

“Marilyn Monroe with a Sheitel”

Fictional Jewish Existence

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Introduction

What does it mean to be Jewish in America? This paper discusses aspects of Jewish life, the quest for a meaningful identity and a safe place, real or virtual, for living as Jews. American Jewish culture mirrors a more general American ethos that is founded upon narratives about identity and national destiny. These narratives often turn out to be fictions that conflict with measurable reality. Yet, they seem to be more powerful in shaping a collective sense of identity. These conflicts often bring forth characterizations of inconsistencies, absurdities, confusion and delusion in the Jewish experience. Reviewing American Jewish texts of fiction and non fiction, I aim to bring out the fictional Jewish existence. By fictional I mean as opposed to real, sound, sustainable, completely honest and free of contradictions. In other words, one might say, as fictional as the normal human condition is.

Contributing to said characteristics are tensions between ideals and disillusion, between contradicting cultural pulls, and between collective aspirations in opposition to personal comfort. They seem to be compounded in American-Jewish life, where one is free to choose whatever mix of American and Jewish identities. This raises a dilemma, what is a Jewish success or a failure in America? If success is measured by the degree a Jewish person or a community are integrated in the American society, accepted, contributing, achieving high social, professional or political status, then the extreme logical conclusion would be that a total assimilation be the ultimate success. But this cannot be because it means the end of Jewishness, therefore, from this point of view, a Jewish failure. If it was not hard enough to be, as the cliché went, both a Jew and a man, perhaps it is more challenging to be a Jew and American. This may lead to a Jewishness

that seems at times unreal, concocted, and to slogans such as American is the new Jewish, or English is the new Yiddish. While one is free to choose American and English over Jewish and Yiddish, naming one as the other appears to be self-deceiving, an extreme case of fictional Jewishness. In the texts examined here I look for similar signs, if not as severe, of Jewish identity that is shaky, unreliable, questionable.

As is usually the case in discussions of a social group, the part of the group that is in most contact with other groups, or with the general society, is the sector that gets the most attention and tends to drive the discussion about the group and to define it. In this respect the American Jewish Reform movement was dominant from the 1920s to the 1980s. Looking at the history of the Reform movement, and at Jewish demographic data published by PEW in 2013, one may conclude that Jewish denominational splits, and the “classic Reform” brand of Jewishness in particular, contributed to a sense of lack of authenticity, reliability and sustainability in American Jewishness. In 1930s Germany, expectations of Reform Jews to be accepted as German patriots were savagely broken. In America, the formulation of Reform Judaism with an expectation that it would become a religion for all Americans, including non-Jews, turned out to be a utopia as well. While this ideology contributed to the spiritual well-being of about two generations of its followers, there is a sense and evidence that it weakened the clarity and credibility of what it means to be Jewish and the durability of a Jewish collective identity.

What is Jewish, What is American?

Historically, the extent of freedom that Jewish immigrants to America enjoyed allowed them to evolve in ways that were unique to America. American Jews today are diverse, and continue to diversify in the ways by which they define their Jewishness, how

much and what kind of Judaism to mix in their American life. So much so that one may wonder, can Jewishness be taken seriously? Has it become a variety of American life styles to choose from, to suit one's comfort and taste? Similar divisions exist in American society about what it means to be American. The American ideal of equal opportunity is challenged by the real life of many if not most Americans, and remains a utopian fiction. Calls to improve equality of opportunities, by correcting a legislation that is not well balanced, are driven by an American ethos of fairness and the legacy of the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal", and the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". These calls are rejected by other Americans as socialist, un-American ideology. It would seem that the American Jewish combination might have produced a particular brand of Jewishness that celebrates the utopian, values a good image, drawn to what looks and sounds good, perhaps influenced by a culture that presumably invented factless advertising. The following personal anecdote may illustrate this point.

Before I get to contemporary sources that express the notion of fictional Jewish existence, I would like to share this personal experience and observation. There is a traditional Jewish prayer said after the Torah has been read and the scroll is placed back in the ark. In most congregations that I am familiar with it is sung with a soulful melody. The Hebrew to English transliteration might be this: "Hashivenu Hashem elecha venashuva, hadesh yamainu ke-kedem". It is a phrase from the Book of Lamentations, and its translation to King James English is this: "Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old." (Lamentations, KJV, 5:21). For a long time I had a habit of asking rabbis and scholars that I happened to come in contact with what was the period of "our days as of old" that he or she had in mind wishing to return to. I

found none of the answers to be conclusive or convincing. But there seemed to be a dividing line between American and Israeli answers. Israelis would attempt to locate a biblical period when the Jewish people lived in relative calm in the land of Israel, say, sometime in King Solomon era. Americans preferred the humanly unattainable, the abstract, fabled, such as the Garden of Eden.

Texts Overview

These are the texts examined in this paper which give me a sense of Jewish existence that seems ambivalent, paradoxical, ungrounded, unreliable. *The Jew of New York : a Historical Romance* by Ben Katchor (1998) ¹ is a graphic novel depicting Jewish life in nineteenth century New York. It conveys a yearning for a more authentic and safer Jewish communal life. *A Guide for the Perplexed* by Dara Horn (2013) ² is a novel about selective memory of history and about Jewish cultures that are both alike and different in various times and places. *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth (1969) ³ is about ethnic Jewish life with very little religion and abundance of anxiety referred to as “a Jewish joke” by Alex Portnoy. *The Diary of Anne Frank* has gained a central place in American culture and beyond. Its universal character and vague Jewishness are discussed here. *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth (2004) ⁴ is a “what if” novel that raises questions about the stability of American democracy and possible fragility of Jewish existence there. In a

¹ Katchor, Ben. *The Jew of New York : a Historical Romance*. New York: Pantheon, 1998. Print.

² Horn, Dara. *A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Norton, 2013. Kindle AZW file.

