritage Museum, sees the 1980s surge in Holocaust memorializing as growing out of a potent combination of factors: the imminent demise of the last Holocaust survivors and with them their firsthand memories; the spread of revisionist history, which denies or distorts the record of the destruction of the Jews; the awakening of the children of the survivors, with a compelling need to transmit their personal histories to the world.

Several other developments relating specifically to art have contributed to the upsurge of interest in museums. In the last two decades, American Jewish artists, partaking in the new interest in Jewish heritage and identity, began to create works on Jewish themes. Growing familiarity with Israel exposed American Jews not only to the handicrafts—of varying quality—brought home by tourists but also to serious Israeli art and artists, a number of whom, like Agam and Arikha, by the 1970s had achieved international reputations and were displayed in general art museums and galleries. On the home front, a body of Jewish synagogue and ceremonial art was developing, the result of the postwar surge of suburban synagogue building that created a demand for modern ritual objects and decorations—Torah appurtenances, wall hangings, menorahs, ark doors—which induced a small number of Jewishly inclined architects and artists to begin to work in this area. Yet another current was the birth of a Jewish crafts movement in the 1960s, the child of the counterculture movement's stress on handicrafts and do-it-yourself ideology. Professional artists as well as amateurs began to develop skills in calligraphy, ceramics, needlework, weaving, woodcarving, and metalsmithing—using them to create ceremonial objects for home and public worship as well as decorative objects with Jewish motifs.

Another factor was the growing awareness of the losses and destruction of Jewish ceremonial art that had occurred during World War II and a resulting sense of urgency about rescuing and preserving what remained. The related growth of a market in ceremonial and other forms of Jewish art led to the opening of a Judaica department at Sotheby's in 1980, followed by the entry of other major auction houses into the field, their activities in turn stimulating further attention.

The director of the Jewish Museum in New York, Joan Rosenbaum, believes that interest in Jewish museums is growing because "people want to learn about their history and background." She sees Jews today as "less self-conscious" about being Jewish and regarding their Jewishness as "an option" to be explored in various contexts.
That leaves open the question of what the particular context of a museum has to offer for an exploration of Jewish identity. Sara Lee, dean of Hebrew Union College's School of Education in Los Angeles, considers museums special because they are "neutral territory," places where people can satisfy their curiosity about Jewishness without having to make any kind of organizational or ideological or even psychological commitment.

Other commentators emphasize the uniqueness of the museum as a purveyor of Jewish culture because of its focus on "the object." One Jewish educator with extensive museum experience explains that Jewish objects and works of art are "powerful communicators of values and ideas" whose "appeal is direct and concrete" and "forges a connection between the creator and the viewer, and between viewers in this era and those in previous eras. Although this connection is difficult to articulate in words, it is one which everyone has experienced at some time or another."12

To scholar Jacob Neusner, "the museum, with its tactile display, with its amazing capacity to teach not didactically, to inform in an interesting way" has "extraordinary power." In his view, "Museums all over the world find themselves overwhelmed by crowds, because people in the age of television seek direct encounter, and because in museums they find it. The single most powerful instrument of mass education, beyond television, is the museum. . . ."13

All these factors, then—the growth of a body of Jewish art, the existence of a pool of wealthy collectors willing to purchase and donate such works, education, artistic sophistication, emotions aroused by the Holocaust and events in Israel, curiosity about Jewishness and Jewish identity—combined with the general popularity of museums in American culture and the special qualities of the museum experience—have contributed to the growing prominence of Jewish museums. To these one could add the emergence of a cadre of professionals—art historians and curators as well as Jewish educators—eager to use the museum as a vehicle for educating as wide an audience as possible about Jewish culture.

WHAT IS A JEWISH MUSEUM?

The basic concept of a Jewish museum as an institution devoted to the collection, preservation, and presentation of art and objects associated with the Jewish people and heritage has been essentially unchanged since the first Jewish museums came into existence a century ago. However, this broad definition leaves considerable room for interpretation and differing ap-

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approaches. What qualifies something to be labeled "Jewish," particularly in the realm of fine art? Should a Jewish museum be limited to showing Jewish art, however that is defined, or should it be universal in its approach? What aspects of Jewishness should the museum emphasize—the religious, the secular, ancient Israel, modern Israel, the Holocaust, or American Jewish life? Finally, and underlying the previous questions, what is the museum's purpose, what "message" does it wish to impart and to whom? To the extent that there is a debate over the nature and direction of Jewish museums, it centers on these questions.

It was apparently easier to answer these questions in the 1890s and the first decades of this century, when the first Jewish museums came into being in Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Frankfurt, and other cities. That was during the age of imperialism, a period in which palatial museums were built to house precious objects amassed throughout the world. A small number of Jews—scholars, art dealers, well-to-do connoisseurs—were inspired to collect the art and artifacts of their own people and to ensure their preservation for future generations. Lending support to this activity were two contemporary developments. One was the movement known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which legitimated the application of scientific methods to the study of Judaism in all its aspects. The second was the growing recognition that, contrary to the common perception that Judaism was hostile to art, the Jews in fact possessed a rich legacy of artistic treasures in the form of ceremonial objects, synagogue architecture and appurtenances, illuminated manuscripts, and the antiquities being excavated in Palestine. The showing of the J. Strauss collection, including magnificent silverwork from Italian synagogues, at the 1878 World Exhibition in Paris, helped to disseminate this new awareness and appreciation. That collection was acquired by Baron de Rothschild for the French state Cluny Museum in Paris.

Even as the existence of this body of Jewish art works gained recognition, it was also implicitly understood that a Jewish museum would be something other than an art museum, that because, through much of its history, Judaism had emphasized the written word over the visual image (among other reasons), there simply was no body of painting and sculpture and other "fine art" such as Christians had produced. It was understood, therefore, that, as an early advocate of Jewish museums, a non-Jewish art historian, Heinrich Frauberger, put it, a Jewish museum would have to "combine the points of view of the historical museum, the art museum, and a museum of ethnography." Frauberger also articulated the goals and program followed by the early Jewish museums: "To collect in photographs,

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drawings, or originals the artistic remnants of the past and the works of the present created by Jews or for Jewish rituals. To utilize the collection correctly for artistic and scientific purposes.”

The first two important Jewish museums in this country—the Jewish Museum in New York, founded in 1904 at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the museum of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati (now the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles), officially founded in 1913—essentially followed this model for many decades, even to being staffed by European émigrés. Their emphasis was on collection, cataloging, and scholarly research, and their collections consisted largely of synagogue and ceremonial art.

So long as the art and artifacts being exhibited in Jewish museums were explicitly Jewish in content or association, there was no question of suitability. Questions began to arise chiefly in relation to “modern art”—the art of the last century—a field in which Jews were becoming increasingly active, but producing works that could only rarely be defined as Jewish. Was Marc Chagall’s “Calvary,” for example, to be considered Jewish art, along with the same artist’s bearded “Praying Jew”? In other words, was subject matter the chief criterion—in which case art on Jewish themes by non-Jews would be admissible—or was the accident of an artist’s birth sufficient to make his creations Jewish? Jews took pride in the contributions to general culture made by the growing list of prominent Jewish artists—in Europe, Chagall, Soutine, Mané-Katz, Lipchitz, Modigliani; in America, the Soyers, Shahn, Levine, Newman, Rothko; in Israel, Rubin, Ticho, Ardon, Agam. Regardless of what they painted, should these artists not display their work in Jewish museums?

The Question of “Jewish Art”

A full or even adequate treatment of the subject of Jewish art is beyond the scope of the present article. However, since Jewish museums must establish criteria for determining what to acquire for their collections and what to exhibit, a few observations are in order.

There is in fact no agreement among those concerned with the subject on what constitutes “Jewish art,” or even that such an entity exists. According to one leading authority, “The style and, frequently, even the subject matter of the art of the Jews have always been rooted in and adapted from


the dominant contemporary non-Jewish society." Still, until the 19th century, this art was intrinsic to the Jewish community that produced it, reflecting "the collective Jewish thought, feeling, and symbolism of that community." In the process of Emancipation, however, the Jewish artist severed his ties to the community and its "collective beliefs and symbols" and "employed his art to reflect his national—or international—or personal outlook."

Even as it is generally agreed, in the words of art critic Harold Rosenberg, that there is "no Jewish art in the sense of a Jewish style in painting and sculpture," and that Jewish art is "an ambiguous situation," it is also understood that certain categories of works can legitimately be labeled "Jewish." These include: any art by Jewish artists, regardless of subject matter; art depicting Jews or containing Jewish subject matter (including the Bible); synagogue and ceremonial art; folk art and handicrafts using Jewish iconography; and "metaphysical" Jewish art, such as works incorporating Hebrew letters and mystical references or motifs.

The first category, that of works by Jewish artists, is legitimated on the ground that even if Jewish artists insist that they create as artists and not as Jews, it is understood that "they have not been working as non-Jews either." Says Rosenberg: "Their art has been the closest expression of themselves as they are, including the fact that they are Jews, each in his individual degree." Another writer puts it even more strongly: "In a century where Jews have been subjected to the threat of extermination, it is hard to imagine that any Jew, no matter how politically radical or opposed to religious dogma, does not bear within him the memory of Jewish religion and tradition."

A few writers have gone beyond this personal or ethnic definition to suggest that modern art itself is peculiarly Jewish, that because it takes radical liberties with realistic images, it can be seen as respecting the biblical interdiction against making human images. "[A]lmost all 20th-century art made by Jewish artists of the first rank suggests that there are risks involved in making figurative imagery. The more original the art, the more the power of the Second Commandment can be felt. As a result, avant-garde art made by Jews suggests a striking paradox. The more fearless and iconoclastic the art seems, the more it can be seen to respect Jewish law."

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18 Ibid.
19 Harold Rosenberg, "Is There a Jewish Art?" Commentary, July 1966, pp. 57-59.
20 Ibid., p. 60.
22 Ibid.
Other writers assert a natural connection between Jews and modern art because both grapple with the issue of identity. Rosenberg suggests that the Jewish artist feels the modern problem of identity "in an especially deep and immediate way." The work "inspired by the will to identity," he concluded, "has constituted a new art by Jews which, though not a Jewish art, is a profound Jewish expression, at the same time that it is loaded with meaning for all people of this era."\(^23\)

A similar thought was expressed by critic Heinz Politzer: "The modern Jewish artist finds himself utterly alone with himself and his work. Thus he has become the prototype of the modern artist, or one might say, the modern artist has become a Jew. For modern man, if he has been awake in this period, has suffered the fate of the Jew in foreboding and anxiety, if not in reality. . . ."\(^24\)

Based on these varying interpretations and understandings of what constitutes Jewish art, Jewish museums have considerable latitude in their activities. They are undoubtedly helped by the fact that abstract and avant-garde art in general have gained wide acceptance, and that there is much greater public sophistication about art. In the end, of course, it is the individual curators and those they work with who define what is suitable for showing in their particular institutions. One might generalize and say that for Jewish museums esthetic merit is a necessary criterion for selecting a work of art, but it is not the sole one. Some Jewish component—however that is defined—is required.

