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Date

“No Heart for Faith”: Depicting Freethinkers and Debating Freethought in the American Yiddish  
Press (1880s-1920s)

By

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B.A., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2012  
M.A., Indiana University-Bloomington, 2014

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An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate  
Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion  
2023

## Abstract

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By Matthew H. Brittingham

Between the 1880s and 1920s, nearly two and a half million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States, where they developed a robust Yiddish print culture in cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Among these immigrants was a broad range of Jews who considered themselves freethinkers. Bound up with the wider history of freethought in the modern period, Jewish freethinkers emerged with the gradual decline of religion as the principal framework shaping notions of truth and authority and the concomitant rise of science and rationalism as competing systems. In America’s Jewish immigrant communities, the most vocal freethinkers tended to embrace radical political ideologies, namely socialism or anarchism—ideologies originally considered at odds with expressions of Jewish particularity. Should freethinking radicals ignore religion or actively fight against it? How should they relate to religious family, friends, and coworkers? Could freethinking Jews maintain some sense of Jewishness? If so, could historically religious rituals play a role in their secular lives? Freethinking Jewish immigrants took to the American Yiddish press to debate the answers to these questions while being shaped by dramatic events on both sides of the Atlantic. Yiddish writers—radical, conservative, or anywhere in-between—also used fictional Jewish freethinkers to pose questions about religion’s past, present, and future meaning. Focusing on the late 1880s to the early 1920s, this study considers how Yiddish journalists in America discussed freethought and depicted freethinkers, how these discussions and depictions changed over time, and the role they played in navigating America’s religious context. It draws primarily, though not exclusively, on editorials, short stories, and advice columns appearing in the popular Yiddish press. And, since debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers were particularly meaningful to Jewish radicals, this study pays considerable attention to the radical Yiddish press, especially the popular socialist Yiddish press.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation was made possible by generous support from Emory University's Graduate Division of Religion (GDR), Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, and Laney Graduate School. I am indebted to these institutions for fostering stimulating intellectual environments and funding my research and language training. I also want to extend a heartfelt thanks to the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) for providing me with a Dissertation Completion Fellowship, supported by the Legacy Heritage Fund. Though the pandemic disrupted my original timeline, I still could not have finished this dissertation without the AJS's funding. The Yiddish Book Center (YBC) likewise offered invaluable language training through a Translation Fellowship. My cohort at the YBC devoted considerable time and energy to reading translations of A.D. Oguz's "The Freethinkers," a serialized novel that became the basis of chapter five. Finally, I have to mention the wonderful folks at the American Jewish Archives (AJA), who wanted to support my research during the 2019-2020 academic year. But, once again, the pandemic had other plans.

I am grateful for the many librarians, archivists, and staff who aided every step of my research process, including, but not limited to, the incredible people at Emory Libraries, the AJA, the YBC, the New York Public Library, and the Center for Jewish History (CJH). I would be remiss if I did not mention the innumerable people who contributed to my work without ever knowing I existed, namely those responsible for digitizing Yiddish newspapers and Yiddish books, like the Historical Jewish Press (National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University) and the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library (YBC).

This project would never have come to fruition without a cloud of scholars surrounding me. Dr. Eric L. Goldstein, my advisor, constantly pushed my project in exciting directions. The fingerprints of the rest of my committee, Drs. Miriam Udel, Gary Laderman, and Allen Tullos, can be seen on almost every page. Dr. Udel was especially impactful as both a mentor and colleague. Countless others were integral to my academic success: my cohort at Emory's GDR, my colleagues with the CJH's Yiddish Press Working Group, the many members of the Georgia Philological Association, and the faculty at both Indiana University's Borns Jewish Studies Program and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of Classics and Religious Studies.

A group of healthcare professionals, friends, and family carried me across the finish line. For years, the healthcare team at Emory Student Health helped me fight anxiety and addiction, and I can't imagine where I would be without them. Ponce Presbyterian Church and my Bene brothers were always sources of encouragement and inspiration along the way. KJ Drake, Mark Wood, Daniel Ludwinski, and Anthony Blalock rallied to my side whenever I called. Similarly, I can never repay my parents and parents-in-law for propping me up in tough times. Brian, Katie, Maddie, Katherine, Anthony, and Rebecca gave me so much strength and joy. My children, James, Noa, and Selah, came into existence during graduate study and kept me grounded with their beautiful smiles. My wife, Ashley, was my rock. I love her to the moon and back.

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INTRODUCTION: *Frum* Freethinkers and the American Yiddish Press



[Figure I.1]

Cartoon: “A Freethinker in a Kosher Mikvah” [*Kibets'er*, Aug. 4, 1911; public domain]

Caption:

Freethinker (telephoning the “*Fraye[r] arb. shtime*”): “Hello! Is this the editor Yanovsky? Hello, Mr. Editor! Who am I, you ask? I’m a freethinker and I’m in a bathhouse right now, and I want to take a cold dip in a mikvah. But, the mikvah is kosher. I ask you,

and answer me straight away, is a freethinker permitted, according to the law [*alpi-din*], to take a dip in a kosher mikvah?...”

On August 4, 1911, a Yiddish humor magazine, *Der kibetser*, published a cartoon entitled “A Freethinker in a Kosher Mikvah” [Figure I.1]. The cartoon pokes fun at the relationship between freethinking Jewish immigrants—Jews who rejected traditional religious observance and religious authority—and *Di fraye arbeter shtime*, a Yiddish anarchist weekly newspaper based in New York City.<sup>1</sup> The image features an aged, naked, freethinker on a bathhouse telephone as two barely visible figures in the background appear to be enjoying their bath. The cartoon does not name the naked freethinker, but the caption indicates that he is telephoning Shoel Yanovsky (1864-1939), the editor of the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. Yanovsky, as a talented writer and popularizer, resuscitated this struggling paper after becoming editor in 1899, and by the 1910s it was hitting its stride.<sup>2</sup> He was particularly known for the number of letters he fielded from readers, some of which came from freethinkers seeking advice on how to live alongside religiously observant Jews.<sup>3</sup> Like many such readers, the naked freethinker is calling from the bathhouse to ask for Yanovsky’s help in solving a conundrum: Is he “permitted, according to the law [*alpi-din*], to take a dip in a kosher mikvah?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “A fraydenker in mikve-koshereh,” *Kibetser* (New York, NY), Aug. 4, 1911, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Kenyon Zimmer, “Saul Yanovsky and Yiddish Anarchism on the Lower East Side,” in *Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab’s Saloon to Occupy Wall Street*, ed. Tom Goyens (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 33–53; idem, “‘The Whole World is Our Country’: Immigration and Anarchism in the United States, 1885-1940” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2010), 43–7; idem, *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Immigrants in America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 15–48, esp. 31–2.

Born in Pinsk in 1864, Yanovsky attended a gymnasium in Bialystok in 1880 but was on his way to New York in 1885, where he became active among the Jewish immigrant anarchists. He soon moved to London, where he became editor of *Der arbeter fraynd*. Ousted from the paper in 1894, for defying the conventional anarchist position on violence, he returned to New York in 1899 and almost immediately sought to revive the *Fraye arbeter shtime*.

<sup>3</sup> Zimmer, “Saul Yanovsky and Yiddish Anarchism on the Lower East Side,” 34–40. The general turn toward the Yiddish press rather than religious authorities was not uncommon among Jewish immigrants. For example, see Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902), 178.

<sup>4</sup> “A fraydenker in mikve-koshereh.”

The language used by the naked freethinker in formulating his conundrum puts the editor in a fascinating position of authority. He poses the question as one of permissibility under religious law (*alpi-din*), suggesting he recognizes Yanovsky, even though he is an anarchist and a freethinker, as a kind of religious authority. So, despite his rejection of *halakhah* (Jewish law), the naked freethinker seeks a *psak din* (a rabbinical ruling) from a radical *posek* (decisor). All this suggests that in their opposition to Jewish religious tradition, Jewish anarchists had become devoted to a set of rules and principles no less dogmatic than those that guided the observant Jews they often ridiculed. The cartoon humorously prods readers to ponder the naked freethinker's so-called freethought: Is he truly free? How free? Does the *Fraye arbeter shtime* promote free thinking, or does it simply construct rigid authority out of irreligion?<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1910s, chiding the freethought of Jewish immigrant radicals was not unusual in the American Yiddish press.<sup>6</sup> Depictions like the *Kibets'er*'s hit on a common thread: While the antireligious seemingly try to avoid the religious, they are constantly drawn into conversation with religion and the religious. And here, the naked freethinker *as an older male* becomes relevant. In the 1880s and 1890s, Jewish immigrant radicals, namely anarchists and socialists,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> For a list of Yiddish writers associated with the *Kibets'er* (ca. 1909) see "List of Proposed Members to the Jewish Press Club" and "Committee on Formation of the Jewish Press Club," May 21, 1909, Peter Wiernik and Bertha Wiernik Collection, Subgroup II: Peter Wiernik Papers, 1888-1936, box 11, f. 10, Yeshiva University Libraries.