³ Roth, Philip. *Portnoy's Complaint*. 1969. New York: Vintage International, 1994. Print.

⁴ Roth, Philip. *The Plot Against America*. London: Vintage, 2004. Kindle AZW file.

similar vein, *Inequality for All*, a documentary film by Robert Reich (2013)¹, is the economist version of “The Plot Against America”, or rather an American Plot against its myth of equal opportunity for all, undermining American democracy.

Michael A. Meyer’s *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement* (1988)² is used here for a look at the history of the American Jewish Reform movement. Especially “classic Reform” which formulated a Jewish religion that is universally oriented and the sole distinction of Jews in America, denying ethnic or national aspects of Jewishness. Complementing this examination is Laurel Leff’s *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (2005)³. I also relate to The 2013 PEW survey of Jewish Americans⁴ that shows trends in Jewish identity, shifts from the center (Reform and Conservative) to, on the one hand, secular Jewish and non Jewish, and, on the other hand, to Orthodox and Modern Orthodox affiliations.

The Jew of New York and its interpretations

First example for this paper’s look at fictional Jewish existence is the graphic novel *The Jew of New York : a Historical Romance* by Ben Katchor (1998). It is styled as a comic strip, a fantasy, a farce, an elaborate Jewish joke. I read it as a compassionate critique of unsatisfactory diasporic Jewish life, a failure to find an authentic Jewish

¹ “Inequality for All : Bill Moyers interview of Robert Reich”. Online video clip. *Youtube*. Sep 20, 2013. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-rpkZe2OEo>>

² Meyer, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.

³ Leff, Laurel. *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print

⁴ “Video: ‘A Portrait of Jewish Americans Overview’”. Online video clip. *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*. 1 Oct. 2013. Web. 31 Dec. 2013. www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/video-a-portrait-of-jewish-americans-overview.

homeland in America, possibly tied to the inconclusive nature of the history of America itself, particularly with regard to the Native Americans.

Setting a framework of fiction within fiction, *The Jew of New York* opens with a theater staff meeting, planning the 1830 season's "Hebraic" comedy, an "Indian" play and a "Patriotic" play. The name of the comedy is also "The Jew of New York". The company's one Jew is the scenic decorator who is also assigned to choose the "Indian" play. He is quick to realize that "The Jew of New York" is a "thinly veiled burlesque of the life, to date, of Major Mordecai Noah" (Katchor, 4).

Thus, at the core of the fiction is an actual endeavor of Mordecai Manuel Noah that took place in 1825 and turned out to be a fleeting episode of Jewish quest for redemption. Noah, a successful New York Jewish writer, took upon himself a utopian proto Zionist initiative to establish an asylum for Jews of all nations at Grand Island, in upper New York state, to be named Ararat (the biblical resting place of Noah's ark after the deluge, where humanity and all living were rejuvenated).

The bizarre opening ceremony of Ararat that took place in Buffalo is described in the beginning of our novel, as a dream of Nathan Kishon who had been there: "A procession of military companies and Masonic groups followed by a figure in a judicial robe... the governor judge of Israel, Mordecai M. Noah." (2). Then we get a glimpse of the mixed Jewish-American nature of the project, which would be a "re-established government of the Jewish nation", "under the protection of the great American union" (11, 13). A corner stone was laid with Hebrew and English inscriptions (13). The initiative did not arouse much following, and after the opening ceremony Noah returned to New York city. Few Jews would be ready to leave their urban life and become

pioneers in the wilderness. Indeed, Noah had in mind a “refuge for downtrodden Jews of the earth” (12), rather than American Jews.

Another theme of *The Jew of New York* anchored on real cultural occurrence is the claim that the Native Americans were descendents of Jews, the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. This was written about since the 17th century and believed to be plausible by many, Christians and Jews, including Mordecai Noah. Two real seventeenth century Jewish figures are also mentioned in relation to this, Menasse Ben Israel and Montesinos. They advanced this notion as a sign of the coming messiah and the redemption of the Jewish people. In Noah’s time this could make a case for American Jews to feel “truly Americans”, the first to have settled there. Rachel Rubinstein’s *Members of the Tribe*¹ is a comprehensive research of this subject. She quotes Noah’s call to the Indians to join his initiative with “their brethren” the Jews (Rubinstein, 26) and makes this observation about the Jewish-American mixture of the Ararat project:

the paradoxes inherent in Ararat resulted in an un-reconciled tension between integration and separation, between his gestures toward the U.S. and the New York constitutions and the declaration of his and the Jews' independence from them. (33)

Such paradoxes seem to challenge American Jewry to this day.

The Indian Jewish connection is presented in the beginning of the novel with the farcical arrival of Nathan Kishon to New York. He is a Hebraic comedy and an Indian play in one. Having got used to dwelling among Indians in the wilderness, he goes to sleep on a

¹ Rubinstein, Rachel. *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2010. Print.

patch of grass in front of the hotel that he checked-in to. (Katchor, 3). At this point in the story we are introduced to a series of absurd events in abruptly changing scenes between New York, Philadelphia and Buffalo, in and out of the planned comedy. (4-9). These first few pages give a sense of the Jewish existence as a minority whose way of being is surreal, ungrounded. Jennifer Glaser, in a 2007 article “An Imaginary Ararat”¹ points out the images of the novel’s characters that are drawn on the opening cover pages. The names of the characters are written as on sheets of paper under their feet. Each paper seems to be perforated between the image and the name. It gives a sense of the unstable state of the characters, as if about to be detached and moved around like paper dolls.