**Art Museum vs. Jewish Museum**

In the 1960s, the most protracted and vocal debate ever to take place in the Jewish museum world erupted over the question of the place of art in a Jewish museum. The battleground was the Jewish Museum in New York, regarded as the flagship of Jewish museums by virtue of its size, age, and professional standing. By virtue of these same qualities it has also served as a testing ground and bellwether for trends in the field. (The perhaps disproportionate focus of this article on the Jewish Museum reflects its legitimate prominence and also the fact that it has been most written about, having received considerable attention from writers and critics, in the general and the Jewish press.)

The decade of the '50s saw a critical change take place in the art world, the rise to dominance of avant-garde, abstract, "imageless" art. Dr. Stephen Kayser, the German-born and -educated curator of the Jewish Museum

\(^23\)Rosenberg, "Is There a Jewish Art?" p. 60.

from 1947 to 1961, who combined a serious interest in Jewish matters with training as an art historian, was not uninterested in these developments. With the help of art critic and Columbia professor Meyer Schapiro, in 1957 he mounted a show titled “New York School: Second Generation” that included such young—non-Jewish—artists as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. When Kayser left the museum in the early sixties, along with the existing board, his successors and the museum’s new board, which included a number of wealthy collectors, saw an opportunity to put the Jewish museum on the art world map. At the time, the more established museums were not able to react quickly to the frenetic developments then taking place in the studios of young artists downtown, and “the Jewish,” as it came to be known, moved to fill this gap. With the board now led by wealthy art patrons Albert and Vera List (who donated an annex to the museum that opened in 1963), and with the administration of the Jewish Theological Seminary—the museum’s sponsor—largely paralyzed by an attitude of ambivalence toward the museum, there followed close to a decade in which the Jewish aspect of the museum was downgraded and the museum made a name for itself with shows of pop and op art, Dada, and hard-edged abstractions.

The director appointed to succeed Kayser in 1962, Alan Solomon, a talented professional but a man who apparently lacked a knowledge of and interest in Jewish art, advanced the argument that Jewish sponsorship of avant-garde art was in line with the general support by Jews of progressive causes and of significant cultural activities, and that by such support, Jews demonstrated their universalism. Sam Hunter, another highly regarded museum professional who succeeded Solomon in the mid-'60s, not only saw no conflict in the Jewish Museum featuring modern art, he saw it as an extension of the Jewish drive since the Enlightenment of seeking “full intellectual participation in Western culture.”

While these developments sent museum attendance soaring, they aroused fury and debate in the Jewish world. Leading the attack against the modern-art shows was Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, who believed the museum had “an obligation to the Jewish community,” which looked “to the Jewish Museum for guidance and instruction in ‘Jewish art,’ that is to say, Jewish ritual art.” She attributed the museum’s new path to indifference on the part of Seminary faculty, who “are not overly happy” but who “know well that Jewish art is not sufficiently important to fuss over,” and who were therefore willing to appease “contributors who are arty and would want to be ac-

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cepted by the Beautiful People of the Museum of Modern Art but can’t quite make it."  

Supporting the museum’s stance were Jewish art historians and critics like Alfred Werner who did not “believe that our Jewish Museum must be ‘all Jewish,’ any more than that Commentary need stick only to ‘Jewish’ topics.” Still, even the broad-minded Werner noted that “a Jewish Museum without discernible Jewish content and Jewish identification is a misnomer.”

Arthur A. Cohen, a scholar-writer who was equally at home with professors of Jewish studies and avant-garde artists, and who curated an exhibition on “The Hebrew Bible in Christian, Jewish and Muslim Art” for the museum in 1963, had no problem with modern art in a Jewish museum, seeing “the obligation of the humanist focus of Jewish tradition to endorse and support, without prejudice, the plastic articulation of the human spirit.” When, a few years later, the Seminary announced that, due to “exigent financial need,” the museum would discontinue its program of exhibiting contemporary art, Cohen took the museum to task in a lengthy article in the New York Times. After praising the museum for its “pioneering” involvement in the art of the ’60s, he condemned it for abandoning its “active support of the creative arts whatever their unrelatedness to Jewish interests, narrowly defined.” He also pointed out that if the museum “wants to be effectively Jewish, or effectively anything, it still has to spend considerable money” if it is to “make its program of Jewish exhibitions meaningful and dramatic.”

Art historian Avram Kampf, who in the mid-1970s would curate a major exhibition of modern art at the Jewish Museum, “The Jewish Experience in the Art of the 20th Century,” subscribed to Cohen’s view. He maintained that for the museum “to have followed its own specialized interests [in various aspects of Judaica] would not necessarily have meant abandoning the mainstream of contemporary art and life. On the contrary, a well-planned, carefully balanced program would have required keeping it open to the contemporary art world and at the same time broadening its own specialized field of interest.”

Jewish content was hardly lacking, it must be noted, even in this period of skewed priorities. Two shows that garnered large audiences and considerable press attention (though agreed to with much hesitation on the part of

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the board) were “The Lower East Side” (1966), a pioneering multimedia exhibition, and “Masada,” a dramatic presentation of archaeological finds, in 1967. In addition, the museum had maintained, since 1956, the Tobe Pascher Workshop, the only one of its kind, devoted exclusively to the creation and production of modern Jewish ceremonial art.

The debate over the place of modern art in the Jewish Museum was resolved programatically, if not in substance, in the early 1970s. By that time the New York art scene had changed, the new art was being shown everywhere, and “the Jewish” no longer had a special role to play. Also, in the early ’70s a self-study committee appointed by the JTS to determine the museum’s future concluded that, especially in light of its budget difficulties, it should henceforth emphasize its commitment to the Jewish community. Addressing that committee, Prof. Abraham Joshua Heschel (generally regarded as one of the Seminary faculty’s more knowledgeable and sympathetic advocates of the museum) saw a great future for the museum as “an inspiration to people all over America. It could be an instrument for saving our youth. It could show the beauty and meaning of Jewish life. People would come to understand that the Jewish Museum makes a real contribution to their existence.”

The decade of the 1970s, specifically from 1973 on, under director Joy Ungerleider, saw the museum return to an emphasis on “programs which explore the richness and diversity of Jewish life, culture, and history.” This approach was continued in the 1980s, under director Joan Rosenbaum, though there was apparent both a widening of subject matter and a subtle shift in emphasis. In a 1989 interview with the New York Times, director Rosenbaum indicated that she did not feel the museum should, on the one hand, “duplicate the Whitney or the Modern,” nor, on the other, should it limit itself to showing just Jewish artists—“they should exhibit everywhere.” Contemporary shows would continue to be important, she said, but her chief interest was in the context of art, the culture in which it is produced. “Because we’re a museum about culture, not just history or art,” she said, “we have the possibility of taking a very broad view. We can consider the political, art historical and societal aspects all at once. By looking at everything, you make Jewish culture more interesting to a wide audience.”

Several exhibitions mounted in the ’80s reflected this line of thought (see “Exhibitions,” below). That such an approach is not without risks, however, was noted in at least one critical response to an exhibition shown early in 1990 at the Jewish Museum, “War, Resistance and Politics: Dusseldorf

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32Minutes of Museum Study Committee, Apr. 19, 1971, mimeo.
33Jewish Museum press release.
Artists 1910–1945” (organized by the Stadtmuseum Dusseldorf). New York Times critic Michael Brenson found it “problematic,” not because the majority of the artists represented were not Jews, but because the show had “no clear sense of whether this is cultural history, an art exhibition or a show about German artists and Jews. . . . At the end of the show, there is a sense that the Dusseldorf avant-garde, which is promoted as the subject of the show, was only interesting to the museum insofar as it produced artists whose progressive politics helped them appreciate the nightmare of the Jews. . . . The exhibition underlines a fundamental conflict within the museum. Can it be both a far-ranging cultural and historical institution of real artistic scope and an institution in which only a special culture and history are served?35

In fairness to the Jewish Museum, it should be noted that even as it has been willing to take risks in putting on controversial or difficult shows, it has also not neglected its basic mandate. In the same spring 1990 season, the museum opened an ethnographic exhibition—one brought over from the Israel Museum in Jerusalem—that was unequivocally “Jewish.” “In the Court of the Sultan: Sephardi Jews of the Ottoman Empire” displayed several hundred artifacts in appropriate settings to depict the life of Jews in a particular period and part of the world. Not surprisingly, the show evoked no controversy and only positive notices.

It seems likely that the issue of universalism vs. particularism will continue to be problematic for Jewish museums, precisely because it reflects the tensions and confusion inherent in modern Jewish life. The continuing challenge will be to strike just the right balance, to do justice to both aspects.

**Purpose**

Behind the debates over what type of art to show and how to balance Jewish and general content lies the more fundamental question of the museum’s basic goal or mission. Should it seek to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, with as broad a range of subject matter as possible, or should it focus its efforts more narrowly? In the 1960s, Avram Kampf criticized the Jewish Museum and its sponsor, the Jewish Theological Seminary, for failure to exert leadership within its own justifiable domain: by providing guidance on synagogue art and architecture, by carrying out a serious program of research and publications on its own collection, by encouraging students to engage in scholarship on Jewish art, by encouraging artists who wanted to draw on Jewish sources for their work.36 In the 1970s, Tom Freudenheim deplored the continuing failure of the Seminary

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and the museum to encourage scholarly study and publication on its collections.37

At the time of the modern-art crisis, A.J. Heschel proposed an openly didactic role for the museum, urging it to seek “ways of teaching Jewish values in a visual manner.”38 A similar position was articulated more recently by Byron Sherwin, vice-president for academic affairs of Chicago’s Spertus College. In an impassioned address to the 1989 annual meeting of the Conference of American Jewish Museums, Sherwin rejected the view that the museum is for entertainment, or passive “voyeuristic” pleasure, and proposed that its aim should be the “transmission of the constitutive values of the Jewish people. . . . The notion of art for art’s sake, the separation of aesthetics from ethics, is outside the pale of the Jewish vocabulary.”