As scholar Lauren B. Strauss summarized, editors and artists at publications like *Kibets'er* showed "judicious contemporary applications of familiar Bible stories and Jewish customs," but their imagined readers were "a politically astute, secular, left-wing, Jewish immigrant audience." See Strauss, "Images with Teeth: The Political Influence of Artwork in American Yiddish Periodicals, 1910s-1930s," in *Yiddish in America: Essays on Yiddish Culture in the Golden Land*, ed. Edward S. Shapiro (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 24. In a March 1915 article in the conservative *Morgn-zhurnal*, Yiddish journalist Bernard Gorin claimed, "professional jokesters," namely cartoonists, helped foster an atmosphere of tolerance on the Jewish street by mocking the pious and impious. In Gorin's assessment, cartoons challenging sacred-secular divides were both popular and meaningful in the 1910s. See B. Gorin, "Tolerants oyf der yidisher gas," *Morgn-zhurnal* (hereafter cited as *MZ*) (New York, NY), Mar. 23, 1915. Also see Annie Polland, "'May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?': The Shared World of the 'Religious' and the 'Secular' Among Eastern European Jewish Immigrants to America," *American Jewish History* 93, no. 4 (2007): 391.

labored to fashion a culture strictly in line with internationalism and cosmopolitanism.<sup>7</sup> This radical culture was assimilationist—it called for the dissolution of Jewish distinctiveness and the blending of Jews and non-Jews into a proletarian melting pot. While the United States seemed a fruitful context for proletarian assimilation, by the early 1910s, the dream was far from realized. A younger generation of Jewish radicals had actually embraced ideologies melding radical politics with Jewish distinctiveness; some former assimilationist radicals even joined them.<sup>8</sup> They were all still freethinkers, but they reconceptualized the freethinker’s relationship to religion.

The cartoon above raises a series of questions: How did the depiction of Jewish freethinkers in the United States transform over time? What role did the image of the freethinker play in discussions surrounding Jewish immigrant culture? To what extent were these images influenced by depictions of freethinkers in the wider American society? What do these depictions say about immigrant Jews’ acculturation and the importance of the category of “religion”—broadly construed—in this process? This dissertation analyzes how the American Yiddish press discussed and depicted Jewish immigrant freethinkers, how these discussions and depictions changed over time, and the role they played in navigating a new religious context. From the 1880s to the early 1920s, Yiddish journalists—radical, conservative, or anywhere in-between—put the freethinking Jew to work when debating religion’s past, present, and future meaning.

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<sup>7</sup> Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 22. Also see Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 453–547; David Philip Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx: Folk Ideology and Folk History in the Jewish Labor Movement* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1999), 13–51.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 169–75; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, Ch. 4 and Ch. 5.

In examining freethinkers and freethought in the America Yiddish press, this study focuses on the published work of journalists, editors, and fiction writers (some of the figures examined were all of these at once). It draws primarily, though not exclusively, on the popular press—periodicals consumed by a mass readership. This does not mean that every editorial, debate, or short story made waves across the Jewish immigrant public (some did), or that most readers found them particularly compelling. Journalists, editors, and fiction writers, rather, used the freethinker to massage tensions they believed relevant to their reading public. In America's consumer-driven economy, where the press relied on its readers, they were, directly or indirectly, in dialogue with consumers. Michael Denning, following the work of Stuart Hall, showed how popular literature took on consumers' "accents" as producers negotiated their interests with those of their public.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers in the American Yiddish press took on the accents of Jewish immigrant consumers.

Because debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers were particularly meaningful to Jewish radicals, my analysis has paid considerable attention to the radical Yiddish press, especially the popular socialist Yiddish press, newspapers like the *Di arbeter tsaytung* (The Workman's Paper, 1890-1902), *Dos abend blat* (The Evening Page, 1894-1902), the *Forverts* (The Jewish Daily Forward, 1897-), and *Di varhayt* (The Truth, 1905-1914). At times, however, debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers transcended ideology. So, I have also considered conservative newspapers, like *Dos yidishes tageblat* (The Jewish Daily News, 1885-1928), *Der morgn-zhurnal* (The Jewish Morning Journal, 1901-1971), and *Der*

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980): 57–72; idem, "The Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, iss. 2 (1986): 28–44; idem, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, eds. Tony Bennett, James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Wollacott (London: Routledge, 1982), 52–86; idem, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (New York: Verso, 2002), 185–92.

*amerikaner* (The American, 1903-1962), as well as general newspapers, like *Minikes' yontef bleter* (Minikes' Holiday Papers, 1897-1932) and *Der tog* (The Day, 1914-1971). Finally, to capture the ways intellectuals differed from, struggled with, and were influenced by their reading public, my work has included journals serving a smaller, intellectual audience. *Di tsukunft* (The Future, 1892-1897, 1902-) and *Dos naye leben* (The New Life, 1908-1914, 1922-1923), for example, staged highly academic debates about freethought and religion. Finally, I have supplemented my analysis with archival materials and life-writing by and about notable Yiddish journalists.

It is important to note that the newspapers mentioned above were headquartered in New York City, where Jews made up nearly twenty-five percent of the city's total population by 1910. New York-based, Yiddish periodicals had offices, agents, and journalists in urban centers across North America, and many cities, like Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, and Montreal, also had a local Yiddish press, if sometimes only fleetingly. Likewise, since Yiddish newspapers of all kinds found their way into readers' hands in places like Colorado Springs, Colorado and Mobile, Alabama, freethinking Jewish immigrants in distant locations could relay their experiences to editors, who could then relay them to readers. Regardless, for New York-based journalists and publications, New York and its environs were the most common stage upon which they set their depictions of freethinkers and debated key questions about freethought. This tendency reflected not only the massive size of New York's Jewish population but also the metropolis' emotional draw for New York-based journalists and readers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Murray Baumgarten, "Their New York: Possessing the 'Capital of Words'," and Mikhail Krutikov, "Spaces of *Yidishkayt*: New York in American Yiddish Prose," both in *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 380–95, 396–412. American intellectuals, Jews and non-Jews, recognized the importance of New York in Jewish intellectual life. See David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19, 24–5.

To understand this period in the history of the American Yiddish press, one must realize that Yiddish periodicals, whether radical, conservative, or unaffiliated, served their immigrant public differently than how the Anglo-American press served its public. While Yiddish newspaper owners, editors, and staff looked to the Anglo-American press for models on how to increase readership and revenue, the Yiddish press placed greater attention on literature (original pieces and translations), self-help, and popular science—all considered necessary for immigrant Americanization. In a new environment where traditional norms and traditional authorities were subverted, Yiddish journalists helped readers navigate the challenges and opportunities of life in the United States.<sup>11</sup> In the 1902 words of Anglo-American journalist Hutchins Hapgood, and reminiscent of the cartoon above, “the Yiddish press... has helped essentially to extend the intellectual horizon of the Jew beyond the boundaries of the Talmud, and has largely displaced the rabbi in the position of teacher of the people.”<sup>12</sup> The language itself offered immigrant Jews a comfortable shelter for narrating their joys and troubles. Books, song, and stage assuredly played vital roles in the lives of Jewish immigrants, and they do make select appearances in this study, but the Yiddish press’ ability to foster dialogue elevates its usefulness in tracking representations of freethinkers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mordecai Soltes, *The Yiddish Press: An Americanizing Agency* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1925), 23, 28–9, 81–2; Ayelet Rose Brinn, “*Miss Amerike: The Yiddish Press’s Encounter with the United States, 1885-1924*” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2019), esp. Ch. 1 and Ch. 2. For examples of the Yiddish press’s role in the lives of Jewish immigrants, see the letters written to the *Forverts* in *A Bintel Brief*, ed. Isaac Metzker (New York: Schocken, 1990). Scholarly commentary on the *Bintel Brief*, including the column’s discussion of freethought and freethinkers, see Steven Cassedy, “*A Bintel brief: The Russian Émigré Intellectual Meets the American Mass Media*,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 34, no. 1 (2004): 113; Marvin Bressler, “Selected Family Patterns in W.I. Thomas’ Unfinished Study of the *Bintel Brief*,” *American Sociological Review* 17, no. 5 (1952): 565–6; George Wolfe, “The ‘Bintel Brief’ of the Jewish Daily Forward as an Immigrant Institution and a Research Source” (Master’s thesis, Graduate School for Jewish Social Work, Columbia University, 1933), 197–9. The Bressler/Wolfe references were found in Annie Polland, “‘Sacredness of the Family’: New York’s Immigrant Jews and Their Religion, 1890-1930” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2004), 36, n.22.

<sup>12</sup> Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 178.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, while the famed freethinkers Leo Rozentsvayg and Benyomen Faygenboym published antireligious books and pamphlets, their pieces published in newspapers and journals matters more to this study.

## Freethought and Jewish Religion in Modern Times

What Jewish immigrants meant when they referred to a “freethinker” was bound up with the broader history of freethought in the modern period. The notion of a “freethinker” emerged in Western societies during the Enlightenment, with the gradual decline of religion as the principal framework shaping notions of truth and authority and the concomitant rise of science and rationalism as competing systems. The term spread rapidly across seventeenth-century Europe and became liberally employed by intellectuals and the broader public over the next three centuries. Even in its earliest usage, “freethinker” was not always synonymous with “atheist,” though critics occasionally conflated the two. Deists, for instance, who accepted the idea of religious truth but believed that it should be subject to the authority of human reason, were also considered freethinkers. In her history of freethought in the United States, Susan Jacoby noted the diversity of self-defined freethinkers, who spanned “the gamut from the truly antireligious—those who regarded all religion as a form of superstition and wished to reduce its influence in every aspect of society—to those who adhered to a private, unconventional faith revering some form of God or Providence but at odds with orthodox religious authority.”<sup>14</sup> Defined more by what it rejected than affirmed, freethought almost always meant a range of unconventional ideas about religion. The term did, however, become associated with anticlericalism and a skepticism of epistemologies that did not prioritize scientific reason above all other sources of truth.<sup>15</sup>

In modern nations in Europe and North America, like Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States—places Yiddish journalists would call *fray* (“free,” i.e., more secularly

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 4.