Glaser’s article discusses the use of Yiddish phrases in the book and sees this as a creation of a virtual Jewish space, a home for Jewish readership: “*The Jew of New York* opens by imagining a Yiddish readership for the volume to come, the book’s title playfully transliterated in to the Hebrew characters in which Yiddish is written.” (Glaser, 156). She compares it to the concept of “Yiddishland” whose citizens are Yiddish speakers around the world, a concept written about by the historian Jeffrey Shandler in “Adventures in Yiddishland: Post vernacular Language & Culture”. (Glaser, 157-8). This represents a widespread view among Jews who see no need for a Jewish identity beyond a cultural sense of community. And, of course, many Jews do not agree with the necessity of that either. Some are content to be members of, say, the “community” of readers of the *New York Times*, a concept entertained by its publisher from 1935 to 1961, a Reform Jew who is discussed later. One might also see a parallel to this trend in the Jewish religious identity. Marah, a character in *The Jew of New York* says to a dance partner: “I’ve wasted

¹ Glaser, Jennifer. “An Imaginary Ararat: Jewish Bodies and Jewish Homelands in Ben Katchor’s *The Jew of New York*”. *MELUS* 32.3 (2007): 153-173. *Jstor*. Web. 22 Nov. 2013.

the last five years of my life dealing in religious articles. People today find spiritual solace in Ballroom Dancing.” (Katchor, 69). This is a hint of equivalency between religious affiliation and social recreation. It suggests a step further away from Jewish religion and culture, toward all-American social associations.

Jennifer Glaser’s article seems to project a decidedly a-Zionist outlook on Katchor’s novel. She writes:

in contrast to Israel - the other "imagined" homeland for the Jews - Yiddishland provides a space for secular diasporic Jews uncomfortable with grounding their Jewish identity on the land mapped out by the Zionist project in the Middle East. (Glaser 154).

According to Glaser’s reading of the novel -

Katchor most clearly offers his readers a finely-rendered Jewish space akin to the "Yiddishland" Shandler describes. Here, Katchor volunteers New York City as a model for a diasporic "groundedness," a place where the Wandering Jew can put down roots and find community (Glaser, 155).

I would offer an opposite reading of Katchor. I see little positive in the way his Jews of New York are described, far from a desirable model for a diasporic living. I also see in the novel suggestions of sympathy toward Zionism and hints of critical irony toward lovers of Zion who prefer a long distance relationship with the land. Among the novel’s Jewish characters are Isaac Azarael, “a middleman in the oriental button trade”, the aforementioned Kishon, a hired Kosher butcher who mixed Kosher with non-Kosher tongues, and the particularly sinister Mr. Abel Marah, an importer of religious artifacts and a runaway thief. Last but not least prominent is the fur trader with whom Kishon

spent five years in the woods, Moishe Ketzelsbord, named Maurice Cougar by the Indians. Ketzelsbord is a devoted admirer of Miss Patella, an actress who supposedly had starred in Mordecai Noah's play "She Would Be a Soldier" (14). Ketzelsbord's devotion to Patella remains distant. In the woods he adores her photos on theater bills that he collects, but would not go to see her live in the theater when he had a chance. This can be read as a critical parody of the remote attachment of Jewish people to the holy land. The name Patella has a resemblance to Palestine, and the name of the play she is associated with, "She Would Be a Soldier", is a hint to what the state of Israel was to become. When Ketzelsbord finally brings himself to see Patella in New York it is too late. He has lost his humanity in the wilderness and is turned into a museum piece.

Of interest here is also a settlement that Kishon and Ketzelsbord come upon in the woods. This is a community dedicated to the respiration of pure air, free of the torture of industrial culture and city dwelling. The name of the settlement is written on a sign with Hebrew letters: "New Afflatus". The Yiddish term Luft Gesheft comes to mind, meaning air business, an affair with no real substance, and Luftmensch, a man who lives "on air", that is, crazy entrepreneurial schemes and dreams.

Hardly a single admirable Jewish human being is found in the novel. Those who are not lunatics are busy with deceptions, exploitations and "Luft Gesheft". First among equals is the above mentioned Marah who steals Kishon's pelts by staging his own death. He assumes a new identity in London but devotedly observes the Jewish code of Shiva mourning after his own death, which left his wife widowed and his child fatherless (92). Jew haters are also given a stage here. The play within the novel is written and directed by an anti-Semite and it presents the Jews in worse light yet. The character of Major Noah

appears with an exaggerated stoop, and upon entering the stage, waves of bad smell of pickled herring are spread.

On the other hand there is another theatrical performance where Elim-Min-Nopee is presented as an authentic Native American and an authentic Israelite, spared of the predicament of “the Jews of the old world [who] appear to have been thoroughly corrupted by European culture and are Jews in name only” (59). This sounds like the classic Zionist view of the degraded character of Jewish life in Diaspora. Alas, the Elim-Min-Nopee performance is a charade put forth by another conniving New York Jew.

Still, among the despised and the wretched Jews, and in spite of the ridicule directed at him, Mordecai Noah stands out as a noble character. The “real Mordecai Noah” makes a final appearance in the novel and talks to the actor that portrays him in the play and to the anti-Semitic playwright. Noah seems as a gentleman who can take a joke. He points out evils, perhaps on a greater scale, that are not exclusively perpetrated by Jews: “Your Jew of New York could only exist on the stage alongside other stock comic figures – a malevolent Punchinello who walks abroad a-night to kill sick people and poison wells” (77). This may refer to the character Francis Oriole who schemes to make a fortune by installing chemicals in Lake Erie that would turn it to a lake of soda water, which would kill its natural habitat. He gets investment money from Jewish speculators and abandons them with the loss. (53,62,93).

Thus, Katchor gives us an elaborate cartoon, an empathic and critical parody of Jewish conduct and destiny that leave much to be desired. It has real references to Jewish aspirations for rootedness and spiritual ascent, and allusion to American culture with its drive for material success and unrealized ideals.