Sherwin also criticized efforts to emulate the major art museums and called for resisting pressures from boards to do so. In the belief that Jewish museums have “a crucial role to play as learning resource centers,” particularly for the unaffiliated, he said that the challenge for museums is to translate Jewish value-concepts into a visual medium . . . to translate “our auditory, literary tradition into a didactic, visual, participatory means of presentation.” As for the museum’s potential audience, Sherwin contended that “our subject matter and the manner in which we present it must define who our audiences are, rather than the converse. . . .” A museum can appeal to diverse constituencies by mounting exhibits with “multileveled and multivalent appeal . . . interpreted differently to a variety of different audiences . . . with the learning tools needed to interpret it. . . .”39

Not all museum professionals subscribe to Sherwin’s view, and those who are sympathetic to it point to difficulties of implementation—the fact that it is simply easier to teach about history and culture than “values” in the museum setting, using art and objects. In examining museum activity, it becomes clear that decisions about emphasis and focus are as much a reflection of real-world constraints as of ideology: the availability of works of art or objects relevant to a particular subject; the means to purchase art or objects or even to foot the bills of a loan exhibition—shipping, insurance, installation, and the like. In the nature of things, a museum’s character also reflects the influence of its major supporters and the pressure to attract donors in a highly competitive situation.

It is the case, too, that Jewish museum professionals tend not to be Jewish scholars or rabbis or teachers but art historians or anthropologists, who may or may not be religiously observant or Jewishly knowledgeable and who have a strong commitment to the museums as general cultural institu-

tions as well as Jewish ones. In general, the people associated with Jewish museums (lay as well as professional) do not see themselves as parochial, but as serving the broader community, making a contribution to the cultural life of the community as a whole and, at the same time, serving a public-relations function for Jews and Judaism. Not insignificantly, it is on the basis of its broad cultural role that the museum can attract essential funding from non-Jewish sources.

On some level, Jewish museums in 1990 were still grappling with the questions raised in the 1960s. After the Jewish Museum decided to concentrate on its Jewish program, Tom Freudenheim, at the time director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, could claim that "the recent shift in the Museum's position is still not all that clear, because there remains a very evident inability to decide what wants emphasis in its presentation: art, Judaica, history, ethnology, archaeology (not that these are mutually exclusive)." Some 25 years later, writing in response to an article in *Moment* magazine provocatively titled "Why Are Jewish Museums So Boring?" Freudenheim maintained that "a major problem facing the Jewish museums is that they are probably not certain what kind of museum they are trying to be."

Perhaps Freudenheim is chasing an illusory goal. Jewish museums mirror the conceptions of their times about the nature of Jewishness—conceptions that are far more complex in the late 20th century than they were a century earlier. Sociologist Samuel Heilman has noted that "the meaning of being Jewish continues to undergo transformations—a fact that will undoubtedly make nearly impossible any sort of static and universally agreed upon definition." This means that museums will vary in their goals, programs, and emphases. Freudenheim himself noted that "one generally agreed-upon mission would [not] serve all Jewish museums. Each has an array of different factors to consider, and each would presumably have a different series of goals."

In reality, this is precisely what has been happening. New York's Jewish Museum, for a variety of cogent reasons, feels that it must compete on a high artistic level in order merely to be visible. The Skirball Museum in Los Angeles and the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia are emphasizing American Jewish history and life. Uri Herscher, Hebrew Union College executive vice-president, explained that the Skirball shares with other museums a basic premise, "that we have a very rich

heritage that needs to be transmitted to the total community—the people in the street beyond the Jewish community,” but his point of departure—his shaping conception—differs: “In the last 50 years, Jews have had emphasized in their lives two vivid events: the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. The glorious story of American Jewish life has essentially been left untold. I think it’s time to emphasize a story which has been essentially positive and joyful.”45 Contrast this with the position of museums “devoted to celebrating the vitality and creativity of 20th-century European Jewish civilization . . . and the crucial lessons of the Holocaust which strove to consume it.”46

Clearly there are different impetuses at work: to “convert” Jews—particularly the most distant—to their heritage; to educate non-Jews about Jews; to inspire the already committed; to preserve the past, but not for its own sake. The early Jewish museum was bent on preserving the Jewish material heritage. Today’s museum has added to this mission the task of preserving Jews, of bringing them face to face with multiple facets of Jewish life that will somehow arouse feelings of identification. Thus, while the contemporary Jewish museum has not, at least officially, abandoned any of the traditional museum activities, there has been a definite shift in emphasis and a resulting fluidity and flexibility in the way it approaches its task.

OVERVIEW OF MUSEUMS

In 1950, as noted earlier, only two major Jewish museums were in existence in the United States—the Jewish Museum in New York and the Hebrew Union College Museum in Cincinnati (reorganized in 1972 as the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles). The first new institution of the postwar years was the B’nai B’rith Klutznick Museum, established in Washington, D.C., in 1957, first as an Exhibit Hall and renamed a museum in 1976. The decade of the 1960s saw the founding of the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Oakland (later Berkeley), California, and the Spertus Museum of Judaica in Chicago, Illinois; the decade of the ’70s, the opening of Yeshiva University Museum in New York and the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia; the decade of the ’80s, the creation of the San Francisco Jewish Community Museum and the Regional Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in Jackson, Miss. The decade of the ’90s is slated to witness the opening of A Living Memorial to the Holocaust—Jewish Heritage Museum in New York, the Holocaust Museum in Wash-

46A Living Memorial to the Holocaust–Museum of Jewish Heritage, pamphlet, p. 2.
ington, D.C., and undoubtedly others as yet unidentified at the time of this writing.

Smaller museums or galleries, usually associated with synagogues, are scattered all over the country. Three of the oldest and most highly regarded are in New York City: Temple Emanu-El, Central Synagogue, and Park Avenue Synagogue. Others of note are in Richmond, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Denver, and Lawrence, Long Island, to cite but a few. There is a respected museum on the premises of the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, N.Y., and several art galleries in Jewish community centers. The first museum devoted specifically to the Holocaust opened in 1963 (the Martyrs Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust in Los Angeles) and was virtually alone until the mid-1970s, when there began an eruption of Holocaust commemoration projects, many of them presenting visual exhibits as part of their activities.  

Although no exact count is possible, at the beginning of 1990, there were in the United States at least 60 institutions under Jewish auspices presenting exhibitions of Jewish materials. In addition, one could mention the general and university museums that have collections of Judaica or Bible-related archaeology—such as those at Harvard or the University of Pennsylvania—or whose subject matter relates to Jews. An example of the latter is the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York, which opened in 1988 as a project of the nonprofit Lower East Side Historical Conservancy. In its exhibits, Jews figure prominently but not exclusively. While all these institutions are deserving of inclusion, the present study is limited primarily to the members of the Council of American Jewish Museums (CAJM).

It is, of course, somewhat misleading to lump all the museums together as a group. The differences between them are considerable. The genre includes, at one end of the spectrum, the Jewish Museum of New York, which occupies its own six-story building, has a staff of over 40 full-time employees (plus part-timers), and a budget of over $4 million a year, and whose true peers, in many respects, are the general art or history museums of similar size. At the other end of the spectrum are galleries whose facilities consist of no more than a few display cases in a synagogue lobby, one or two part-time staffers, and budgets of a few thousand dollars.

Still, all the museums meet established criteria, have common purposes, engage in similar activities, and confront the same types of problems. It was...
for this reason that CAJM was organized, in 1977, with these stated goals: “to facilitate communication between institutions through bi-annual meetings and occasional publications . . . ; maintain professional standards and a code of ethics for Jewish museum programs, operations, and personnel; strengthen advocacy for Jewish museums by promoting their work as major Jewish cultural resources; and coordinate cooperative projects.”

CAJM is administered by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, whose headquarters are in New York City. The foundation itself was created by the Council of Jewish Federations and is supported by federations and by independent fund raising.

Apart from differences in age, size, sponsorship, and physical facilities, the museums all have distinct institutional personalities. These reflect their origins and history, their physical and social settings, the emphases they place on different activities, and perhaps most significantly, the influence of the personalities who have shaped them.

Some museums began their existence with a collection; some with an idea around which relevant objects were acquired. In both instances, the origins are themselves chapters of social history that shed light on the interests, mores, and concerns of American Jews in different periods.

The Jewish Museum and the Skirball were “unplanned” museums, that is, their parent institutions found themselves recipients of valuable objects donated by important supporters. These collections, which were placed in the libraries of the respective schools, in the care of the library directors, attracted additional gifts over the years. As the collections became larger, separate museum facilities were established. The Spertus Museum originated with the collection of Maurice Spertus, and became part of Chicago’s College of Jewish Studies, subsequently renamed the Spertus College of Judaica.

At its founding, the B’nai B’rith Klutznick Museum (originally Exhibit Hall) sought to reflect “the philosophy and program of its parent organization,” and was “devoted to telling the story of American Jewry’s contribution to society.” For its inaugural exhibition, it borrowed such items as the original correspondence between the president of Newport, Rhode Island’s Touro Synagogue and George Washington and the first Hebrew book published in North America, in 1735. Eventually it acquired its own fine collection. The Magnes Museum in Berkeley grew out of the mission of one man—its director, Seymour Fromer—and a group of dedicated supporters, to preserve the heritage and history of the Jews of the West. Both museums eventually acquired or built up collections of their own and branched out into other areas of interest besides their original ones.

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49 See Greenwald, “Jewish Museums—United States,” for individual museum profiles.
Yeshiva University Museum was instituted as part of a master plan for university expansion, under the leadership of then president Samuel Belkin. With the backing of art patrons Ludwig and Erica Jesselson and under the guidance of art historians Karl Katz and Rachel Wischnitzer, the museum originally consisted of a permanent exhibition of specially commissioned synagogue models with accompanying slide and film presentations on the synagogue and Jewish history. Beginning with director Sylvia Herskowitz in 1975–76, the museum’s concept changed to one of loan exhibitions arranged by guest curators. Soon the museum began to build up its own collection, based on earlier gifts to the university and augmented by new ones, and to offer a varied program of changing exhibitions. The National Museum of American Jewish History, which opened in the year of the Bicentennial, identifies itself as a history, not an art, museum, though art works are included in its collections and exhibitions. The museum was initiated by members of Philadelphia’s historic Mikveh Israel Congregation, which erected a building on Independence Mall to house both the museum and the synagogue.

The Mizel Museum in Denver, the Plotkin Museum in Phoenix, and the Fenster Museum in Tulsa were the creations of determined individuals who saw a need in their communities and had the drive and persistence to bring their dreams to fruition.