<sup>15</sup> In the 1933 words of G. Adolf Koch, a historian of freethought in early republican America, freethinkers joined hands in “a tendency toward anti-clericalism, and a feeling that religious dogmatism and orthodoxy led to obscurantism.” Here, Koch is describing trends in deism in the early republic, but throughout his work he places early American deists squarely within the ranks of freethinkers. G. Adolf Koch, *Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), xiv.

inclined), “religion” emerged as a distinct category of human life, formally, if tenuously, distinct from requirements for citizenship.<sup>16</sup> Many *fray* European countries still had state-supported churches, and those churches remained culturally tied to national belonging, but modern nation building in Europe often weakened ties between specific religious traditions and civic participation. The United States, coming out of a colonial context with varying established churches and diverse forms of religious stratification, rejected a federally established church with the ratification of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1791).<sup>17</sup> States could still maintain established churches, and many did, but the next half-century would witness diminishing formal ties between specific denominations and civic life. Perhaps ironically, the decline of established churches proved a boon to religious creativity in America’s competitive, consumer-oriented context.

And yet, religious attachments were still important to how the republic’s citizens thought of themselves as Americans.<sup>18</sup> Less than two decades after the United States’ founding, one of the country’s most esteemed statemen, the freethinking Thomas Paine, had become a pariah for his antireligious views.<sup>19</sup> In the 1830s, the same decade in which Massachusetts abolished church establishment (1833), the last state to do so, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that American unbelievers followed certain religious norms simply because they feared social exclusion. “The

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); idem, 1998, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Ralph E. Pyle and James D. Davidson, “The Origins of Religious Stratification in Colonial America,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2003): 57–76. Also see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America’s Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 1–24. For debates on America’s religiosity compared to Europe’s, see Hugh McLeod, “Introduction,” in *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World*, eds. David Hempton and Hugh McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6–8.

<sup>19</sup> Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 4.

point to Tocqueville,” historian Leigh Eric Schmidt summarized, “was not how sizeable this clandestine bunch of nonbelievers was, but instead that the new nation’s social, religious, and political mores kept incredulity furtive; only an infidel few risked public rancor.”<sup>20</sup> After the Civil War, when there were growing calls for the United States to identify as a “Christian nation,” many postbellum state constitutions barred atheists from civic participation. The citizenship of freethinkers never truly became a full-throated debate, but they were undoubtedly unwelcome.<sup>21</sup>

New intellectual trends, coupled with urbanization and industrialization, gave irreligious dissent in the United States a new vigor in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The country entered a Golden Age of freethought that would last until World War I. Most Americans did not transform into freethinkers during this period, but open dissent became far more fashionable than ever before. The ability of freethinking preachers to draw massive crowds, most notably Robert Ingersoll, the so-called “Great Agnostic,” showed how irreligion, even antireligion, had become fashionable. In many circles, open impiety no longer diminished social standing. While American clergy continued to oppose freethinkers, they, like most pious Americans, became resigned to their public presence.<sup>22</sup> But again, there persisted what historian David A. Hollinger called “a generic Protestantism.” He elaborated:

This generic, transdenominational Protestantism had come by the end of the nineteenth century to be taken for granted by nearly all of the Americans in a position to influence

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. For a mention of laws against impious propaganda, in Yiddish, see Isaac Hourwich, *Di antviklung fun der amerikaner demokratye* (New York: Farlag Kultur, 1922), 224.

<sup>22</sup> Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 12. In Schmidt’s words, “Ingersoll hardly made atheism popular or mainstream, but his high profile was a clear indication of the new cultural prominence that unbelief had achieved by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.” Atheists remain quite unpopular in the United States, see Caroline Corbin, “Secularism and US Religion Jurisprudence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, eds. Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 472–3.

the character of the nation's major institutions, including those controlling public education, politics, the law, literature, the arts, scholarship, and even science. This confident spiritual proprietorship lay behind the continued currency well into the century of the idea that the United States was a "Christian nation."<sup>23</sup>

Native-born Jews and Jewish immigrants from Central Europe did dot the diverse freethinking world in the United States before the influx of Eastern European Jews to American shores in the 1880s, but their numbers were miniscule.<sup>24</sup> In the period between the Civil War and the onset of mass Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, most Jews in America were highly acculturated to American sociopolitical norms. Jewish leaders during this period strongly encouraged fellow Jews to define themselves confessionally, as members of a religious group, rather than as a "people" or "nation." In practice, however, "religion" did not always suffice in describing how Jews imagined and enacted communal attachments, and other terms used to describe Jewish distinctiveness, including "race," played a role in public discourse.<sup>25</sup> But, *in the public presentation of Jewish distinctiveness*, "religion" offered Jewish community leaders a legally protected framework from which to indicate fitness for national belonging. In the postbellum years, with rising calls for the United States to assert its "Christianness," leaders in the Jewish community more vocally supported the constitutional rights of so-called "infidels" (the irreligious).<sup>26</sup> In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the stakes in defining Jewishness

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<sup>23</sup> Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 20. On turn-of-the-century transformations in American Protestantism, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), esp. Ch. 1.

<sup>24</sup> There were some well-known, freethinking Jewish individuals, like Ernestine L. Rose: Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 99–102; Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 86–116.

<sup>26</sup> Naomi Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 67. Or, as David A. Hollinger summarized, "Jews who managed to find a place for themselves in the public intellectual life of the nation—rather than speaking to a distinctly Jewish constituency—reinforced the most de-Christianized of the perspectives already current among the Anglo-Protestants." See Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and*

increased when acculturated Jews encountered growing antisemitism in certain social circles. The immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe, gaining steam in the 1880s, further propelled acculturated Jews' fears of exclusion in the United States.

While being a Jewish freethinker in modern times took a variety of forms—political radicals, deistically-inclined anticlericals, unaffiliated atheists, nonobservant moderns, etc., the Jewish freethinkers who form the basis of this study were foundational in constructing a radical Jewish political culture in the United States.<sup>27</sup> The Jewish freethinkers in this study encountered new opportunities and underwent transformations, some in Eastern Europe, some in Western Europe, and some in the United States. But whether they departed the Old World with New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago in mind, or they first resided somewhere in Central or Western Europe, most leading Jewish radicals of the 1880s and 1890s hailed from the Russian Empire.

The Russian Empire was a dynamic sociopolitical landscape. Traditional Jewish communal authority had been declining since the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late eighteenth century, which brought millions of Jews under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prussia, and the Russian Empire.<sup>28</sup> In Russia, whether it was

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*Secular Culture*, 24. Also see Dr. Lilienthal, "God, Religion, and our American Constitution.," *Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Dec. 16, 1870; "Church and State," *Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Feb. 24, 1871; a republished essay by John W. Chadwick, "Liberty and the Church in America.," *Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Oct. 11, 1872; Rev. Dr. Wise, "A Defense of the Constitution.," *Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Feb. 9, 1872; "Christianizing the Nation.," *Jewish Messenger* (New York, NY), Jan. 27, 1871. On Jews in the antebellum years, see Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 101. A notable exception occurred in 1856. After reporting on a group of irreligious Jews in St. Louis, Missouri, Isaac Mayer Wise's *Israelite* remarked, "We are determined to give each his due, and the infidel and atheist his flogging as often as possible." See "They are not all Infidels.," *The Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Aug. 22, 1856. This piece was somewhat controversial, however. See the letter from Sam L. Moses, "Discourtesy," *Occident* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 1, 1856.

<sup>27</sup> On the many "forms" of freethought among Jewish freethinkers in modern times, see Shmuel Feiner, *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, trans. Chaya Noar (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 1–25.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), Part II and Part IV; Eliyahu Stern, *Jewish Materialism: The Intellectual Revolution of the 1870s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 32–3. On the emigration figures from Eastern Europe, see Lloyd P. Gartner, "Jewish Migrants En Route from Europe to North America: Traditions and Realities," *Jewish History* 1, no. 2 (1986): 62; Gartner estimates that eighty percent of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe to the United States came from the Russian Empire.

the harsh decrees of Tsar Nicholas I (r. 1825-1855) or the liberal reforms of Tsar Alexander II (r. 1855-1881), socioeconomic prospects for most Jews steadily declined, as did the power of traditional Jewish authorities. The *maskilim*, or advocates of the Haskalah, attempted to shift Eastern European Jewry into alignment with non-Jewish populations. They framed adopting Haskalah ideologies as a kind of conversion. “Becoming a *maskil*,” scholar Jillian Vanessa Davidson stated, “was... a kind of baptism from which one emerged from the darkness of ignorance, shrouded in the purity and light of wisdom.” The *maskilim* likewise “perceived of themselves as ‘martyrs,’ sacrificing themselves for the benefit of Jewish society at the ‘altar of enlightenment’.”<sup>29</sup> And yet, as historian Shmuel Feiner said, the Haskalah “spoke and preached with a dual tongue.” The *maskilim*, that is, “did not propose a total abrogation of tradition”; it was a “transposition from a world depicted as one-dimensional to a more complex world, but in no case was there a total abandonment of the community, Jewish society, or Judaism.”<sup>30</sup>

Movements like Zionism and socialism, bolstered by political tensions, also challenged religious authority and traditional observance. Urbanization in cities like Odessa and Kyiv further exposed many Jews to secular knowledge and new political ideas.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, into the last quarter of the nineteenth century, “religion,” *as a distinct category of human existence*, played a negligible role in how unemancipated Eastern European Jews understood Jewish

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<sup>29</sup> Jillian Vanessa Davidson, “A ‘Secular Catastrophe’ in Eastern Europe: The Great War and the Reconstruction of Modern Jewish Memory” (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003), 49.