***A Guide for the Perplexed* : Re-interpreting the Past**

Dara Horn is one American Jewish writer who is not likely to refer to Israel the way Jennifer Glaser does (quoted above), as an imagined homeland mapped out by the Zionist project in the Middle East. Her novel *A Guide for the Perplexed* uses Hebrew phrases the same way *The Jew of New York* uses Yiddish, to give a sense of a shared connection that the author, the readers and the book's main characters have with Israel. An American Israeli hybridity is embodied in the book in the family of two American sisters Josie and Judith, Josie's Israeli husband Itamar and their six year old daughter Tali. Josie and Itamar are tied together in loving marriage and in their joint work on a revolutionary software that Josie had invented and named "Geniza". The software's intended function is to record and catalogue every event in everybody's life and retrieve it by demand, for the purpose of remembering and interpreting past occurrences and providing indications for the present and future.

The book's main theme is history and memory. Rather earnestly it presents situations of contradictory interpretations of past and present events, and helpful adaptations of notions that might be false. A brief commentary on the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers is mentioned as a positive example. It is presented as if spoken by Rambam, the twelfth century master of rational Judaism, author of the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Joseph reveals himself to his brothers who had maliciously sold him to be a slave in Egypt. He forgives and comforts them by offering a reinterpretation of their deed. He says it was ordained by God so that he would be able to save them and their father from starvation. (ch. 9). By analogy one could see here a forgiving view of changed interpretations of Judaism, even at the cost of adding well meaning falsehoods,

or, better said, inventions or fictions, if the cause is right. In a similar fashion a hateful relationship between the sisters Josie and Judith is turned around to be viewed in Tali's mind as a life story of consistent and mutual love, thanks to the final sacrifice that Judith found herself forced to commit in Cairo to save Josie. (ch. 13). The way Josie chooses to present the facts of that event enables Itamar to be reconciled with the love he had felt for Judith before he married Josie and, later, while Josie was in captivity presumed dead. Another example of false interpretation of reality is, of course, the video of Josie's faked hanging, which was received as an authentic evidence of her death.

The story of Josie, Itamar and Tali ends in a development along the line of American Israeli hybridity. The family moves to Israel after the catastrophe in Cairo and the passing of Josie's mother in America. Setting roots in Israel, Tali still explores in her mind, and by means of the "Geniza" software, scenes of her former life in America that have begun to fade.

Intertwined in Dara Horn's book is the true story of the discovery of the "Geniza" in Cairo, the dumping storage of Hebrew texts of all kinds in the Cairo synagogue, which existed over a period of more than 900 years. Solomon Schechter who extracted and analyzed much of its content was a rabbinic scholar of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At the time he was a "Reader in Rabbinics at Cambridge University's Faculty of Oriental Studies" (ch 1). We are also introduced to his twin brother Srulik who went a separate way from their birthplace in Rumania to Palestine. (ch 1). They both remember words their father taught them about the mind being frozen with self absorption, cold and unfeeling. (ch 12). But, they differ in their interpretations of the words and their recollections of the way they were said. Srulik recalls: "Father looked at me then, ... He knew I wanted to leave, and not to live a life of learning like you. ... Those words made

it all right for me to close those books” (ibid). But, Schechter recalls: “Father was teaching me that passage intentionally, to remind me to continue serving God as I continued studying, even as I was studying in worldly universities” (ibid).

In Egypt Rabbi Schechter meets the Chief Rabbi of Cairo. They are two different characters from very different cultures, joined by a common religion, national history and devotion to Torah study. After an awkward hesitation they enjoy mutual understanding and cooperation. On his way back from Egypt Schechter visits Srulik in Israel and meets his two daughters who speak Hebrew fluently and naturally, and are of the same age as his own daughters. “Meeting another set of redheaded girls so similar to his own delighted and disturbed Schechter. [...] it occurred to him that his own daughters would have nothing to say to these girls, even if they had shared a language” (ibid). This is another comment about American Jewishness in relation to Israel. Schechter is immersed in traditional Hebrew, but unlike his brother and Josie’s family, he will move to New York rather than to Israel. As a result his children will have little in common with his brother’s children in Israel. This is in contrast to the understanding he had with the Cairo Rabbi, of his own generation albeit in the very different country of Egypt. Or, this could be a comment not on a generational gap but on the sense of understanding between two Jewish diasporic figures, contrasted with misunderstanding between American and Israeli born Jews. One has to hear graduates of Israeli public schooling breaking their teeth reading, say, the Kaddish prayer to wonder, are they Jewish? The question is still asked by the perplexed, what does it mean to be Jewish?

Splits in Interpretations of the Jewish Religion

Solomon Schechter's role in Dara Horn's book ends when he leaves Cambridge to be president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City in 1902. As is generally known, he is regarded as a leading figure in the Jewish Conservative movement in America. He insisted on being faithful to the Torah and the Jewish law, and taught a broad minded approach to applying Jewish law to the present. This was in contrast to Orthodox Judaism which is opposed to changes and, on the other hand, in opposition to Reform Judaism which has had less reverence for the tradition. As it turns out, adaptation of Jewish tradition to the present is a continued process. One might say that by today's standards, Rabbi Schechter would be considered Modern Orthodox, as the Conservative movement evolved further away from the Jewish practices and thinking of old, but, true to its name, always more conservative than the Reform movement. Competing religious denominations are not, of course, unique to the Jewish religion. It is worth noting, though, that generalizations that apply to one Jewish sector may not fit another. These formal separations also reinforce a sense of vagueness to what it means to be Jewish-American in terms of life style and thoughts, to what extent one is primarily Jewish or American, or inseparably both. It may be worthwhile, then, to look at the history of Jewish denominational splits.

In his 1988 book *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*¹ Michael A. Meyer, professor at Hebrew Union College, describes the emergence in 1887 of the Conservative movement and the founding of its Jewish

¹ Meyer, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.