Among the factors that help to shape an institution’s character and success, some are purely matters of geography or environment. The Jewish museums in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York have potentially large audiences, but must work hard to draw them in: local Jews are widely spread out and may have to travel a considerable distance; tourists have limited time and a wide range of attractions to choose from. By contrast, in smaller cities, Jewish museums may be among the chief cultural draws listed for tourists.

Within a city itself, location is a significant factor. In New York, the Jewish Museum occupies its own free-standing edifice, a handsome and distinctive structure in an affluent neighborhood, the portion of upper Fifth Avenue known as “museum mile.” As a result, the museum is viewed as one of many cultural attractions in New York, one that can be included easily in a tourist’s itinerary. The planned Living Memorial to the Holocaust–Museum of Jewish Heritage will be in one of New York’s prime tourist areas, Battery Park, overlooking New York harbor and the Statue of Liberty. The National Museum of American Jewish History, too, is situated in a high-traffic tourist area in Philadelphia, near the Liberty Bell. Yeshiva University Museum, by contrast, has had to overcome the handicap of its physical location in the racially mixed and relatively inaccessible upper Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights. Because the loca-
tion undoubtedly discourages casual, drop-in visitors, the museum staff has concentrated efforts on attracting organized group visits, by adults and children alike, most of whom reach the campus in chartered buses.

Similarly, the Skirball Museum had been located in an "undesirable" neighborhood of Los Angeles; this was scheduled to change, however, with the move, in the early 1990s, to a new home in the Hebrew Union College Skirball Cultural Center, a $40-million complex on a 15-acre site, designed by noted architect Moshe Safdie, located midway between the Westside and San Fernando Valley—and adjacent to the new J. Paul Getty museum. Here the Skirball would be closer to the centers of Jewish population in Los Angeles as well as in a more desirable and accessible location for attracting visitors at large.

Of the seven charter, or founding, members of CAJM, the Magnes Museum in Berkeley and the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia are organized as independent, nonprofit institutions. One, B'naï B'rith Klutznick, is sponsored by a national organization, and four are under the auspices of institutions of higher Jewish learning: the Jewish Museum, New York (Jewish Theological Seminary); Yeshiva University Museum, New York (Yeshiva University); Skirball Museum, Los Angeles, with branches in Cincinnati and New York (Hebrew Union College); and Spertus Museum, Chicago (Spertus College of Judaica). Two museums recently elevated to general membership status in the council are synagoguesponsored: the Fenster Museum of Jewish Art, Tulsa; and the Temple Museum of Religious Art, Cleveland. Among the associate members of the council, 2 are branches of the Skirball; 2 are historical-society galleries; 1 is a Holocaust memorial and museum combined; 2 are galleries situated in Jewish community centers; 1 is a gallery located in a home for senior citizens; and 15 are connected with synagogues (some are community museums simply located on synagogue premises).

**Collections**

The collections in Jewish museums consist primarily of works of art and Judaica. The latter has been defined as creations that "serve a purpose connected with Judaism as a way of life," or as "anything used by Jews for a religious purpose or having definite Jewish associations." Generally, Judaica is understood to be art and objects created for ritual and ceremonial

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50Stephen S. Kayser, ed., *Jewish Ceremonial Art* (Philadelphia, 1955), introd., pp. 9-18. This definition "excludes creations by Jewish artists which are detached from Jewish objectives, but includes works which serve a Jewish purpose even though their makers were not Jewish: a situation quite common in western Europe before the Emancipation." Ibid.

purposes, in the synagogue and the home, but it includes ethnographic materials as well. The body of works includes objects made of silver and other metals, wood, textiles, glass, and ceramics. Objects range from Torah ornaments to arks and ark curtains to Sabbath tableware to circumcision and burial implements, clothing, amulets, and furniture.

Of the major collections that began to be assembled in the 1850s in Europe, a number remained on that continent; others eventually found their way to Palestine (later Israel) and America. That of German businessman Salli Kirschstein was purchased for the Hebrew Union College in 1925. The collection of a Turkish antiquities and rug dealer, Ephraim Benguiat (according to Roth "uneven," but including "some fine pieces"), was exhibited at the World Columbia Exposition in Chicago in 1892–93, was subsequently placed with the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., and was acquired in 1925 for the Jewish Theological Seminary by its then president, Cyrus Adler. That formed the nucleus of the Jewish Museum’s collection until it was vastly augmented by another collector, Harry G. Friedman, whose donations, beginning in 1941, ultimately totaled more than 5,000 objects, amounting to about 50 percent of the museum’s holdings. The medal collection of Samuel Friedenberg was another important addition to the museum’s holdings.

Smaller museums, too, have been created on the basis of significant gifts of Judaica. The collection of Judge Irving L. Lehman (called "small but exquisite" by Roth) was given to Congregation Emanu-El in New York City; and Cecil Roth’s own collection, particularly notable for illuminated ketubot, was donated to Beth Tzedec Congregation in Toronto and forms the basis of a substantial museum there.

The Klutznick Museum received the Joseph B. and Olyn Horwitz collection of antique ceremonial art and the Kanof collection of contemporary ritual objects created by noted silversmiths Ludwig Wolpert and Moshe Zabari. The museum at the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, New York, was initiated with the gift of Ralph and Leuba Baum of a collection of over 800 ceremonial objects and rare textiles.

Over the centuries, much Judaica of value was lost or destroyed as a result of pogroms, expulsions, and migrations. In the last century, experts believe that, through lack of suitable outlets, or through lack of interest or ignorance of the value of objects, much Judaica was melted down or simply discarded (Friedman’s collection for the Jewish Museum, for example, was

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54Roth, ibid., p. 311.
acquired primarily by combing through secondhand stores in search of cast-off objects). In recent decades, people have become more aware of the significance of family possessions and have come to appreciate them for both their historical and possible monetary worth.

The collections in American Jewish museums are also linked to the fate of the Jews of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1939, for example, the Jewish community of Danzig sent its collection of Jewish folk art to the Jewish Museum for temporary safekeeping, not knowing that the “loan” would turn out to be permanent. Although considerable Judaica was destroyed during the Holocaust, more than originally thought survived. There was, for example, the Jewish Museum of Prague, where the Nazis stockpiled the confiscated treasures of Czech Jewry, unknowingly creating what is now one of the world’s largest and finest Judaica collections in the world. In 1947, world Jewish organizations formed the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR), to allocate property confiscated by the Nazis and recovered by the U.S. military government in Germany. Where possible, property was restored to original owners. Unidentifiable or unclaimed items were distributed to appropriate homes. Some 4,000 ritual objects were given to the Bezalel Museum (now the Israel Museum) in Jerusalem and smaller assemblages to Yeshiva University, Hebrew Union College, and other institutions in the United States.

The market in Judaica is an active one, with dealers, private collectors, and museum curators always on the lookout for undiscovered treasures. The entry of the major auction houses into the Judaica field in the early ’80s served to raise interest and the level of knowledge about the value of the items. At the same time, growing affluence and the trend to viewing art objects as good financial investments have stimulated activity. The supply of Judaica from the 19th and 20th centuries is regarded as plentiful, while objects from the 18th and 17th centuries are rare and from earlier periods rarer still, a fact that has inspired a small industry in fakes and forgeries. All museums are interested in augmenting their collections of older Judaica; at the same time, they have also begun to collect contemporary Judaica of high quality, which they believe will become the “precious legacy” for future generations. (See “Exhibitions,” below.)

Next in importance to ceremonial objects in Jewish museum collections is fine art—paintings, sculpture, and graphics—with the emphasis on works by Jewish artists, certainly including those from Israel. As discussed in the section “What Is a Jewish Museum?” the determination of what is suitable for a Jewish museum is always problematic and very much subject to

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5 An exhibition of several hundred items from the museum was organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service in 1983. See David Altschuler, ed., The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections (New York, 1983).
individual curatorial taste. Archaeological artifacts from the Middle East are another interest of Jewish museums, though only the Skirball and the Jewish Museum have significant collections in this area. Because the subject of “life in Bible times” is a popular one in museum education programs (see “Education and Public Programs,” below), even smaller museums seek to acquire or borrow small collections of biblical antiquities. Art and memorabilia relating to the Holocaust are also sought after by the general Jewish museums, with a number offering educational programs on the Holocaust. Other collecting interests are folk art; photographs; coins and medals; manuscripts and rare books; historical documents; and, increasingly in recent years, items of ethnographic interest, such as clothing and jewelry, household objects, letters, posters and programs, stamps and coins, newspapers and magazines—anything illustrative of the material culture of Jews in a particular time and place.

The newest area of collecting interest is objects relating to the experience of Jews in America. Traditionally, this has been the purview of historical societies, though their focus has been on documents and archives. Museums have come to recognize the need to preserve a much broader variety of memorabilia and artifacts and even speak of adding to their staffs professional ethnographers and anthropologists who are trained in the collection and use of such material.

The HUC Skirball Museum launched “Project Americana” in the mid-'80s, “an intensive collecting effort, . . . to acquire . . . objects of Jewish history and celebration, memorabilia from everyday life, folk art and fine art. Included are items made and used in America and those few cherished things new immigrants were able to bring to the United States.” With the help of “a nation-wide network of volunteers,” the project had, by early 1990, netted some 1,000 objects, ranging from “Russian samovars to wedding gowns, tools and advertising signs of artisans and tradesmen, mementos of a variety of communal organizations, architectural elements from former synagogues, folk art, paintings and sculpture.”

Two other museums that have mounted nationwide campaigns for collectible objects relating to American Jewish life are A Living Memorial to the Holocaust–Jewish Heritage Museum in New York and the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. This has led to complaints from local historical societies and other museums that may have been less aggressive in their efforts and fear losing out on objects of local significance. David Altshuler, director of the Jewish Heritage Museum, maintains that while competition undoubtedly exists, there are more than enough objects to go around and that the mere act of “beating the bushes”

36“Skirball Museum Description,” mimeo, n.d.
elicits new material. Relying almost entirely on donations and long-term loans, that museum managed to collect some 5,000 artifacts in the space of two years.

Altshuler's reassurances notwithstanding, most experts agree that the proliferation of museums has inevitably increased competition for desirable art and objects in all subject areas. Moreover, Jewish museums are not alone in their desire for Jewish collectibles. They face competition as well from general art museums, local history societies, and private collectors.