<sup>30</sup> Shmuel Feiner, “Towards a Historical Definition of the Haskalah,” in *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, eds. Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), 211. Also see Olga Litvak, “Haskalah: Jewish Practice and Romantic Religion,” in *Routledge Handbook of Jewish Ritual and Practice*, ed. Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2023), 203–14; idem, *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Amir Banbaji, “*Melitsah*, Rhetoric, and Modern Hebrew Literature: A Study of Haskalah Literary Theory,” *Prooftexts* 38 (2020): 245.

<sup>31</sup> Historian Eric L. Goldstein summarized: “Overseas immigration was itself a reflection of the much larger set of social and demographic revolutions that were transforming the face of eastern European Jewry.” See Eric L. Goldstein, “The Great Wave: Eastern European Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1880-1924,” in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 72.

collectivity.<sup>32</sup> Imperial contexts would prove more amenable to what scholar Noam Pianko identified as “nationalist paradigms of collective identity”—“rigid boundaries between national groups, the assertion of a shared essential national quality, and the shift to grounding collective narratives in secular history rather than religious narratives.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite a range of backgrounds, from the more secularized to the more traditional, many leading Jewish radicals from Russia had taken advantage of expanding opportunities for secular education under the relatively liberal Alexander II. A revolutionary spirit and embrace of Russian culture regularly accompanied secular education, and the combination generally signaled that the members of this budding Jewish intelligentsia had rejected centuries-old communal norms distinguishing Jews from non-Jews.<sup>34</sup> In the Eastern European Jewish context, where “religion” was not yet widely considered a discreet part of Jewish life, abandoning traditional piety was part of the broader rejection of supposedly parochial communal norms.<sup>35</sup> In his memoirs, Jewish philosopher Khayim Zhitlovsky (1865-1943) offered a concise summary of his personal, near-totalizing departure from Jewish belonging during these years. “One thing had

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<sup>32</sup> Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 6, 111–2.

<sup>33</sup> Noam Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 17; also see pp. 22–4.

<sup>34</sup> Scholar Steven Cassedy identified three basic models for entry into this group, with varying degrees of connection of Judaism and Eastern Europe Jewish life. See Steven Cassedy, *To the Other Shore: The Russian Jewish Intellectuals Who Came to America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 9–14; Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 16–17.

<sup>35</sup> As historian Tony Michels summarized, “Acquisition of secular knowledge frequently resulted in rebellion against religious observance, belief in God, parental authority, and communal allegiance.” See Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 31. Zimmer gives a similar summary: “The *inteligentn*, as the leftist Jewish intelligentsia was known, therefore rejected religion, spoke Russian instead of Yiddish, and viewed Jewish culture as anachronistic. Most were sympathetic to or active within the Russian populist, nihilist, or socialist movements, prompting some to flee to avoid arrest.” See Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 17. Some Jewish radicals, like Benyomen Faygenboym and Leo Rozentsvayg, generally maintained these sentiments throughout their radical careers. Rozentsvayg, for example, stated in 1916: “the old generation, who live in a religion from the time of the pyramids, can’t attract the young generation, who live and operate under the light of the sun of the twentieth century.” See L. Rozentsvayg, *Brismile* (New York: author, 1916), 8. In *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe wrote that strictly observant Jewish immigrants only had “a parochialism bred by centuries of isolation, and a heritage of fear, withdrawal, insularity” upon which to hang their hats. See Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 70.

been settled completely,” he wrote of himself and his comrades, “We had already known for certain that we were not Jews.”<sup>36</sup>

Under the influence of Russia’s revolutionary culture of the 1860s and 1870s, the Jews who entertained revolution encountered an array of philosophies.<sup>37</sup> In one way or another, most eventual leaders of the Jewish labor movement in the United States and Western Europe imbibed the broadly influential intellectual currents of their day. Some voraciously read the Russian Nihilists of the 1860s, most notably Nikolai Chernyshevsky. This intellectual current stressed scientific materialism and a rejection of conventional moral codes. Many also felt the pull of Russian Populism in the 1870s, a current emphasizing the intelligentsia’s role in the political and cultural development of the common people. Certain Russian revolutionary movements even welcomed Jews into their ranks. The Russian Jews who embraced revolution swam in a political culture promising individual and collective transformation and steeped in traditions of propaganda (word) and agitation (deed).<sup>38</sup>

Revolutionaries certainly took different tones when rejecting traditional religious observance, responses likely depending on numerous factors. Eminent socialist Morris Vintshevsky (1856-1932), left Russia earlier than most, arriving in London in 1879, where he frequented local freethinking circles. Well before he departed, however, the sounds of Jewish religious life—its prayers, the voices of its authorities, etc.—had become grating.<sup>39</sup> Vintshevsky

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<sup>36</sup> Qtd. in Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 13. [Khayim Zhitlovsky, *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn* (New York: Dr. Khayim Zhitlovsky Yubiley Komitet, 1935), vol. 1: 236–7] Though analyzing a very different, modern Jewish context, anthropologist Ayala Fader called doubts like these “life-changing doubts,” see Fader, *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), Ch. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 2–3, esp. pp. 59–62.

<sup>39</sup> Already a freethinker when he arrived in London, Vintshevsky remembered regularly visiting the “Hall of Science,” what he called “the temple of the London freethinkers,” where he heard lectures by political radicals and unconventional religious figures, like famous theosophists. See Morris Vintshevsky, *Gezamlte verk*, ed. Kalmon Marmor (New York: Frayhey, 1928), vol. 8: 188. For an earlier version, see Morris Vintshevsky, “Eleonora Marks [Eleanor Marx], ihr liebes-leben un ihr tragisher toyt.,” *Tsukunft* (Jun. 1918): 349–54.

recalled, “For me, and not for me alone in those days [in Russia], unbelief and hatred for any kind of faith had reached the highest degree of fanaticism.”<sup>40</sup> Others would remember reaching the apex of their antireligion after relocating. Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), later the editor of the socialist daily *Forverts*, was securely a freethinker when he joined Vilna’s revolutionary circles. But, because his parents were observant, he would participate in their Passover seder. It was in New York when, he noted, “I was at my most fanatical.”<sup>41</sup> The intensity of Vintshevsky and Cahan’s antireligion, at least as they described it years later, was certainly rare, but declining observance among the intelligentsia was the norm.<sup>42</sup>

The assassination of Alexander II (1881), ensuing pogroms (1881-1882), and repeal of liberal reforms (1882) left many Russified Jews alienated from the Russian intelligentsia into which they sought entry.<sup>43</sup> Those who fought to discard Jewishness suddenly felt hurled back into its orbit. Though already in London at the time, the previously mentioned Vintshevsky remembered the pogroms as profoundly impactful. He and his Jewish, revolutionary friends were

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<sup>40</sup> Qtd. in Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Ab. Cahan, “My First Pesach In America—in 1883,” trans. Chana Pollack, March 29, 2018, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://forward.com/culture/397340/my-first-pesach-in-american-1883/>; Pollack’s translation is only part of the original article, see Ab. Cahan, “Mayn ershter peysekhn in amerike,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 7, 1936. Abraham Cahan was born into a more traditional, religious home and learned Russian away from the watchful eye of his parents. He joined Vilna’s revolutionary circles in the 1870s and graduated from the Vilna Jewish Teacher’s Institute in 1881. See Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben* (New York: Forverts Association, 1926-31), vol. 1: 123, 225, 227–31; idem, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, trans. Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969); idem, *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan*, ed. Moses Rischin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Seth Lipsky, *The Rise of Abraham Cahan*, annotated edition (New York: Schocken, 2013); Ehud Manor, *Forward: The Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts) Newspaper: Immigrants, Socialism and Jewish Politics in New York, 1890-1917* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009). Also see Elias Tcherikower, ed., *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, trans. Aaron Antonovsky (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1961), 248. Another venerable figure in the Yiddish press, Philip Krants, was raised in a more Russified home, but he too joined revolutionary circles in the 1870s and studied at St. Petersburg’s Polytechnic Institute. See Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 97. There were other oddities with other radicals. On the oddities of A.Y. Netter, for example, see Bernard Vaynshteyn, *Di yidishe yunyon in amerike: Bleter, geshikhte un erinerungen* (New York: Feraynigte Yidishe Geveerkshafte, 1929), 116–7.

<sup>42</sup> In Steven Cassedy’s words, “Far more common than outright apostasy... was a simple rejection of Jewish religion and daily practice in favor of a secular worldview.” See Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 32; Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 16–17.