Theological Seminary in New York. This was out of profound disagreements with the 1885 Reform Pittsburgh conference that formulated the religious principles of "Classic Reform" as it was called later. It maintains that Jews are not a nation and defines Judaism as a universalist religion. Its Godly mission is to contribute to a better and just world, inspired but not bound to the prophets of the old testament. Its fourth paragraph criticizes Halakha, or ritual laws, such as keeping Kosher, as "apt to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation" (Meyer, 269). The more conservative among Reform Rabbis could not accept a drastic separation from Halakha and Jewish tradition, and founded the Conservative movement.

On the other hand, the Pittsburgh platform received fierce criticism from Felix Adler, son of a New York Reform Rabbi and a former student of rabbinical studies in Berlin. He "condemned the race pride that even Reformers evidently possessed and their failure to recognize that in some moral matters Jews could and should learn from Christians" (Meyer, 270). Adler pointed out the basic contradiction that invalidated, in his view, the Reform movement. Judaism, he argued, would cease to be itself with the fundamental reforms that the movement endeavored to institute. (Meyer, 265, 270). Adler objected to Jewish separation, negated a theistic God and the notion of Israel as God's chosen people. (Meyer 265). In 1876 he founded the New York society for Ethical Culture which attracted a following at first. It did not last long as a formal group, but leading ethical life remains an important element of Jewishness professed by a majority of American Jews today, as shown by the PEW study discussed below.

Meyer describes the frustrating effect the Conservative split had on the expectations Rabbi Isaac M. Wise had of Reform Judaism. Wise founded the Hebrew Union College, the first Reform rabbinical school in America, in 1875. According to

Meyer, Wise expected that Reform Judaism would be accepted as the common religion of all Americans. Says Meyer: “Wise, the most influential of nineteenth-century American Jewish Reformers” believed that Judaism would help shape the American destiny. “Reform Judaism, as a progressive, universal, and non-authoritarian religion, would become the common faith of America.” (Meyer, 227). This far reaching vision of Reform Judaism has not materialized and does not appear likely to. Although non Jewish Americans can feel comfortable in a Reform “temple” (in lieu of “synagogue”), the general trend is toward secularism.

Arthur Hays Sulzberger’s Jewishness

A prominent Reform Jewish figure worth mentioning here is Arthur Hays Sulzberger (1861-1938), *The New York Times* owner publisher during World War II. His Jewishness is discussed in Laurel Leff’s book *Buried by the Times* whose main issue is the policy instituted by Sulzberger to downplay the news of the Jewish Holocaust as it was carried out by the Nazis.

The book describes Sulzberger as a descendant of distinguished German Jews who emigrated to the United States in mid nineteenth century. He was the son in law of Adolph Ochs, son of German Jewish immigrants, who bought the *Times* in 1896. (Leff, 20, 24). Having “assimilationist” tendencies, he was philosophically opposed to emphasizing the unique plight of the Jews in occupied Europe because “Being Jewish was solely a religious, not a racial or ethnic orientation [...] that carried with it no special obligation to help fellow Jews. [...] American Jews who helped other Jews because they were Jews threatened to undercut their position as Americans.” (Leff, 13). Likewise, since in his view Jews were not a people, he opposed a creation of a Jewish state. On

these two issues he had disagreements with some of American Jewry's top leaders. (14). Yet, he did not cut himself from the Jewish community. Like his forefathers he was a member and a board member of synagogues and other Jewish institutions. As a Reform Jew he did not observe the Sabbath and the laws of Kashrut, went to a synagogue irregularly, but said to have always fasted on Yom Kippur (25).

Sulzberger's attitude was influenced by his grandfather-in-law, the above mentioned Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, and the "Classic Reform" Judaism. Wise maintained that after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E and the dispersal of the Jews, they ceased to be a nation and became solely adherents of a religion. They could and should be good Germans or Americans, whatever people they find themselves living among. (25). Indeed they have a mission to be champions of enlightenment, be the peacemaker among nations, oppose racial and national divisions. "America is our Zion" declared in 1898 the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (25). Hence the Reform opposition to Zionism in all its manifestation. This changed in the 1930s with the arrival of more Eastern European Jews to America, but Ochs and Sulzberger did not change. (26).

Besides practical considerations, to keep a neutral image of the *New York Times*, Sulzberger's refusal to be concerned with Jewish welfare is tied by Laurel Leff to a psychological motive, possibly "a deep sense of insecurity, neurotic fear" that Jews were not in fact equal among all others. (28). Over time, his Jewish affiliation did not last, as his descendants are no longer Jewish. His case sheds more light on the problematic, conflicted nature of Jewishness in America, some of its utopian assumptions, questionable definitions and how unsustainable it seems to be.

Portnoy's Complaint

The possibly neurotic nature of Sulzberger's Jewishness, mentioned by Leff, is rather benign compared to the intense expression of Jewish neurosis that pervades Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint*. Alex Portnoy complains "I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke — only it ain't no joke!" (Roth, 36-7). The Portnoy family lives in the enclosure of their nearly all-Jewish ethnic neighborhood in New Jersey. Devoid of meaningful religious or cultural Jewish spirit, they are confined to a way of life founded on distrust and fear of non Jews. The suffocating nature of their Jewishness, combined with the unhealthy relations between Alex and his parents, particularly his mother, have debilitating effect on his personality and the way he connects with women. He is driven to unsatisfying liaisons with non Jewish women and when he reaches a new low he flies to Israel. His expectations of the Jewish state are frustrated when he fails yet more miserably upon trying to connect in his same old way with an Israeli Jewish woman. In this book Philip Roth introduces us to a case of unhealthy diasporic Jewishness, not so much fictional as misguided. It is based on raw ethnic instincts of the lowest kind, and a deep seated fear of non Jews, brought over by Jewish experience in Europe. Alex grows up to be an educated American who sees the ills of that attitude. He appreciates the civility of non Jews that he meets, works for bettering the lot of the poor, but emotionally he cannot feel on a par with non Jewish women that he is attracted to. He fancies an easy rehabilitation by going to Israel, where he expects to feel as a normal human being, a Jew among Jews in a Jewish country. But, moving to Israel cannot remedy his malaise as long as there is no change of mentality.