Museum professionals are divided over possible solutions to the problem of competition. Some believe museums should specialize rather than attempt to be encyclopedic and thus avoid overlapping with sister institutions; others are inclined to accept the judgment of "free market" forces; still others urge cooperation and collaboration, with museums joining forces, for example, to purchase expensive works of art which can then be shared. Yet another proposal envisions museums compiling and sharing inventories of their collections for increased loan exhibition purposes, thereby reducing the pressure to collect, itself made more costly because of storage and preservation requirements. One consequence of present trends may well be the creation of more museums like the San Francisco Jewish Community Museum, which focuses on exhibitions and does not seek to build up its own permanent collections.

All this comes in a period when acquisition of art has become more difficult for economic reasons. As art critic Robert Hughes explained it, "American museums have in fact been hit with a double whammy: art inflation and a punitive rewriting, in 1986, of the U.S. tax laws, which destroyed most incentives for the rich to give art away. Tax exemption through donations was the basis on which American museums grew, and now it is all gone, with predictably catastrophic results for the future." To deal with this new situation, curators have to put enormous time into wooing potential donors, often settling for long-term loans rather than outright gifts. Another strategy is "deaccessioning," a controversial process in which works regarded as less valuable or not in line with a museum's areas of specialization are sold and the proceeds used to acquire more desirable items.

Other issues for museums in relation to collections are improving the preservation of collections and the development of a standardized, computerized catalog of Judaica. Committees of the Council of American Jewish Museums are at work on both areas.

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Exhibitions

Exhibitions are the heart of museum activity—the way in which works of art, ceremonial objects, artifacts from daily life, printed materials, and media are arranged and presented so as to convey a meaningful story or message, however concrete or abstract that may be.

Typically, museums offer between two and six changing exhibitions in the course of a year. A museum may create an exhibition from scratch, utilizing materials in its own collection and/or borrowed items, or it may show a loan exhibition originating with other museums or free-lance exhibition arrangers. The cost of originating an exhibit can be at least partially recouped through lending it to other museums. Conversely, the borrower museum can offer its audience changing exhibitions at less cost and effort by bringing in shows created elsewhere, and can "personalize" them through adding relevant objects from its own collection and through the related public programs it offers. The sources for traveling exhibitions include not only the American Jewish museums but the major museums in Israel as well as general museums, the Smithsonian Institution, and private exhibition organizers. With all this, museum professionals see a need for the development of more traveling exhibitions on Jewish themes, particularly those suitable for smaller exhibition spaces.

The choice of subjects itself reflects a museum's particular interests and what it perceives will appeal to a substantial audience. The calendar for just one year's schedule in one museum illustrates the remarkable range of subject matter that can be found. The Spertus Museum, Chicago, offered the following in the period September 1989 to September 1990: "Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome" (198 color photographs provided by the International Catacomb Society augmented by artifacts from the museum's collection and loaned objects); "The Role and Activities of Jewish Immigrant Self-Help Societies in Chicago" (organized by the Chicago Jewish Historical Society, utilizing photographs, documents, and artifacts); "Agam in Chicago: The First 25 Years, 1953-1978" (49 works by Israeli artist Yaacov Agam from local collections); "Heritage and Mission: Jewish Vienna 1295-1935" (photopanels; cosponsored by the City of Vienna and Vienna's Jewish Welcome Service); "The Legacy of Bezalel" and "Recent Bezalel Graduates" (works by early and contemporary students of Jerusalem's famed art school; many from the collection of the Mizel Museum); "Unknown Secrets: Art and the Rosenberg Era" (60 works of art, historical and contemporary, relating to the Rosenberg espionage trial; organized by the Rosenberg Era Art Project); "Jew," a video installation by Pier Marton featuring taped interviews with young Jews born in Europe and now living in America; "Witness to History: The Jewish Poster 1770–1985" (50 posters created in Europe, the United States, and Israel, organized by the Magnes Museum).
In light of the broad and flexible way in which Jewish museums have come to define themselves, it is not surprising that the subjects of exhibitions are so varied. At the same time, certain themes and even the same exhibitions appear in the calendars of more than one institution. This reflects the timeliness of certain topics (the anniversary of the French Revolution, or the anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain are examples) but also certain practical exigencies, such as availability of desired materials and costs. Generally, in planning a schedule of exhibitions, an attempt is made to achieve a balance of Judaica, fine arts, ethnography, and cultural or historical subjects, as well as to include material appealing to various segments of its audience (Israel and Holocaust, for example).

Categories frequently overlap, however, particularly as the subjects selected are of a broad cultural nature. Shows like “Ashkenaz: The German Jewish Heritage” (Yeshiva University Museum, 1986–87) and “Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy” (Jewish Museum, 1989–90) incorporated fine art, ceremonial objects, manuscripts and books, folk art, photographs, furnishings, and artifacts from daily life—as well as music and videos—to depict the history and lives of those communities. Both exhibitions were considered ground-breaking and drew high critical praise as well as large audiences.

Joan Rosenbaum, director of the Jewish Museum in New York, sees this eclectic approach—the combining of art and cultural artifacts in what she calls “contextual exhibitions”—as the hallmark of the Jewish museum. The focus of an exhibition has to be “the objects,” she maintains, since that is what distinguishes museums from other cultural enterprises, but the objects must be presented in such a way as to engage the viewer’s interest and emotions, which means providing a broader context for the objects.

An examination of the exhibition schedules of Jewish museums in the late 1980s reveals a high interest in ethnographic/cultural exhibits, i.e., the life of particular Jewish communities, though most are more modest in scope than the two already mentioned. Some smaller exhibitions that traveled to cities other than where they originated were “Memories of Alsace: Folk Art and Jewish Tradition” (organized by the Jewish Museum, 1989); “The Jews of Kaifeng: Chinese Jews on the Banks of the Yellow River” (organized by Beth Hatefutsoth, Israel, 1989, and circulated by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture); and “Embellished Lives: Customs and Costumes of the Jewish Communities of Turkey” (organized by the Magnes Museum, 1989).

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58 A highly acclaimed exhibition of this sort, which was organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service in 1983, was “The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections.” Largely because of space considerations, the Jewish Museum in New York was the only Jewish museum able to present the exhibition. It was shown in a number of other cities in general museums.

59 Glueck, “The Jewish Museum Reaches Out.”
"My Beloved Is Mine: Jewish Sephardic and Oriental Wedding Traditions" was shown at the Mizel Museum in Denver in early 1990—using artifacts on loan from the Magnes Museum in Berkeley. In the same period, the Jewish Museum opened "The Jews of the Ottoman Empire," which originated with the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Cultural/historical exhibitions based on photographs—often with accompanying artifacts—are frequently shown, often originated by organizations or independent exhibition arrangers. They are especially sought by smaller museums because they usually require less exhibition space and smaller costs for transportation, insurance, and security arrangements than exhibits of art and artifacts. One recent and much praised example in this category was "A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present" (Jewish Museum, 1988), which took three years to prepare and included among its more than 400 photographs many brought over by recent émigrés from the USSR.


In keeping with its special interest in history and issue-oriented topics, the Jewish Museum mounted an extremely ambitious, nontraditional exhibition in "The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth and Justice" (1987), which went beyond merely documenting the story of Alfred Dreyfus's trial for treason and the public turmoil surrounding it but sought to explore the deeper issues raised by the affair, especially the debate among leading intellectuals and artists of the day. The exhibition drew on the voluminous materials produced during that period, using some 500 drawings, photographs, engravings, cartoons, posters, newspapers, illustrated magazines, and films. An indication of the serious attention paid to the exhibition was the publication in the New York Times of three separate articles on it: a "pre-story" by Elie Wiesel and two lengthy and laudatory reviews by art critics John Gross and John Russell.⁶⁰

On a much smaller scale, but similar in seeking to depict a historic event...

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in its broader cultural context, was Yeshiva University Museum’s "Medieval Justice: The Trial of the Jews of Trent" (1989). The exhibition was built around a 15th-century manuscript describing a famous ritual-libel case in the Tirol region, and used an array of medieval art works to illuminate the historical, political, economic, and social forces of the period.


While the larger museums, with their greater resources and bigger professional staffs, have the edge in conceiving and implementing large-scale or complex exhibitions, they have no monopoly on imagination or resourcefulness. There was, for example, the exhibition mounted by Congregation Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives Trust in Richmond, Virginia, "Let Them Build Me a Sanctuary" (1989), to commemorate the bicentennial of the two founding, later merged, congregations that support the museum. Models were commissioned of the various buildings occupied over the years by the congregations; these were displayed with ritual objects and prayer books used in different periods, with explanations of changes in philosophy and practice that had taken place over the years. The Mizel Museum in Denver created "It Shall Be a Crown Upon Your Head: Headwear Symbolism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" (1986-87), using loan items from other Jewish museums, the Smithsonian, and local Christian and Muslim clergy. Cleveland’s Temple Museum of Religious Art presented "The Loom and the Cloth" (1988), bringing together 200 antique works of fabric—ceremonial and costume—from more than 25 museums and private collections around the world—considered a remarkable feat for a museum of its size.

A significant general trend in Jewish museums is the development of the permanent "core" exhibition, one that provides visitors with a basic orientation to Judaism and Jewish history, alongside the temporary changing exhibits on various topics. The new emphasis on such exhibits stems from the recognition that visitors to many Jewish museums may well emerge from the experience as unenlightened about basic Jewish matters as when they entered. It may also reflect the makeup of today’s museum audience: fewer Jewishly knowledgeable Jews and more non-Jews.

The National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia opened its core exhibition, which covers the period from the arrival of the first Jews in North America to the present, early in 1990. The plans for the
Jewish Museum—New York’s expanded quarters, to open in 1992, call for devoting half the gallery space to the permanent exhibit, which will incorporate many more items from the museum’s holdings than were ever previously displayed, as well as radio and TV materials and access by means of computers to additional information. The exhibit will create “a total environment rather than just a show of art and artifacts,” museum director Rosenbaum told an interviewer. In Los Angeles, the new Skirball Museum, too, will devote half its space to the core exhibit, which will emphasize three areas: the beliefs and practices of Judaism; American Jewish life; and the creative spirit—Jewish contributions to the arts and other areas. The museum is to feature interactive, interpretive exhibits, that is, “the objects will be presented in environments that provide a context for understanding the lives of the people who made or used them.”