“thrown down from the heights of Russian citizenship (*birgershaft*) into the Jewish burrow (*kanure*).”<sup>44</sup> Even Russia’s revolutionary movements seemed to reject their Jewish members. Some dispirited Russified Jewish intellectuals responded by refocusing attention on actualizing Jewish interests among Eastern European Jews, creating a fertile ground for Jewish nationalism. Others responded by migrating west, toward Western Europe and the United States. For those who ended up on American shores, they joined a stream of newly arriving Jews who, by the 1920s, when the U.S. Congress clamped down on open immigration, numbered almost two and a half million.<sup>45</sup>

### **Freethinkers or *Apikorsim*? Notes on Terminology**

“Freethinkers” and “freethought” in the Jewish context present several terminological challenges. First, there was a general problem regarding how to define secularizing Jews in modern times. As functional cognates of freethought entered Jewish culture, they often became politically inflected. A prime example was “freigeisterei” in the nineteenth century’s German Jewish intellectual spheres. As the German *maskilim* promoted acculturation, they struggled to fence the modernization processes embraced by other Jews. They used “freigeisterei” to label

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<sup>44</sup> Vintshevsky, *Gezamlte verk*, vol. 10: 324. In the Anglo-American press in the 1890s, Cahan would write an evocative, fictional description of a pogrom’s impact on secularized Jewish intellectuals in 1881. See Abraham Cahan, “The Russian Jew in America,” *Atlantic Monthly* (1898), 128; entire piece, see pp. 128–39; also see Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, xvii.

<sup>45</sup> Revolutionaries, for example, filled the ranks of Am Olam (“Eternal People”), a Jewish agriculturalist movement hoping to transform themselves while tilling American soil. Though most Am Olam colonies in the United States quickly faded, their idealistic aims brought seminal leaders of the Jewish labor movement to the United States in the early 1880s. In 1881, after Russian police searched Cahan residence for radical literature, he departed for the United States with Am Olam. See Zalman Reyzen, “Cahan, Abraham,” *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* (Vilna: Vilner Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1928-1929) vol. 3: 375–87. Am Olam also brought A.Y. Netter, Avrom Kaspé (1861-1929), Mikhl Zametkin (1859-1935), Alexander Harkavy (1863-1939), and Dovid Edelshtat, 1866-1892). Others departed Russia without joining such movements. Krants fled to Western Europe (settling in London in 1883) the same year Cahan left Russia. Reyzen, “Krants, Philip,” *Leksikon*, vol. 3: 728–40. Most references to Reyzen’s *Leksikon* are the volumes published in 1928 and 1929. I occasionally reference the following edition: Zalman Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur un prese*, ed. Sh. Niger (Warsaw: Tsentral, 1914).

modernization-run-amok, and thus the word developed a pejorative connotation.<sup>46</sup> “Freethinker” and “freethought” became similarly complicated in the American context. In 1893, Arthur Dembitz, staff member at *The American Hebrew*, an Anglo-American weekly, highlighted the everyday slipperiness of “freethinker” and “fanatic,” two discursively linked words. He wrote: “If we judge by the expressions of a certain class, every one (*sic*) who pays less attention to religious ceremonies than they is a freethinker or skeptic; while such as manifests a more thoroughly absorbing devotion to religious subjects are branded as fanatics.”<sup>47</sup> Dembitz’s quote suggests that “freethinker” was subject to the rhetorical play of in-the-moment interpersonal politics.

In Yiddish, especially American Yiddish, there was another layer of complexity. *Der fraydenker* (m.) or *di fraydenkerin* (f.), transliterated directly from the English, had an effective, albeit imperfect analogue in the Mishnaic word for heretic, rendered in Yiddish as *apikoyres* (pl. *apikorsim*). *Apikoyres*, entering Yiddish from Greek by way of Aramaic, originally derived from the name “Epicurus,” the philosopher popularly associated with hedonism. In Jewish tradition, *apikoyres* was reserved for Jews who had no share in the coming afterlife. While some American Yiddish writers did not necessarily make *fraydenker* directly equivalent to *apikoyres*, most coupled them. In the 1890s, Yiddish lexicographer Alexander Harkavy defined *apikoyres* as “heretic, unbeliever, free-thinker.”<sup>48</sup> An esteemed dictionary, compiled in 1911 by Yiddish writers Dr. Charles David Spivak and Solomon Bloomgarten, the latter better known as Yehoash,

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<sup>46</sup> See for example, Shmuel Feiner, “The Pseudo-Enlightenment and the Question of Jewish Modernization,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996): 71, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Harun [Arthur Dembitz], “Little Truths,” *American Hebrew* (New York, NY), Jan. 20, 1893.

<sup>48</sup> *Yidish-Englishes verterbukh*, compiled by Alexander Harkavy (New York: Joseph L. Werbelowsky, 1901), 73; the 1910 edition included the same definition of *apikoyres*. See *Yidish-Englishes verterbukh*, compiled by Alexander Harkavy, twenty-second edition (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1910), 73. Also see “*fraydenker*” and “*apikoyres*” *Comprehensive Yiddish-English Dictionary*, eds. Solon Beinfeld and Harry Bochner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

featured a similar definition for *apikoyres*: “One who denies a god, a freethinker.”<sup>49</sup> Jewish tradition offered other words that became associated with “freethinker” and “freethought,” like *min* (pl., *minim*; heretic, from Gnostic) and *koyfer-beiker* (or simply *koyfer*, pl., *kufrim-beiker*; meaning atheist), but none resonated as powerfully as *apikoyres*. Furthermore, while *apikoyres* and freethinker were used almost interchangeably, *apikoyres* was more likely to have Old-World connotations. This was especially true when writers attached qualifiers to the *apikoyres*, the most noteworthy being *shtetl-apikoyres* or *alt-modish apikoyres*. But *apikoyres* could also refer to *religious* Jews who deviated from historic norms, like the *maskilim*, or even Reform Jews. Because this study focuses on irreligious Jews, it only considers references to *apikorsim* where they overlap with discussions about freethought and depictions of freethinkers. Since *apikoyres* (heretic) and *apikorses* (heresy) were specific to a Jewish cultural milieu, and to avoid associations with heretics or heresy in other religious traditions (e.g., Christianity), I have chosen to preserve these words in the Yiddish, rather than translate them.

Freethought in the Jewish immigrant context had a particular accent even as it reflected broader norms. Although many freethinking Jewish immigrants arrived on American shores at the start of freethought’s Golden Age in the United States, and they embraced the work of prominent native-born freethinkers, like Ingersoll, freethinking Jewish immigrants did not establish formal ties to native-born freethinkers. In her history of freethought and radical politics in New York, historian Rachel Scharfman found that, apart from language and class differences, native-born freethinkers in the city had a broader range of political views than their Jewish

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<sup>49</sup> *Yidish verterbukh*, compiled by Dr. C.D. Spivak and Sol. Bloomgarden (New York: Ferlag “Yehoash,” 1911), 15. For another definition: “In Yiddish, the word *apikoyres* has the special meaning of an unbeliever in religion, of a person with free sensibilities (lit., *frayzinnigen*).” See the note marked \* in Ph. Krants, *Aristotel* (New York: International Library Publishing Company, 1903), 21. Finally, see another interesting comment about *apikorsim* and freethinkers: Royten yidel, “Brief meevert layam,” *Arbeter tsaytung* (hereafter cited as *AT*) (New York, NY), Jun. 5, 1891.

immigrant counterparts.<sup>50</sup> Freethinking Jewish immigrants still held diverse views on religion and had varying political alignments, with some associating with specific political movements popular and others declaring themselves *umparteyish*, or nonpartisan, but the most vocal freethinking Jewish immigrants tended to be political radicals, namely socialists and anarchists. Even then, freethinking Jewish radicals ranged from the fiercely antireligious to tolerant atheists, deists, and agnostics. Most also recognized their brand of politics was not one and the same as freethought, though they usually assumed fellow radicals were freethinkers.<sup>51</sup>

The discourses surrounding freethought and freethinkers intersected other discourses. Race and gender, for instance, were regular features in discussions about freethought and freethinkers. When journalists wrote about freethinkers who wanted to disavow Jewishness but could not (often against their will), they sometimes described an essential Jewishness through both innate characteristics (e.g., a “Jewish heart” or “Jewish soul”) and racial language (e.g., a “Jewish nose” or “Jewish face”).<sup>52</sup> In the words of , “As Jewish immigrant writers struggled to define their own Jewishness, particularly as they developed secularized versions in response to assimilation pressures, they often fell back upon a stock of philo-Semitic and anti-Semitic stereotypes, perpetuating even as they tried to complicate them.” Gender stereotypes were also common. Male Yiddish writers, regardless of ideology, were likely to describe freethinking Jewish women as inconsistent or illogical when compared to their male

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<sup>50</sup> Rachel Scharfman, “On Common Ground: Freethought and Radical Politics in New York City, 1890-1917” (PhD diss., New York University, 2005), 32, also 33 n.64; also see Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 153.

<sup>51</sup> Scharfman, “On Common Ground,” 32. Even at the time, some onlookers found differences among freethinkers—in terms of politics, language, and class—obvious. See, for example, Sopher, “Washington, D.C.,” *American Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Sep. 10, 1886.