**American Democracy and American Jewry :
How Safe and How True to Themselves?**

Reform Jews of 1930s Germany were also believers in the movement's principles and considered themselves German patriots. Their fate flew in the face of that belief. Another book by Philip Roth is premised on the question, indeed a fear in the back of people's minds that surfaces at times, would a similar horror be possible in America today, or in the future? Roth's novel *The Plot Against America* describes a fictional, but realistic and plausible history of America in the WWII period. In this "what if" story the American hero Charles Lindbergh, who was pro-Nazi, becomes America's president in 1940 instead of Franklin Roosevelt. In addition to his personal charisma, his message of American nativism and isolationism wins the hearts of the voters. He promises no intervention in the war in Europe, no aid to Britain and France, and blames the Jews for wanting to fight the Nazis for their own cause and against American interests. He even gets a pompous Jewish rabbi to endorse him, "as a Jew and an American patriot". Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf preaches that the first priority of Jews is "the development of American ideals" and calls "the Americanization of Americans" "the best means to preserve our democracy against Bolshevism, radicalism, and anarchism [and quotes from Theodore Roosevelt :] There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American, but something else also, isn't an American at all. We have room for but one flag, the American flag." (Ch. 1, Kindle Location 574).

The Rabbi grew up in the South and his father fought in the Civil War for the Confederacy. He admires Judah Benjamin who "was a Jew and second only to Jefferson Davis in the government of the Confederacy. He was a Jewish lawyer who served Davis as

attorney general, as secretary of war, and as secretary of state. Prior to the secession of the South he had served in the U.S. Senate as one of South Carolina's two senators." (1711). Indeed, the real historic figure Judah Benjamin may be an embodiment of the Jewish dilemma mentioned above in the introduction, what is a Jewish success and what is a Jewish failure? On the one hand Benjamin is a source of "Jewish pride", the first Jew that rose to such levels in American government. Another view may see no relevance to Jewish issues in his career because there was little, if at all, Jewishness of any form in it. Even though he did not deny his Jewish origin and was known by all as a Jew, he is not known to have been involved in Jewish heritage or interests. A third view may go further and suggest that Benjamin is relevant to the Jewish dilemma as an example of a Jewish failure, because his way of life ended his Jewish lineage. Symbolically, his Parisian daughter buried him there in a Catholic cemetery.

In this novel nine year old Philip Roth lives with his older brother Sandy and their parents in a Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. The neighborhood is the same as in *Portnoy's Complaint* but the family is characterized more favorably. Especially the mother is a sympathetic, at times admirable figure. There is a strong sense of community in that Jewish neighborhood. Their Jewishness is simply who they are. "These were Jews who needed no large terms of reference, no profession of faith or doctrinal creed, in order to be Jews, and they certainly needed no other language— they had one, their native tongue" (3553). When threatened by anti-Jewish violence, some of them move to Canada. Israel, then Palestine, is not even a remote consideration for them, unlike Alex Portnoy in the 1960's. The above quoted lack of ideology, perhaps also the language issue, may explain it.

In a visit to Washington, DC, the family witnesses the popularity of President Lindbergh among ordinary people, visitors from different parts of the country. Crowds

cheer at the sight of his plane as he performs his daily flight over the city. The Roths experience there anti-Semitic attitude from ordinary people, emboldened by the election of this president. They mock Mr. Roth when he recites the words inscribed at Lincoln Memorial: “All men are created equal.” (Ch. 2, Kindle Location 1159). “They live in a dream, and we live in a nightmare.” He concludes. (1252).

When Lindbergh becomes president he initiates a program to encourage Jews to leave voluntarily their Jewish ghettos and move to rural areas. It is presented as an opportunity to break free of the limitations of a segregated existence. Some Jews see it this way, others, such as Mr. Roth, are frightened and outraged. A loose tongued Jewish gossip journalist, Walter Winchell, lashes out at the “White House fascists” for creating those “concentration camps” with the intent to annihilate Jewish life. Winchell runs for President and his campaign speeches around the country attract hostile violent crowds. Gradually, mob hostilities increase against Jews. Opinions are divided “whether getting these organized anti-Semites and their thousands of unseen sympathizers to reveal themselves for what they were [...] — was good for the Jews or bad for the Jews. (4305). The Roth’s are about to join other Jewish families who moved to Canada when Lindbergh disappears with his plane, suspected to have been kidnapped. His vice president becomes acting president and imposes martial law. The borders with Canada and Mexico are closed. Germany claims that the kidnapping “was masterminded by the warmonger Roosevelt— in collusion with his Jewish Treasury secretary, Morgenthau, his Jewish Supreme Court justice, Frankfurter, and the Jewish investment banker Baruch— and that it is being financed by the international Jewish usurers Warburg and Rothschild [...] in order to return Roosevelt to the White House and launch an all-out Jewish war against the non-Jewish world.” (4966). Two days later British intelligence informs of evidence that Lindbergh is alive and well in

Berlin. This is met with increased accusations of a Jewish plot, anti-Semitic charges that are printed in respectable newspapers, and another surge of violence against Jews. The mayor of New York laments that Nazi propaganda “have captured the mind of the world’s greatest nation without uttering a single word of truth!” (5073). Three days later the FBI and National Guards take control of the country. Prominent Jewish leaders and members of the Roosevelt administration are arrested, suspected of being “among the ringleaders of the Jewish conspiratorial plot against America.” (5076). Voices of reason could not stop the madness, but an emotional authoritative plea by Lindbergh’s wife triggers the restoration of orderly democratic procedures and an election that put Roosevelt back in the Whitehouse.