In the area of Jewish ceremonial art, two trends are discernible. One is a growing emphasis on the contemporary, with museums seeking to contribute to the esthetic enhancement of Jewish life by encouraging artists to create, and the public to acquire, new ceremonial art. There is some tension here, however, because works that are salable do not necessarily meet museum standards of artistic quality. Therefore, to avoid serving merely as venues for “crafts shows”—or even to give that impression—museums may stage juried or invitational exhibitions, in which the exhibited items are not for sale until the exhibition closes; at the same time, a wider assortment of more “commercial” objects may be offered for sale in the museum gift shop. In their role of catalyst, museum curators may seek out gifted metalsmiths, ceramicists, and other artists (non-Jewish as well as Jewish) and commission specific works, when necessary providing guidance on ritual requirements. The B’nai B’rith Klutznick Museum in Washington, the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, the Magnes Museum in Berkeley, and the Fred Wolf Gallery of the Philadelphia JCC Klein Branch have been particularly active in this area. A few museums have experimented with artist-in-residence programs, but have ultimately been forced to give them up for lack of space. The most extensive and long-lasting such effort was the Tobe Pascher Workshop at the Jewish Museum—New York, established for the leading Jewish metalsmith Ludwig Wolpert, which functioned from 1956 until the late 1980s.

The second trend is that of participatory exhibitions. The Skirball Museum pioneered the Purim mask exhibition—inviting both prominent artists and local Jewish schoolchildren to create masks of the chief characters in

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the Purim story, which were exhibited in the galleries. The San Francisco Jewish Community Museum, which had earlier sponsored a sukkah design contest for artists, undertook a similar Purim mask project. In addition, it originated “Hanukkah: Family Celebrations in Art,” in which six families created distinctive Hanukkah settings, ranging from the whimsical (a giant dreidel) to the traditional (a replica of a shtetl room).

In the area of fine art, exhibits often focus on one artist or a group of artists, but there has also been an effort to organize shows around a theme. The Jewish Museum’s “The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1905–1945” (1985) explored the experience of émigré Jewish artists—“the first generation of Jews to become professional visual artists in the West.”63 “Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912–1928,” which originated with the Israel Museum and traveled to several American Jewish museums, documented a short-lived movement in which Jewish artists sought to blend traditional folk imagery with avant-garde trends afoot in Russia at the time of the revolution. The exhibition featured more than 140 original works by Marc Chagall, El Lissitzky, Issachar Ryback, Nathan Altman, and other artists, many of whom became leading figures in 20th-century art. The Klutznick Museum’s “Continuing Witness: Contemporary Images by Sons and Daughters of Holocaust Survivors” (1989) featured paintings, sculpture, photographs, and prints by a dozen artists. And the Jewish Museum organized “In the Shadow of Conflict: Israeli Art, 1980–1989” (1989), the varied responses of 18 Israeli artists to the political and social situation in Israel.

Contemporary art remains problematic but is a central interest of most museum professionals and many museum supporters. Since the audience for Jewish museums includes people interested in more conventional, less challenging art as well as admirers of modern art, curators and directors are hard-pressed to satisfy all tastes and must engage in a delicate balancing act. They see their first obligation as assuring high quality in the art they exhibit, regardless of content. At the same time, they are equally obligated to demonstrate a Jewish justification for what they show.

It would obviously be impossible within the scope of this article to detail the artists whose works have been exhibited in Jewish museums, but here, too, a few examples offer an indication of the range and variety. In the spring of 1989, the Skirball Museum exhibited some recent gifts of 20th-century art: “The Scroll,” by Los Angeles artist Ruth Weisberg, a 94-foot drawing with color wash, wrapped around the gallery, in which the artist depicted significant life-cycle events from her own experience as an American Jewish woman, incorporating scriptural and rabbinic motifs; works by

63Kenneth E. Silver, curator, in his introduction to the exhibition catalog.
six Israeli artists who work in various styles; 15 paintings by Max Band, a “School of Paris” artist who fled Nazi Europe and settled in Southern California; and “Black Forest VII,” by Los Angeles artist Susan Moss, painted in memory of her grandparents who died in the Holocaust. In an exhibit considered groundbreaking, “Lights/Orot,” at Yeshiva University Museum (1988), artists from MIT’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies used electronic media to explore the Jewish concept of light in ritual; in 1989–90, the same museum’s calendar included a show of paintings by Janet Shafner, “Modern Interpretations of Biblical Themes”; “Paintings for the Book of Psalms,” by Raphael Abecassis; “A Graphic Midrash,” by Alice Zlotnick; “Photographic Constructions” by Alan Rutberg; and “Photographs of the Jewish Cemetery in Venice,” by Driscoll Devins and Arrigo Mamone. In an effort to make contemporary art more accessible, Spertus Museum—which has a permanent gallery for changing exhibitions of contemporary art—tries to present an accompanying videotape of the artist discussing his work generally and its Jewish significance.

Smaller institutions, too, are interested in contemporary art. Two examples are the Starr Gallery of the Jewish Community Center in Newton, Mass., which commissions works related to Hanukkah for an annual show, and the Philadelphia Museum of Judaica at Congregation Rodeph Shalom, which, in a gallery 14 by 45 feet in size, offers three exhibitions a year and prides itself on seeking out and showing promising new artists.

What lies ahead in the exhibition field is undoubtedly more emphasis on the cultures of recent Jewish immigrants to the United States, those from the USSR, Iran, South Africa, Israel, and Eastern Europe, as well as the folklore and anthropology of contemporary American Jewish life. Curators will be seeking out neglected Jewish artists of the past and will continue to encourage contemporary art on Jewish themes.

TECHNIQUES

In the way it exhibits art, objects, and artifacts, the museum tells its story—and there are many ways to do it. The traditional static displays of objects in glass cases, with short accompanying explanatory labels, may be judged boring by all but the avid enthusiast. By contrast, the use of multimedia—recorded sound, audiovisuals, computer displays, and the like—may be regarded as distracting and inauthentic by the purist.

The approach to exhibition in museums generally has been changing dramatically, in an effort to make museums more interesting, to reach a wider public, and to communicate their subject more effectively. This devel-
opment has given new prominence to exhibition designers and to museum educators, who are taking a greater role in creating and shaping exhibitions. "Multi-experiential" activities, in imitation of such popular public attractions as Walt Disney World—are one element, one that is not necessarily favored by more traditional museum professionals. Another element is simply displaying fewer objects but presenting them in a contextual setting and with more explanations, perhaps using computers or videotapes.

In a way, the American Jewish museums have come relatively late to this approach. The Museum of the Diaspora—Beth Hatefutsoth, in Tel Aviv, which opened in 1978, showed how captivating Jewish history and culture could be when depicted in imaginative displays (though strictly speaking, Beth Hatefutsoth is not a museum, because it displays replicas, not real objects). And the Frankfurt (West Germany) Jewish Museum, which opened in 1988, "uses interactive 'theater-like installations' in its presentation of [Judaica]. Four exhibits present life-size tableaus corresponding to four 'stations in the life of the individual Jew,' namely, brit milah (circumcision), bar mitzvah, wedding ceremony and chevra kadisha (burial society)."

Quite clearly, it is easier for museums just starting to follow the new methods. The new Skirball Museum plans to present objects "in environments that provide a context for understanding the lives of the people who made or used them," presumably not unlike what is described for Frankfurt. New York’s Living Memorial to the Holocaust—Jewish Heritage Museum will offer a sophisticated interactive computer encyclopedia and a variety of multimedia displays.

**Education and Public Programs**

The growing emphasis by museums on their role as educational and cultural centers has led to increased emphasis on public programs of all sorts—programs that appeal to the general public and thus are often funded by local and state arts and cultural commissions. Programs geared specifically to schoolchildren are the largest component in this sphere but others are gaining in prominence—tailored for adult audiences, for children (not in school groups), and for families. The latter category includes programs for preschool children accompanied by one or more adults as well as activities for family groups with younger and older children. The rationale for such programs, as expressed by Jewish Museum education director Judith

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Siegel, is that with “fewer and fewer ‘Jewish neighborhoods’ with visible, tangible Jewish culture,” with large numbers of Jews un schooled or with only minimal Jewish education, the Jewish museums can help to fill the “experiential gap,” using, not texts and literature, but the arts and related activities.\(^6\)

One sign of the seriousness being accorded to the education function is the growing willingness to include education professionals on the museum exhibition committee, helping to decide what will be exhibited, the exhibition design, scheduling, and so on—no longer brought in after the fact, but viewed as an integral part of the process.

Museum educators start off with the art and artifacts in the museum—whether in the permanent collection or a temporary exhibition—and use them as catalysts or springboards for exploring the wider historical and cultural contexts from which they come. The “Golem” exhibition at the Jewish Museum, for example, was accompanied by ten public programs, offered over the course of several months: a dramatic reading of an Israeli play in which an enactment of the Golem legend takes place in a concentration camp; a panel of noted writers discussing “Golems in Contemporary Literature”; a lecture on “Jewish Mysticism and the Golem”; a concert featuring two world premieres of works on the theme of the Golem; showings of two films based on the Golem legend; and a series of talks by artists whose works were featured in the exhibition.

When the Skirball Museum presented “Memories of Alsace,” it arranged three related programs: a lecture on the history of the Jews of Alsace; an “Alsace Family Festival,” including music, folk dancing, crafts, gallery games, and food; and a slide-illustrated symposium exploring the merger of French folk traditions with Jewish ritual. Mizel Museum offered three programs in conjunction with the exhibit “My Beloved Is Mine: Jewish Sephardic and Oriental Wedding Traditions”: one, personal reminiscences by Sephardic and Oriental members of Denver’s Jewish community; a lecture by a Yeshiva University professor on “Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewry: One People, Diverse Traditions”; and a lecture on “Women’s Traditions in the Sephardic and Oriental Worlds: Greece, Turkey & Morocco.”

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

To provide the necessary interpretive functions, museums have built up staffs of professional educators and cadres of volunteer docents. To illustrate the growth that has taken place: the education staff of New York’s

Jewish Museum increased from three full-timers in 1979 to seven or eight a decade later, plus part-time teachers. In 1989–90, with over 25,000 children a year attending its programs, the museum had pretty much reached the limits of the numbers it could accommodate.

Jewish museums have been remarkably successful in creating programs that are responsive to state curriculum needs and selling them to local schools—public, private, and parochial schools—ironically, somewhat more successfully than to Jewish schools. In many instances, the number of non-Jewish students visiting the museums far exceeds that of Jewish students. (At New York's Jewish Museum, the proportions are 70 percent and 30 percent; at Chicago's Spertus Museum, over half are non-Jews; at Los Angeles's Skirball Museum, the numbers are evenly divided.) Several factors are responsible for this situation. One is the museum's view of itself as a general cultural institution that makes Jewish life and culture accessible to a wide public. Another is the fact that there simply are, in a given city, more non-Jewish schoolchildren available. Another factor is logistical: Jewish schools may be at too great a distance; the crammed schedule of the day school and the short (and inconvenient) hours of the supplementary school, as well as the costs involved, make trips of any kind difficult. Against this, public schools seek out enrichment programs, respond eagerly to programs that supplement the curriculum and are effective with students, and are willing to make the trip and pay the necessary fees. There is, too, the very practical consideration that general funding sources, such as city and state arts commissions, look favorably on ethnic institutions that offer programs to the general public.