<sup>52</sup> During the Progressive Era, the wider American culture’s depiction of Jews, as Eric Goldstein has shown, was ambivalent. Jews could be both the example par excellence of modernity’s benefits and its disruptions. See Goldstein, “The Unstable Other: Locating the Jew in Progressive-Era American Racial Discourse,” *American Jewish History* 89:4 (2001): 383–409. Sharon Beth Oster, “The Ethics of Evaluation: The Immigrant, the Cosmopolitan, and the ‘Jew’ in American Literary Realism, 1880-1925 (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2003), 4.

counterparts. Similarly, when freethinking men debated approaches to religion in the Yiddish press, they occasionally denigrated their opposition for being “*vayberish*” (here, “womanly”) or “romantic” (here, signaling feminine). In her analysis of Jews and gender stereotypes, Riv-Ellen Prell argued that Jews in the United States—the immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century included—used gender stereotypes to map “their anxieties about Americanization and mobility onto the terrain of one another’s lives.”<sup>53</sup> The discourses surrounding freethought and freethinkers reflected this broader use of gender stereotypes.<sup>54</sup>

Studying freethought and freethinkers in the American Yiddish press uncovers other terminological issues. For one, it reveals changing interpretations of “*yidishkeyt*,” typically rendered into English as “Jewishness.” Scholars have often understood *yidishkeyt* exclusively in the sense of a secular Jewish identity. During the mass immigration period, however, Yiddish journalists did not necessarily use the word in this fashion. In the 1880s and 1890s, *yidishkeyt* commonly referred to the world of piety.<sup>55</sup> As scholar C. Bezalel Sherman summarized, “Never before had [these Jewish immigrants] seen a state or community that was not wedded to organized religion; and there was no bridge to span the gulf that opened between the total identification of Jewishness with Jewish religion that they had known in their native lands and the system of religious freedom they had found in this country.”<sup>56</sup> American Yiddish journalists in the early 1900s, in fact, debated whether *yidishkeyt* could be understood in a secular manner. In subsequent decades, both the radical Yiddish press and conservative Yiddish press adapted to secular notions of *yidishkeyt*. Words like *yidntum*, rendered today as “Jewry,”

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<sup>53</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 10. Also see Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

<sup>54</sup> Also see Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 52.

<sup>55</sup> Polland, “‘May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?’,” 377–8; idem, “‘Sacredness of the Family,’” 270–4.

<sup>56</sup> C. Bezalel Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” *Judaism* 3, no. 4 (1954): 356.

could be just as complicated, sometimes implying a sense of piety and sometimes not. Finally, this dissertation avoids the designation “orthodox” except when historical actors used the word themselves. The conservative Yiddish press and radical Yiddish press almost always contrasted freethinkers with *frume yidn*, meaning observant, devout, or pious Jews. The conservative *Tageblat*, for example, rarely used “orthodox” when describing observant Jewish immigrants.<sup>57</sup> Even freethinking Yiddish journalists, when ridiculing pious Jews, used *frumak* (derived from *frum*), meaning “zealot” or “hypocrite.”<sup>58</sup> “Orthodox” was not common in the Yiddish press before the 1910s and 1920s, and thus I do not use it as often as “pious Jews” or “observant Jews.”

## Religion and Irreligion in the Study of American Jewish History: Approach and

### Methodology

Scholars have historically paid scant attention to the religious lives of the Jewish immigrants who arrived on American shores between the 1880s and early 1920s.<sup>59</sup> This has followed, at least

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<sup>57</sup> Gil Ribak, “The Organ of the Jewish People: The *Yidishes Tageblat* and Uncharted Conservative Yiddish Culture in America,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112, no. 4 (2022): 799. Ribak notes that Yiddish journalists sometimes used *gute yidn*, or good Jews, to describe the religiously observant, though it generally signaled a Jewish loyalty toward fellow Jews, irrespective of piety.

<sup>58</sup> Also see the definitions of “*frum*” and “*frumak*” in Beinfeld and Bochner’s *Comprehensive Yiddish-English Dictionary*.

<sup>59</sup> Scholars have been adept at painting a complex picture of Jewish immigrants during the mass immigration period. But religion has not necessarily played a significant role in their analysis. See, for example, Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925*, ed. Allon Schoener (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967); Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908-1922* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); Howe, *World of Our Fathers*; Gerald Sorin, *American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Sydney Weinberg, *World of our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and Ethnic Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997); Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, 1881-1905* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*. Some analyses of Jewish immigrant life from 1880-1924 have been comparative, for examples see Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrants in New York City, 1880-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985);

in part, how many immigrant Jews themselves described the religious differences between Eastern Europe and the United States—they often framed their religious experiences as a declension.<sup>60</sup> Works like Hutchins Hapgood’s *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), Cahan’s *Yekl* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (serial, 1913; book, 1917), Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), Rose Cohen’s *Out of the Shadow* (1918), and Moses Weinberger’s *Jews and Judaism in New York* (1887), among others, testified to the declining power of traditional religious authorities and a widespread laxity in observance.<sup>61</sup> A declension narrative does reflect certain truths, but the American context, with its religious voluntarism and robust consumer culture, did not destroy many Jewish religious traditions but transformed them.<sup>62</sup>

Several scholars recognized the absence of work on the religious lives of the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. These scholars filled the void by mainly focusing on religious structures and the people who created them. In putting religion back into the conversation, that

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Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York: 1880-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For analysis of the children of immigrants in the United States, see Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>60</sup> Polland “‘Sacredness of the Family’,” 5.

<sup>61</sup> For the works mentioned, see Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*; Abraham Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896); idem, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1917); Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912); Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1918); Moses Weinberger, *People Walk on Their Heads: Moses Weinberger’s Jews and Judaism in New York*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Sarna (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981). For general conversation on religious observance and Jewish immigrants, see Jenna Weissman Joselit, “What Happened to New York’s ‘Jewish Jews’?: Moses Rischin’s ‘The Promised City’ Revisited,” *American Jewish History* 73, no. 2 (1983): 163–72; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 162–5.

<sup>62</sup> As Annie Polland suggested, “the immigrants who came to America underwent sweeping changes as they parted from their old ways of life, their family, language and set forth on the road to Americanization.” See Polland “‘Sacredness of the Family’,” 2. Also see Menachem Blondheim, “Divine Comedy: Jewish Orthodox Sermons in America, 1881-1939,” in *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 203–6. On how American religiosity shaped the reception of secular ideas, see Evyatar Friesel, “Ahad Ha-Amism in American Zionist Thought,” in *At the Crossroads: Essays on Ahad Ha’am*, ed. Jacques Kornberg (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 133–41.

is, they concentrated on how immigrant rabbis and immigrant lay leaders constructed religious institutions in the United States.<sup>63</sup> The resulting narrative was one in which the embattled religious, namely the immigrant “orthodox,” crawled toward successful institution building, even if the fruits of success did not ripen for decades. The primary action of Jewish immigrant religious life, it presumed, occurred in formal institutions. While this narrative put religion back into view, it reinforced a rigid religious/secular dichotomy and pushed the study of American Jewish history toward a denominational model. By itself, the denominational model does not account for the breath of religious expression and diversity of religious discourses among immigrant Jews.<sup>64</sup>

Borrowing from the study of American religion more broadly, recent scholarship showed the promise of applying a “lived religion” approach.<sup>65</sup> Historian Annie Polland, for example, employed this approach in her notable articles on how immigrant Jews adapted religious expression to the American context, namely its voluntarism, which encouraged religious diversity, and its robust commercial culture, which turned market activity into sacred activity. Contrary to a simplistic, secularization thesis, she proved Jewish immigrants during this period

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<sup>63</sup> Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Gurock's nuanced work accounts for some aspects of everyday observance, but his main foci are institutions and rabbis, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Resisters and Accommodators: Varieties of Orthodox Rabbis in America, 1886-1983,” in *American Jewish Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1996), 1–62; idem, *Orthodox Jews in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2009); idem, “Twentieth-Century American Orthodoxy's Era of Non-Observance, 1900-1960,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, 9 (2000): 87–107; idem, “Resisters and Accommodators' Revisited: Reflections on the Study of Orthodoxy in America,” in *American Jewry: Transcending the European Experience?*, eds. Christian Wiese and Cornelia Wilhelm (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 223–37; Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>64</sup> Polland, “May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?,” 376.

<sup>65</sup> In describing lived religion, Anne S. Brown and David Hall specifically stated that it revealed “how ordinary men and women make their way through a set of choices, fashioning, as they do so, a mode of being religious that is responsive to needs that arise within social life.” See Brown and Hall, “Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Early New England,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 62.

were, in her words, “eager to maintain certain religious customs and to innovate with others.”<sup>66</sup>

Also noteworthy, Polland employed the Yiddish press to show how Yiddish journalists of all stripes, from the strictly observant to the fiercely freethinking, debated sacred matters. This lived religion approach opened a door to understanding the fluidity of religious discourses in the immigrant period.

By thinking broadly about religion, my study also moves beyond a denominational model and toward the everyday discourses of religion in society—read through newspapers.<sup>67</sup>

Centralizing how Jewish immigrant journalists in the United States depicted freethinkers and debated freethought, it too reveals how oft-assumed boundaries between sacred and secular, religious and irreligious, regularly collapsed. In so doing, this study borrows from the work of David Chidester on religion in American popular culture. In *Authentic Fakes* (2005), Chidester considered how the shapers of American popular culture, whether popular preachers, marketing strategists, consumers (as market influencers), etc., have long found the word “religion” useful “as a figure of speech.”<sup>68</sup> “Religion” in America has been, he summarized, “subject to

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<sup>66</sup> Polland “‘Sacredness of the Family’,” 16. Also see idem, “Working for the Sabbath: Sabbath in the Jewish Immigrant Neighborhoods of New York,” *Labor* 6, no. 1 (2009): 33–56; C. Bezalel Sherman offered a similar view, albeit less nuanced. He wrote: “This is not to say that all, or even a majority, of the early Jewish workers were radicals or antagonistic to religion. Quite the contrary. Most of them remained steadfast in their religious loyalty, joined Orthodox congregations in large numbers and went to incredible lengths to safeguard their spiritual heritage.” See Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism, and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 357. Also consider, for example, the popularity of *sforim* (religious books) among immigrant Jews. See *Catalogue of the Hebrew Books of Jacob Druckerman, Bookseller* (New York: Druckerman, 1899). AJHS Monographs, Z7070.Z9 D72; and Isaiah Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* XVI (1976): 350.