The novel raises a two pointed question: is there a danger of another Holocaust in America? And if Jews voluntarily go along with pressures to assimilate, will this bring about a “silent Holocaust”? Anti-Jewish allegations that are described in the novel, such as a Jewish plot to dominate the world, and prominent personalities who made them, such as Charles Lindbergh and Henry Ford, were real. These views continue to be present in American discourse, above and under the surface. Is the sense of safety and belonging any more real and reliable than that of the Jews of Germany in 1930s?

A similar question is raised about American democracy, how safe and sound is it, since a president and other officials may be elected not for their “wisdom”, as the founding fathers envisioned, but due to their manipulative power over the general public. This in fact, one may observe, is not an uncommon occurrence, although, thankfully, not with such devastating consequences so far.

The documentary film *Inequality for All* by Robert Reich (2013), discusses the threat to American democracy from an economic point of view. Economic legislation, rules and regulations in America are “rigged”, says Reich, to benefit the rich and deny equal

opportunity from the poor and middle class. This undermines the institutions of American democracy. Reich's analysis is an example of how real life in America contradicts the American myth of fairness and equal opportunity. At the same time, there may be a potential conflict between this myth and the American legacy of free market and self-made individuals. These contradictions are mirrored, as said above, in Jewish ideals vs. reality and between different Jewish ideals. Reich's analysis could also add to a general sense of borrowed time within which American Jewry may exist. Then again, who isn't on borrowed time?

Watered Down Jewish Identity : *The Diary of Anne Frank*

Anne Frank and her diary are household names in America and around the world. The first publications in English in the 1950s were the results of editing in which Anne's father Otto Frank was involved. The 1952 American publication, named *The Diary of a Young Girl*, included a forward by Eleanor Roosevelt. She wrote: "These are the thoughts and expression of a young girl living under extraordinary conditions, and for this reason her diary tell us much about ourselves ... I felt how close we all are to Anne's experience." (quoted in *Jewish Women's Archive*).¹ The forward does not relate to Anne's Jewishness and makes no mention of Jews and the Holocaust. (ibid.) In 1955 the diary was adapted to a Broadway play, named *The Diary of Anne Frank*. A previous attempt by a Jewish playwright was rejected by the publishers and by Otto Frank who wrote: "it was not a Jewish book, so please do not make it into a Jewish play." (ibid). One may understand Otto Frank who refused to see the world as Jews vs. non Jews after experiencing both Nazi horrors and fraternity of non Jewish Dutch people who risked

¹ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/frank-anne>

their lives and sheltered him and his family. His attitude might also seem perfectly in line with the above mentioned “classic Reform” that is bent on universalized Jewish culture and, in America, Americanized identity. However, in America after the Holocaust, Jewish identity, including among Reform Jews, became strongly connected to the memory of the Holocaust, and some criticism was directed at the diary adaptations of general human flavor.

Among the harsh critics was Cynthia Ozick in a 2000 article “Who Owns Anne Frank?”.¹ She accuses Otto Frank, a Nazi camp survivor himself, that due to his overly appeasing character he produced that diluted literary work of an agreeable, hopeful message, instead of a document about the Holocaust that it should have been: “the story of Anne Frank ... has been distorted, ... reduced, ... infantilized, Americanized, ... falsified, kitschified, ... Among the falsifiers have been dramatists ... [and] Anne Frank’s own father” (77). And about Otto Frank’s character: “His characteristically world view belonged to an era of quiet assimilation, or, more accurately, accommodation (which includes a modicum of deference) when German Jews had become, at least in their own minds, well integrated into German Society.” (83). I wonder if all or most of this criticism might not apply to us, including Ozick, in the way we deal with our Jewish tradition, smoothing its edges and adapting its messages to suit our present life. What is more, one might add that today there is more inclination to see the Holocaust as a manifestation of human capacity for unimaginable evil. There is an increased realization that the roles of victims and perpetrators are not set in stone. Yet, given that the Holocaust is ranked highest in shaping the identity of the majority of American Jewry, as

¹ Ozick, Cynthia. “Who Owns Anne Frank ?” *Quarrel & Quandary*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

established by the PEW survey discussed below, Otto Frank's offence would indeed be considered graver than the ever ongoing process of reinterpreting Jewishness. Thus the diary and its acceptance may suggest signs of inconsistencies and ambivalence in Jewish sensibilities and perceived identity. Ozick's question, who owns Anne Frank, may be rephrased: who is Anne Frank? perhaps analogous to: what is American Jewry?

The 2013 PEW survey of American Jews

The 2013 PEW survey analyses changes in Jewish identity in recent years. A video of a panel discussion summarizes its highlights. The survey interviewed 3500 people who classified themselves as Jewish. It offered 9 choices of what's essential to being Jewish. The most popular category, chosen by 73%, was "Remembering the Holocaust". Far below at 19% came "Observing Jewish law", which was second to last, just above "Eating traditional Jewish foods" at 14%. Second to the Holocaust was "Leading an ethical and moral life" - 69%, followed by "Working for justice/equality" - 56%, "Being intellectually curious" - 49%, "Caring about Israel" - 43%, "Having good sense of humor" - 42%, "Being part of a Jewish community" - 28%.

Another set of statistics shows a trend of assimilation. 32% of millennial Jews (born after 1980) define themselves as Jews of no religion, 67% of them raise their children as not Jewish. Rate of intermarriage among Jews is 58% since 2000, 71% among non Orthodox. The survey also shows a trend of denominational shifts, with potential growth of the orthodox, growth of secular, and decline of Conservative and Reform.