Yet another contributing factor is the often poor or nonexistent relationship that exists between the museum staff and the Jewish education establishment in a given locale, the latter often failing to recognize the educational potential of the museum. As a result, Jewish museum staffs have expended far more effort in working with state and local education authorities to develop "curriculum-based" programs of interest to the public schools than in cultivating the Jewish schools. This anomalous situation is frustrating to Jewish museum professionals themselves, who have begun to address the problem, at least in their professional meetings and in some practical steps.

Typically, classes are held in the mornings, weekdays and Sundays, before the museum opens to the general public. The programs utilize creative writing, art workshops, games and puzzles, and other activities in addition to viewing objects in the galleries.

Archaeology is the subject with the widest appeal, particularly for public schools, because it meshes easily with the curriculum, especially in social studies, e.g., life in ancient times, desert life, ancient Greece and Rome, the history of the alphabet, and so on. School programs can be built around
permanent or temporary exhibits, varying the objects that are studied. Two examples from the 1989–90 school program guide of New York's Jewish Museum are “The Currency Connection” (grades 3–4), in which coins are used to learn about the social, economic, and political aspects of ancient societies, and “Through the City Gates” (grades 5–6), in which students learn about urban design, occupations, and consumer goods in ancient times by examining artifacts.

Skirball Museum's M.U.S.E. (Museum Utilization for Student Education) program offers, for grades 5–7, one or two classroom sessions and a two-hour museum visit in which students take part in “a simulated ‘dig’ for replicas of ancient artifacts and a museum hunt for the real artifacts they resemble.”

The Spertus Museum's Artifact Center, which opened in 1989, is a complete facility devoted to archaeology and the ancient Middle East. The center includes a 30-foot “tell,” or archaeological mound, where “artifacts” are discovered; a marketplace, with stalls of artisans and merchants; an Israelite house equipped with suitable props, where preschoolers and kindergarteners can engage in imaginative play; and a workshop where visitors take part in crafts, dramatics, and other creative activities.

The Holocaust is another popular topic for programs. The Jewish Museum offers, for grades 7–12, “Learning About the Holocaust Through Art,” which uses works on current display supplemented by video and slide presentations. In 1989–90, students could view “Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy” to “witness the devastating destruction of Italian Jewry, and come to an understanding of the possible consequences of stereotyping, racial prejudice and hatred.”

“Cultural Diversity and Pluralism” is another broad rubric for educational programs of interest to the public schools. These center on Jewish holidays—Hanukkah being especially popular, on Jewish ethnography, or on a general cultural topic with universal application or implications. The Skirball Museum M.U.S.E. program offers two “interactive classroom kits and museum experiences” in this area: (1) “Multi-Cultural Celebrations” for grades 4–6 provides a “classroom session, in which students explore hatboxes containing objects from and information on five celebrations in five different cultures,” followed by “a 2½-hour Museum visit in which students learn about some Jewish celebrations and the objects which make them special. This visit also includes “a crafts project and a Museum hunt,” followed by “an optional follow-up in the classroom: creating your own cultural museum.” For grades 6–9, a program of 5–8 sessions on “Immigration and Family History” provides materials for students to learn about a German-Jewish family and a Polish-Jewish family and to research their own family histories.

American Jewish history also offers material for intercultural learning.
At the Mizel Museum, Denver, students visiting the exhibit on “Pioneering Jews of Colorado” were shown around by guides in period costume portraying prominent historical figures. Children were later given an opportunity to dress up in costume and act out the characters.

The area of Judaica is also covered in education programs. In conjunction with its exhibit “Serendipity—Treasures from the Yeshiva University Museum Collection,” children visiting that museum carried out a variety of “gallery searches”: name the animals used as symbols on Jewish ceremonial objects; find all the objects in the exhibition that include columns as a decorative motif; draw objects in the exhibition that have crowns; find “what’s missing” in drawings of various objects. At Mizel Museum, Denver, in connection with an exhibit on Torah ornaments, children took part in a “Scribe’s Workshop,” where they learned hand lettering and made Torah breastplates and wimples.

Publications are an important aspect of public education. Recent years have seen a proliferation of exhibition catalogs, often containing scholarly essays and extensive illustration. Well-produced catalogs add considerably to the understanding of the background and context of an exhibition, as well as being available long after the exhibition itself has been dismantled.

Funding

From the Jewish communal perspective, it would certainly seem desirable to determine how much money is actually being spent on Jewish museums and where the funds come from. However, as of the beginning of 1991, no systematic data were available on the financing of these institutions. In the absence of official documentation, some data were obtained informally for the seven “charter” members of the Council of American Jewish Museums, generally regarded as the major Jewish museums in the country.

It is well known—as well as the subject of some controversy—that vast sums of money are being invested in the creation of Holocaust museums: close to $150 million for the Washington Holocaust Memorial Museum; $50 million for the Museum of Tolerance of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, and $100 million for A Living Memorial to the Holocaust–Jewish Heritage Museum in New York, not to mention the numerous smaller institutions in this category.

Among the general Jewish museums, both Hebrew Union College’s Skirball Museum, in Los Angeles, and New York’s Jewish Museum were in the midst of $50-million capital campaigns. The former was for a new building

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in a new location; the latter, for renovation of the existing structure and an addition that would double the museum's available exhibition space, as well as to establish an endowment fund. (For the two-year duration of construction, the museum set up temporary shop in the building of the New-York Historical Society, where it would continue to offer exhibitions and programs.) All these capital programs were being funded by intensive fund-raising campaigns carried out among both Jews and non-Jews, with many notable gifts from the latter category.

Capital campaigns are dramatic in scope but they are time-limited. An attempt was made to determine the amount of money expended on a continuing basis from the recent operating budgets of the seven major museums. While all seven museums willingly provided recent budget figures, it became clear that any direct comparison is not valid and may even be misleading. One reason is the use of different accounting methods; another is the extremely complicated relationships that exist between the sponsored museums and their parent bodies. Nevertheless, having offered these qualifications, the figures supplied by the museums provide a crude but legitimate barometer of the sums of money involved: Jewish Museum, New York (1988–89), $4 million; National Museum of American Jewish History (1989–90), $1.4 million; Yeshiva University Museum, New York (1989–90), $1.065 million; Skirball Museum, Los Angeles (1989–90), $786,000; Spertus Museum, Chicago (1989–90), $780,000; Magness Museum, Berkeley (1989–90), $579,000; B'nai B'rith Klutznick Museum, Washington (1990–91), $400,000. According to Morris Fred, director of the Spertus Museum and chairman of the Council of American Jewish Museums, these figures can be expected to rise in the early '90s, not only due to normal increases but because a number of museums have undertaken costly installations of permanent core exhibitions.

To meet their annual budgets, Jewish museums put together a basket of funds from a variety of sources. Two generalizations can be made about this: one, the "mix" of funding sources is different for each institution; and two, for a given institution, the funding mix varies from year to year. For example, the proportion of government grants may be higher in a particular year, in consequence of a generous NEH grant, but lower the next year when smaller, or no, grants are received—and so on in each category of funding.

The more fortunate museums are those under institutional auspices, since at least a portion of their budgets is guaranteed. Among the sponsored institutions, four receive a substantial proportion of their support (40–50 percent) from their parent agencies: Yeshiva (Yeshiva University); Skirball (Hebrew Union College); Spertus (Spertus College of Judaica); and Klutznick (B'nai B'rith). (This support is in addition to actual housing, which is not included in the budget, though general maintenance costs are included.)
The Jewish Museum receives what amounts to token monetary support—less than 3 percent—from its sponsor, the Jewish Theological Seminary, but is housed "free" in the Seminary-owned museum edifice and is provided with certain administrative and consultative services.  

Some museums have major individual benefactors or foundations that provide endowments or continuing support. The Spertus Museum, Magnes Museum, Klutznick Museum, and Yeshiva University Museum have endowment funds that cover somewhere between 15 and 20 percent of their budgets.

All museums, even those with sponsors and/or endowments, must look to outside sources for some portion of their support. These include: individual donors (gifts, memberships, fund-raising events); corporations; foundations; government agencies; and Jewish federations. Program and admission fees and sales from museum shops also provide income, the latter, in some instances, a not insignificant amount.

Overall, Jewish communal funds in the form of allocations from federations account for only a small portion of museum funding. Among the major institutions, the Magnes Museum receives the most in direct federation support—over 11 percent of its budget, from the San Francisco and Bay Area federations and smaller area federations. The new museum in that area, the San Francisco Jewish Community Museum (1984), is unique in having been founded by a local federation; it began with an endowment of $1.75 million that the federation helped to raise and is housed in the federation building. (Among smaller museums, the Mizel Museum in Denver receives a federation allocation amounting to roughly 15 percent of its $100–120,000 budget.) Direct allocations are only one form of federation support. The Spertus Museum is an indirect recipient of federation funding, through the Chicago federation’s support of the Spertus College of Judaica. Similarly, indirect support is given when a gallery of Jewish art is housed in a federation-supported Jewish community center. Federations also make special project grants (e.g., for a particular exhibit), and they make allocations to the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, which administers the Council of American Jewish Museums (annual budget of approximately $30,000 in direct costs).

Unlike the other institutional museums, the Jewish Museum is not located at the site of the parent institution, nor has it ever been an integral part of its teaching or research programs. Although JTS representatives sit on the museum board and faculty members serve as advisors, the museum carries out its own fund raising and in recent years has gained increasing autonomy in its management.

In 1988, some 112 out of 179 Jewish community federations made allocations to the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, which in turn allocated funds to other cultural agencies, including: American Jewish Historical Society, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Histadruth Ivrith of America, Jewish Publication Society, and Leo Baeck Institute.
One reason for limited federation funding is the reluctance to support institutions that are under denominational auspices. Another is the perception that most museums have parent bodies caring for them and thus need less support. Primarily, though, it is widely accepted that in the competition for "the Jewish dollar," human-service needs should be given priority over art and culture. At a conference on "Art and Identity in the American Jewish Community," Phyllis Cook, executive director of the Jewish Community Endowment Fund of the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation, suggested that the community must be educated "to see the human-service aspect of arts and culture" and that "funding culture becomes a matter, not of altruism, but of self-interest."