<sup>67</sup> In *Beyond the Synagogue*, Rachel Gross states that lived religion “focuses our attention on the ways in which people enact their religious identities on a daily basis, through ordinary activities such as eating, cooking, shopping, reading, or entertaining.” See Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 7.

<sup>68</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 49. Gershon Winer, I would suggest, takes an interesting approach to religion and secular Yiddish culture, an approach to which I am indebted, see Winer, “The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism,” *Judaism* 41, no. 1 (1992): 80–96. Also see Arthur A. Goren, “Sacred and Secular: The Place of Public Funerals in the Immigrant Life of American Jews,” *Jewish History* 8, no. ½ (1994): 269–305; Rhoda Helfman Kaufman, “The Yiddish Theater in New York and the Immigrant Jewish Community: Theater as Secular Ritual” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1986); Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor

journalistic license, rhetorical excesses, and intellectual sleight of hand... The very term *religion* is contested and at stake in the discourses and practices of popular culture.”<sup>69</sup> “Religion” was also contested in the American Yiddish press, and freethought and freethinkers were stages for contesting the boundaries between the sacred and the secular.

While “religion” and “religious” are key terms in this study, I use them without strict definitions. I do not define the terms because the way Jewish immigrant freethinkers, and their critics, used “religion” and the “religious” depended on context. They sometimes employed “religion” as an ill-defined “something” beyond oneself. Political radicals often talked about religion’s origins in light of popular science and popular anthropology—religious feelings arose from human fear of and desire to control the natural world. But freethinking Jewish immigrants could just as well define “religion” as the authority structures associated with conventional religious traditions, e.g., churches, rabbis, theologians, yeshivas, etc.

By analyzing representations of Jewish immigrant freethinkers in the Yiddish press, I follow a specific subset of scholarship in the study of American Jewish history. Historians and literature scholars have frequently turned to visual and literary representations—images, fiction, advice columns, editorials, etc.—to understand how editors, writers, and readers used the popular Yiddish press to negotiate adapting to American norms and maintaining Jewish distinctiveness. Some of the most notable scholarship focusing on representation has focused on gender, race, class, and relations with non-Jews.<sup>70</sup> Scholars have not yet fully analyzed how Jewish immigrant

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Movement,” 354–65; idem, “Socialism and Nationalism,” *Judaism* 1, Iss. 4 (1952): 334–9; Gennady Estraiikh and Zalman Newfield, “Grandfathers Against Bar Mitzvahs: Secular Immigrant Jews Confront Religion in 1940s America,” *Zutot* 9 (2012): 73–84; Israel Knox, “Jewish Secularism and the Sabbath,” *Judaism* 31, no.1 (1982): 70–4; Ellen M. Umansky, *From Christian Science to Jewish Science: Spiritual Healing and American Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 49–50. Italics his.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*; Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*; Ellen Deborah Kellman, “The Newspaper Novel in the Jewish Daily Forward, 1900-1940: Fiction as Entertainment and Serious Literature” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2000); Gil Ribak, *Gentile New York: The*

intellectuals represented irreligion in the American Yiddish press. Similarly, recent scholarship on freethinking subcultures in the United States, e.g., the work of Leigh Eric Schmidt and Susan Jacoby (atheists/freethinkers), as well as Christopher Cameron (Black freethinkers), has centered almost exclusively on the anglophone world.<sup>71</sup> A focus on freethinking Yiddish journalists gives scholars of American religion and American irreligion a glimpse into how a group of non-anglophone freethinkers intersected a wider movement.

## Chapters

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*Images of Non-Jews among Jewish Immigrants* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Jessica Kirzane, “The Melting Pot: Interethnic Romance in Jewish American Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2017); Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Shulamith Z. Berger, “The Making of the American *Baleboste*/Housewife: Images of Women in Advertisements in the Yiddish Press of the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Di Froyen: Conference Proceedings: Women and Yiddish: Tribute to the Past, Directions for the Future* (New York: National Council of Jewish Women, New York Section, 1997); Steven M. Cohen and Paula Hyman, eds. *The Jewish Family: Myths and Reality* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986); Deborah Dash Moore, “The Urban Vision of East European Jewish Immigration to New York,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1981): 31–8; Ewa Morawska, “Changing Images of the Old Country in the Development of Ethnic Identity among East European Immigrants, 1880s-1930s: A Comparison of Jewish and Slavic Representations,” *YIVO Annual* (1993): 273–345; Rachel Rojanski, “Socialist Ideology, Traditional Rhetoric: Images of East European Jewish Immigrant Women in the Yiddish Socialist Dailies in the United States, 1918-1922,” *American Jewish History* 93, no. 3 (2007): 329–48; Maxine S. Seller, “Defining Socialist Womanhood: The Women’s Page of the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1919,” *American Jewish History* 76, no. 4 (1987): 416–38; Naomi Rebecca Brenner, “Authorial Fictions: Literary and Public Personas in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008); Edward A. Portnoy, “The Creation of a Jewish Cartoon Space in the New York and Warsaw Yiddish press, 1884-1939” (PhD diss., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2008). More general conversations about representation, see Dan Miron, “Literary Image of the Shtetl,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 3 (1995): 1–43; Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). On Yiddish literature, Christianity, and representation, see Freya Dasgupta, “Crucified with the Brother from Galilee: Symbol of the Cross in Modernist Yiddish Imagination,” *Religions* 13, 804 (2022): 1–13.

<sup>71</sup> Schmidt, *Village Atheists*; Jacoby, *Freethinkers*; Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2019); also see Charles McCrary, *Sincerely Held: American Secularism and Its Believers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Hannah K. Scheidt, *Practicing Atheism: Culture, Media, and Ritual in the Contemporary Atheist Network* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Kirsten Fischer, *American Freethinker: Elihu Palmer and the Struggle for Religious Freedom in the New Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Stephen Lalor, *Matthew Tindal, Freethinker: An Eighteenth-Century Assault on Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Charles Mathewes and Christopher McKnight Nichols, eds. *Prophecies of Godlessness: Predictions of America’s Imminent Secularization from the Puritans to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For an interesting piece on freethinking Jews in Europe, see Todd H. Weir, “The Specter of ‘Godless Jewry’: Secularism and the ‘Jewish Question’ in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *Central European History* 46, no. 4 (2013): 815–49. For a broader perspective on Jews and secular thought, see David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Part one (chapters one and two) covers the American Yiddish press between the 1880s and 1904, with a particular interest in the radical Yiddish press. During this period, Jewish radicals used their periodicals to tease out varying approaches to religion. Chapter one considers the journalism of freethinking propagandists in the early years of the Yiddish press. It focuses particular attention on the publications that aligned with the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), a dominant force in the Jewish labor movement through much of the 1890s. The SLP-aligned Yiddish press was antireligious, but its journalists also adopted the SLP's motto, that "religion is a private matter." Using work by some of the most well-known Yiddish journalists of the period, one of which was Cahan, I highlight the complexities in the relationship between Jewish radicals and religion in the 1890s. Chapter two focuses on a period of transition, 1897-1904. This period spans the creation of the *Forverts* in New York and the General Jewish Labor Bund in Vilna to the immediate wake of the Kishinev pogrom (1903). As radical journalists faced internal and external pressures, they debated freethought and depicted freethinkers in order to express anxieties surrounding their distance from Jewish religious life. This chapter includes editorials and short stories appearing in the *Abend blat*, the *Forverts*, and the *Tsukunft*, among others.

Part two (chapters three and four) addresses the years between 1905 and 1914. These years saw a treasure trove of debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers in the American Yiddish press. Debates and depictions built upon the imagery and rhetoric of years prior, but circumstances had clearly changed—acculturation, a new wave of radicals, and the transformation of old-guard cosmopolitans into nationalists shifted the tone many freethinkers took toward religion. Most Jewish radicals stayed anticlerical and generally critical of religion, but many also embraced traditions historically associated with religious observance. Even conservative Yiddish journalists commented favorably on these trends. Chapter three considers

how American Yiddish fiction reflected the changing atmosphere. After discussing new freethinking approaches to religious traditions, this chapter shows how fictional depictions of freethinkers shifted evermore toward a firm embrace of Jewish distinctiveness. It concludes by analyzing ambivalent commentary on freethinkers and freethought in the conservative Yiddish press, with fiction again playing a key role. Chapter four snapshots several instances where Yiddish journalists debated and discussed issues relevant to freethinkers, playing with the word “religion” while doing so. It opens with the advice columns and human-interest stories of the prolific D.M. Hermalin before turning to articles by Yankev Pfeffer, who had socialist ties and edited a conservative weekly. The chapter then turns to the reviews of *Kosher un treyf* (1909), a book by leading socialist and antireligious propagandist Benyomen Faygenboym. His book caused a stir among fellow socialists, and they generally panned his work as that of an antiquated *apikoyres*. The reviews exemplify how the landscape of antireligious propaganda had shifted in little more than a decade. The chapter concludes by examining a 1911 debate among contributors to the *Forverts*. Cahan went beyond tolerance when he advocated freethinking readers attend the Passover seder. His writing on the matter sparked a debate regarding the relationship between freethought, religion, socialism, and Jewishness. The debate showed how the dividing lines between various freethinking radicals had evolved.