But, here is a curious thought. The PEW survey finds shrinkage of the Reform denomination, despite their acceptance of non Jewish spouses as their members. In light of the above mentioned expectation by Isaac M. Wise that Reform Judaism might

become the accepted religion among all Americans, perhaps there was a flaw in the survey? Should have they polled for Reform Judaism among the general population, not just those who identified themselves as Jews?

In the discussion that follows the presentation of the survey, Steven M. Cohen points out that given those rates of intermarriage and raising children as non Jewish, the birth rate of Jewish babies among non Orthodox is 1, which means that in one generation half of the non Orthodox Jews will be eliminated from the Jewish population. A silent holocaust just around the corner. He suggests to alleviate this threat by increasing Jewish education and providing social facilities to encourage Jewish marriages.

It is easy to overlook one observation that I glean from this presentation of the PEW data. Just as it would be a mistake for someone looking at a river, unaware of the flow of its water, to say how full of thriving living fish is this standing water. The obscured finding of the PEW survey, as I see it, is that a given generation of non Orthodox, vibrant and influential though it may be, is largely the product of Orthodox Jews. They come from upstream, one or more generations in the past, where they keep multiplying in force. Along the way downstream to the present, many transform themselves to non Orthodox. Further downstream they, or a large portion of them, will cease to be Jewish. This loss to the size of the Jewish population may not be noticed because it is offset by the said "fish upstream". This may affect a misconception about the nature of American Jewish population.

The Continuity of Discontinuity and Soap Judaism

Steven M Cohen and Ari Kelman write about the newest in Jewish culture among the young, which they find encouraging. The article's title *The Continuity of Discontinuity*¹ suggests that continuity of the Jewish tradition requires a measure of discontinuity, that is, adaptation to new circumstances and sensibilities. This is a report of a research of trends in the young Jewish "cultural scene" that may merit support from Jewish philanthropies. It is somewhat of a marketing research, then, rather than a pure scientific work, and the title could qualify as a marketing slogan. The authors present four "projects" that are outside the familiar Jewish denominations or establishments. The four are a shul, a teller of torah, a record label, and a salon. They are shown as alternative, innovative ways to express and cultivate Jewishness. With confidence that might be questioned the research sponsors point out that "Four years on, and the projects have proven to be anything but a fad." The authors, however, note reservations voiced by other communal leaders who "saw all the innovations, with the possible exception of the new congregations and minyanim (informal prayer groups), as only marginally Jewish, reflecting and sometimes promoting the blurring of lines between real Judaism and the forces of assimilation." I share this feeling that continued discontinuity is likely to lead outside any kind or degree of Jewish identity, encouraging an illusion of a thriving up-to-date Jewish culture that is but a temporary stop before exiting the Jewish world.

¹ Cohen, Steven M., and Ari Kelman. *The Continuity of Discontinuity*. 2007. Web. "The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies". 14 Jan. 2014. <acbp.net/library.php>

Blurred lines between Judaism and assimilation are reflected in (or promoted by) popular TV shows. One example is the TV soap opera “*The O.C.*”¹. Seth Cohen is a high school senior, son of a Jewish father, Sandy, and a gentile mother, Kirsten, in a home that has little signs of Jewish tradition, unless one counts Sandy’s wise cracks and Seth’s rambles as Jewish humor. Seth says: “welcome to a [Jewish] world of insecurity and paralyzing self-doubt” (2003, season 1 episode 4). He invents the concept of Chrismukkah which is Christmas with a nod to Hannukah. The family fosters a non Jewish boy of Seth’s age, Ryan, and Seth plans a Bar Mitzvah for Ryan for the purpose of raising money for a friend’s surgery. Sandy is less enthusiastic and says: “It’s a sacred religious event. A tradition that marks a Jewish child’s obligation to observe the Ten Commandments.” Ryan rises up to the challenge and says in his speech: “mitzvah means any act of human kindness.” (season 3 episode 10).

So, What is a Sheitel and who is Marilyn Monroe?

As one could tell from the PEW survey, non Orthodox Jews seek and find ways to define themselves as Jewish, without the burden of acting and looking too Jewish. They also keep their support for an independent Jewish state (those who do) to a comfortable level. Steven M. Cohen makes another comment in relation to the survey, about the large proportion of Modern Orthodox in Jewish immigration (“Aliyah”) to Israel. One such figure is Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a student of Rambam’s rational Judaism. I mention him as an example of a no nonsense commitment to Judaism and Zionism, while keeping in mind (and outside the scope of this paper) that Israeli Jewry, as well as Modern Orthodoxy, are no exceptions in their share of inner struggles, shifting positions in

¹ *The O.C.* Fox. 2003-2007. Television.

dealing with ongoing new challenges. Riskin is also the source of the punch line that I use here to express a sense of absurdity, fictional existence, of American Jewishness. In the mid 1960s he founded a Modern Orthodox synagogue, “Lincoln Square”, in Manhattan’s Upper West Side. After a dozen or more successful years he moved to Israel to be the founding Chief Rabbi of Efrat, now population nearly 10,000, south of Jerusalem. He recently said, “Living in Israel is a life long national service” (published in Hebrew on the issue of Torah study vs. military service).¹ By way of a seeming aside, Talmudic style, I add: He used to say: (to the perpetual singles who at the time flocked his Synagogue) “I know what your problem is. You want Marilyn Monroe with a Sheitel!”.² One may see this image as capturing the American Jewish utopian dreaming that wants to see itself as both Jewish and firmly part of the American cultural fabric.

¹ Riskin, Shlomo. Ynet Judaism. Web. 4 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4483654,00.html>>.

² Sheitel is the Yiddish word for a wig worn by some Orthodox Jewish married women to cover their hair as an act of required modesty.

Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) was a major Hollywood sex symbol in the 1950s and early 1960s

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