In seeking support from individuals, Jewish museums confront an otherwise positive phenomenon, namely, the growing number of Jews serving on boards of art museums and other "high culture" institutions. An illustration of the change in this area is New York's most prestigious WASP bastion, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which had a few Jews on its board since early in the century (e.g., Solomon Guggenheim, Benjamin Altman, Robert Lehman), but they reportedly felt "isolated and vulnerable." In the 1970s and 1980s, less out of "any devotion to ethnic egalitarianism than of a cold-eyed obeisance to economic realities," the number of Jews increased dramatically, so that by the mid-1980s, "roughly one-fifth of the Met's board was Jewish."

What effect the gravitation of wealthy Jewish patrons of the arts toward the most prestigious institutions has on Jewish museums is not entirely clear. Some maintain that it has reduced the pool of prospective supporters; others that the supply of well-to-do Jews who have an interest in the arts is probably greater at present than at any previous period and that there is enough to go around. Some museum advocates believe that the new situation is actually more promising for the development of a truly committed leadership, of donors who want—in the words of Jewish Museum benefactor Albert A. List—"to link their interest in art and their bond with Judaism." He and his wife, List said, at the dedication of the Jewish Museum's List Wing in 1963, believed that their involvement with the museum "might in some way help us to articulate our understanding of art as essentially spiritual."

The swelling number of foundations, in particular Jewish family founda-
tions, and the rise in support for the arts by corporations have made these bodies important targets of fund raising. Government, too, has assumed increasing importance in museum financing, with funds coming from arts agencies at all levels. The Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency, offers general operating and program support, with a special interest in such areas as preservation of collections. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts are considered major patrons, funding exhibitions and a variety of museum activities. State and local arts agencies underwrite specific projects, such as after-school art classes, lectures, and film series.

CONCLUSION

The burgeoning of Jewish museums is one of the success stories of American Jewish life. The museums testify to the integration of American Jews into the fabric of American culture, even as they assert a separate and proud Jewish identity. Within the variegated mosaic that is the American Jewish community, the exhibition galleries of a Jewish museum are probably the only place where one can see Hassidic and Orthodox Jews, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and “just Jews,” Ashkenazim and Sephardim, liberals and conservatives, recent arrivals and longtime Americans mingling freely, viewing and appreciating art and objects that transcend differences in belief and life-style. At the same time, as many Jews become more distant from their roots and heritage—growing numbers of them becoming, through intermarriage, part of extensive family networks of non-Jews—museums serve as a neutral, socially acceptable meetingplace in which people of all backgrounds can be exposed to the richness and variety of the Jewish heritage. At their best, museums offer the means to discover or rediscover aspects of the Jewish experience that “create that interaction between visitor and object that sparks a sense of connectedness and understanding.”

Not that everyone is satisfied with the way Jewish museums are functioning. As noted above, they have been criticized for not taking their Jewish mission seriously enough, for failing to develop scholarship in Jewish art, for not teaching Jewish values, for failing to define their purpose adequately.

At the same time, they have been faulted for being boring, or for presenting only the gloomy side of the Jewish experience. Responding to the latter charges, Tom Freudenheim—who is widely respected for his professional attainments in the broader museum world and for his devotion to the cause

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"Siegel, “Education: Its New Place in American Museums.”"
of Jewish museums—says that “most museums are boring,” not just Jewish ones, and that he has seen “exceptionally engaging material in [Jewish] museums, and lots of boring things elsewhere.” He agrees, though, that “there is a great deal more creative work to be done in Jewish museums,” if they are to attract more visitors and make their message more engaging. What is needed, he maintains, is “far greater levels of financial support from the American Jewish community . . . and encouragement for museum personnel and for people wanting to enter the field as their life’s work . . . for creative ideas . . . and experimentation.”

One step aimed at correcting some of the existing shortcomings was the establishment in 1988 of a joint program of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Jewish Museum, the Mannekin Institute, which offers graduate courses in Jewish art and internships at the Jewish Museum and JTS Library. Although the institute does not confer degrees, the decision to offer specialized training for graduate students enrolled in other institutions clearly underscores both the growing interest in the field and the need to upgrade professional preparation.

The problems of self-definition and constant need to attract an audience are serious but not daunting. The people working in Jewish museums are capable, committed individuals who will struggle through to solutions. The one dark cloud hanging over the future of Jewish museums is the financial one—especially in a period of economic uncertainty—for only with adequate support can they ensure their survival and fulfill their promise.

COUNCIL OF AMERICAN JEWISH MUSEUMS
(as of March 1991)

Charter Members

B'nai B'rith Klutznick Museum
1640 Rhode Island Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 857-6583
Mr. Michael Neiditch, Acting Director

Hebrew Union College–Skirball Museum
3077 University Mall
Los Angeles, CA 90007
(213) 749-3424
Ms. Nancy Berman, Director

The Jewish Museum
1865 Broadway
New York, NY 10023
(212) 399-3344
Ms. Joan Rosenbaum, Director

Judah L. Magnes Museum
2911 Russell Street
Berkeley, CA 94705
(415) 849-2710
Mr. Seymour Fromer, Director

National Museum of American Jewish History
55 North Fifth Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106
(215) 923-3811
Ms. Margo Bloom, Director

Spertus Museum of Judaica
618 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60605
(312) 922-9012
Dr. Morris Fred, Director

Yeshiva University Museum
2520 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10033
(212) 960-5390
Ms. Sylvia Herskowitz, Director

General Members

Fenster (Gershon and Rebecca) Museum of Jewish Art
1223 East 17th Place
Tulsa, OK 74120
(918) 582-3732

Mizel Museum of Judaica
560 South Monaco Parkway
Denver, CO 80224
(303) 333-4156
Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, Director

Temple Museum of Religious Art
University Circle at Silver Park
Cleveland, OH 44106
(216) 791-7755
Ms. Claudia Fechter, Director
Associate Members

A Living Memorial to the Holocaust—Museum of Jewish Heritage
342 Madison Avenue, Suite 706
New York, NY 10173
(212) 687-9141
Dr. David Altshuler, Director

American Jewish Historical Society
2 Thornton Road
Waltham, MA 02154
(617) 891-8110
Mr. Bernard Wax, Director

Benjamin & Dr. Edgar R. Cofeld
Judaic Museum of Temple Beth Zion
805 Delaware Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14209-2095
(716) 886-7150
Mr. Mortimer Spiller, Director

Beth Tzedec Museum
1700 Bathurst Street
Toronto, Ontario M5P 3K3
Canada
(416) 781-3511
Ms. Judith Cardozo, Curator

Central Synagogue
123 East 55th Street
New York, NY 10022
(212) 838-5122
Ms. Cissy Grossman, Curator

Cleveland College of Jewish Studies
26500 Shaker Boulevard
Beachwood, OH 44122-7197
(216) 464-4050
Ms. Leah Kaplan-Samuels, Program Director

Congregation Beth Ahabah
Museum & Archives Trust
109 West Franklin Street
Richmond, VA 23233
(804) 353-2668
Ms. Cynthia Krumbein, Director

Elizabeth S. Fine Museum of the Congregation Emanu-El
Arguello Blvd. & Lake Street
San Francisco, CA 94118
(415) 751-2535
Ms. JoAnne Levy
Chairman, Museum Committee

Fred Wolf, Jr. Gallery
JCC of Greater Philadelphia
Jamison Ave. & Red Lion Rd.
Philadelphia, PA 19116
(215) 698-7300
Ms. Phyllis E. Gerson Apparies, Director

Judaica Museum: Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale
5961 Palisade Avenue
Bronx, NY 10471
(212) 548-1006
Ms. Karen S. Franklin, Director

Hebrew Union College-JIR
Skirball Museum Cincinnati Branch
3101 Clifton Avenue
Cincinnati, OH 45220-2488
(513) 221-1875
Ms. Marilyn F. Reichert, Director
Hebrew Union College–JIR
Joseph Gallery
One West 4th Street
New York, NY 10012-1186
(212) 674-5300
Ms. Linda Robinson, Director
  of College & Community Relations

The Jewish Community Museum
121 Steuart Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
(415) 543-8880
Ms. Linda Steinberg, Director

Jewish Historical Society of Maryland, Inc.
The Jewish Heritage Center
15 Lloyd Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
(301) 732-6400
Mr. Bernard Fishman, Director

Jewish War Veterans
National Museum, Archives and Library
1811 R Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 265-6280
Ms. Leslie M. Freudenheim, Curator

Kanner Heritage Museum
3560 Bathurst Street
North York, Ontario M6A 2E1
(416) 789-5131
Ms. Pat Dickinson, Coordinator

May Museum of Judaica
Temple Israel
140 Central Avenue
Lawrence, NY 11559
(516) 239-1140
Ms. Fredda Harris, Cochairman

Museum of the Congregation
Emanu-El of the City of New York
One East 65th Street
New York, NY 10021-6596
(212) 744-1400
Ms. Reva Kirschberg, Director

Park Avenue Synagogue
50 East 87th Street
New York, NY 10028
(212) 369-2600
Ms. Ita Aber, Curator

Philadelphia Museum of Judaica
at Congregation Rodeph Shalom
615 North Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123
(215) 627-6747
Ms. Joan C. Sall, Curator
Mailing Address:
112 Wetherill Road
Cheltenham, PA 19012
(215) 635-1322

Joseph Baron Museum
Cong. Emanu-El B’ne Jeshurun
2419 E. Kenwood Blvd.
P.O. Box 11698
Milwaukee, WI 53211
(414) 964-4100
Ms. Annette Hirsh,
  Chair, Museum Committee
Plotkin Judaica Museum of Greater Phoenix  
3310 N. Tenth Avenue  
Phoenix, AZ 85013  
Mrs. Sylvia Plotkin, Director

Rabbi Frank F. Rosenthal Memorial Museum-Temple Anshe Shalom  
20820 Western Avenue  
Olympia Fields, IL 60461  
(708) 748-6010  
Mr. Jeffery N. Mina  
Chairperson of Museum Committee

Starr Gallery  
Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center  
333 Nahanton Street  
Newton Centre, MA 02159  
(617) 965-7410 x 168  
Ms. Diane Palley, Gallery Director

Temple Judea Museum of Keneseth Israel  
York Road & Township Line  
Elkins Park, PA 19117  
(215) 887-8700  
Ms. Judith B. Maslin, Director