Part three (only chapter five) focuses on how the Great War and early interwar period influenced depictions of freethinkers and debates about freethought in the Yiddish press. Global conflict was accompanied by claims of religion’s resurgence, as well as claims of peace between freethinkers and the religious. War was not the only factor encouraging these claims, as some interpreted it as an inevitable acculturation process. Still, many Yiddish journalists used the war to frame changing attitudes. Behind an upsurge in antisemitism in the United States and ongoing

acculturation, the early interwar period saw some continuation of the Great War's themes. Chapter five, and the dissertation as a whole, ends around the time when the influence of the American Yiddish press started declining.

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In an English, semiautobiographical novel, longtime Yiddish journalist and labor activist Tuvye-Borekh Eyges (1875-1960) described how his protagonist, “Mot,” broke from traditional religious norms upon relocating from Vilna to Moscow to London to Boston. Eyges’ Mot first became involved in radical politics as a young man in London’s East End in the 1890s. His conversion to radicalism meant much more than politics:

To become a radical in those days, one had invariably first to abandon religious belief, to deny the existence of God. Then, as a matter of course, one became convinced of the uselessness of religious ceremonies, and then followed the abandonment of church or synagogue attendance. This was considered necessary in order to leave the mind free to consider life from a materialistic, rather than from a theological point of view; to place Nature before God, Darwin before Moses or Christ; to consider Thomas Paine and Robert Ingersoll of greater importance than the rabbi or archbishop. Becoming a freethinker was the stepping stone to a “future” ideal—an ideal relative to the change of the economic system, the change of society, and to later adopting a new religion—the “Social Revolution.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas B. Eyges, *Beyond the Horizon: The Story of a Radical Emigrant* (Boston: Group Free Society, 1944), 75–6.

Though Mot's transformation started in London's East End, it could have happened in Vilna or Moscow, St. Petersburg or Lemberg, Chicago or New York. In the 1870s, 1880s, and much of the 1890s, there were Jews who, as they encountered modernity's shifting sands in various locales, experienced or witnessed the same or similar transformations—from religiously observant to radical and unobservant. Mot, like many others during these years, felt involvement in radical politics *necessitated* severing ties to God and religious observance.<sup>73</sup>

The story this dissertation charts begins with Jewish radicals, albeit in the United States, who felt radical politics necessitated an antireligious stance. What shape should their opposition take? How should they act toward pious family members, coworkers, and acquaintances? Should they spit in the eyes of the rabbis or simply pretend they didn't exist? When Jewish revolutionaries arrived on American shores and turned their attention to constructing a radical culture and converting others, they debated these and similar questions.

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<sup>73</sup> David Philip Shuldiner stated: "Many Jewish revolutionaries abandoned all active identification with Judaism or any aspect of Jewish culture, citing among their arguments the fact that they felt it was incompatible with their internationalism, or that anti-Semitism (within or without the revolutionary movement) made ethnic identification too much of a liability. Among the most decisive factors in their initial departure from the community of tradition was the equation of Judaism with political reaction, more often than not confirmed by the shunning of revolutionaries and their ideas by most members of the community of tradition—the most vocal among the anti-revolutionaries tending to consist of the most pious." See Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 15. David A. Hollinger similarly commented that "Cognitive demystification was a comprehensively Western and ultimately a global movement; secular inquiry could feel liberating in Peoria as well as in Paris, in Baltimore as well as in Berlin." See Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 23. For a situation like Mot's—when a classmate asked the freethinking Mary Antin if she was a Jew, she answered, "No, I wasn't; I was a Freethinker (*sic*)." See Antin, *The Promised Land*, 242.

## **PART ONE: 1880s-1904**

## CHAPTER ONE: “A Mockery of the Jewish Faith”: Jewish Radicals and Antireligious Agitation (1886-1897)

### Introduction

Galas and balls were a provocative part of Jewish radical politics since the early 1880s, but the Yom Kippur balls of the late 1880s and early 1890s proved particularly provocative.<sup>74</sup> The first ever Yom Kippur ball, hosted by a group of freethinkers, took place in London in 1888, but a year later the phenomena spread to New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, and in subsequent years spread even more widely on American shores. Supported and promoted primarily by Jewish anarchists, Yom Kippur balls were a means by which some freethinking Jewish immigrants, both anarchists and ardently antireligious socialists, thumbed their nose at the holy day’s fasting and solemnity with food, revelry, and speeches by radical agitators. Wherever the balls occurred in the United States, they garnered opposition from conservative sectors of the American Jewish populace—the conservative Yiddish press, the Anglo-American Jewish press, and Jewish public officials. The conflicts they provoked, sometimes including fistfights, also drew the eye of non-Jewish media outlets and non-Jewish public officials.<sup>75</sup>

By 1890, a group of Jewish radicals emerged as vocal opponents of Yom Kippur balls. They were the Jewish socialists who published the *Arbeter Tsaytung*, a socialist Yiddish weekly that aligned with the Socialist Labor Party (SLP). The SLP-aligned Yiddish journalists were

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<sup>74</sup> On the legacy of radical balls in generally, see Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 107–8. Also see Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 258.

<sup>75</sup> Rebecca Margolis, “A Tempest in Three Teapots: Yom Kippur Balls in London, New York, and Montreal,” *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études Juives Canadiennes* 9 (2001): 38–84. Also see Eddy Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi: And Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 83. Lectures were important features of the balls. A Yom Kippur meeting (not a ball) in 1904 listed its speakers as Johann Most, Leo Rozentsvayg, and Shoel Yanovsky—all eminent Jewish radicals. See “A groysye fraydenker ferzamlung,” *Fraye arbeter shtime* (hereafter cited as *FASh*) (New York, NY), Sep. 17, 1904. For some of the anarchists’ Yom Kippur events the next year (1905), see *FASh* (New York, NY), Sep. 23, 1905. On the culture of the labor movement more generally, see Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” 342–94.

freethinkers who opposed religious authorities and conventional religious beliefs. But, they also considered religion a matter of private concern, and so they took a stronger stand against audacious antireligious agitation. For some of these SLP-aligned journalists, objecting to Yom Kippur balls was a shift from prior policy—socialist notables had once been involved in Yom Kippur balls. Why did some socialist Yiddish journalists change their stance? The answer lay in conflicts among Jewish radicals and transformations in the radical Yiddish press.

The story of America’s Yom Kippur balls is not yet complete, but several themes percolating in this chapter are already visible. As immigrant radicals who arrived on American shores in the 1880s and 1890s, freethinkers dominated the leadership of the Jewish anarchists and Jewish socialists. Whether atheists, agnostics, deists, or otherwise (most were atheists), they ultimately sought to liberate the Jewish immigrant masses from the “yoke” of religious observance.<sup>76</sup> Both marshaled Yiddish publishing to accomplish this end. Still, their leaders followed distinct paths mapped by non-Jewish radicals. As the differences between Jewish anarchists and Jewish socialists, most especially the SLP’s Yiddish sections, became more pronounced, an underlying debate emerged: What was a freethinker? How should they propagandize for freethought? This debate was connected to disputes between Jewish radicals and the conservative forces they opposed.

This chapter focuses especially on the Jewish socialists’ side of this debate. Throughout the 1890s, some of the most notable journalists in the socialist Yiddish press, like Philip Krants (1858-1922), Abe Cahan, and Benyomen Faygenboym (1860-1932), beat the drum of the SLP’s

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<sup>76</sup> For an example of the association between atheists and socialism, see Sholem Rabinovits, “Hakhalom veshivro.,” *Yidisher vekhter* (New York, NY), Feb. 1, 1912. Rabinovits wrote: “The young element of the Jewish workers, which is almost completely socialistic, is at the same time ‘atheistic,’ and bitter opponents of the religious class in general and pious Jews in particular.”

“religion is private” mantra.<sup>77</sup> While these socialist journalists proclaimed a middle-path stance on religion—not conservative but not aggressively antireligious, they continued to challenge religious ideas and religious authority. For readers, it threatened to muddy the waters. For journalists, it required constant vigilance to explain what “religion is private” meant. The Yiddish periodicals that aligned with the SLP walked a tightrope, and not always well. Emerging from debates about freethinker agitation and propaganda, the most influential group of Jewish radicals, the socialists, charted a middle path between aggressive antireligion and conservatism.

The first section of this chapter considers disputes between the radical Yiddish press and the conservative Yiddish press up to 1889. The second describes how key voices in Jewish socialism charted a middle path on religion. For the SLP’s Yiddish press, their position on religion had clear complexities—they asserted “religion is private” while writing disparagingly about religious rituals and religious authorities. Was there really a middle path? The *Arbeter tsaytung*’s journalists said so, and the chapter continues by exploring how they argued their position to a diverse, sometimes confused readership. But, if Jewish socialists envisioned a world without conventional religion, what could they offer in its place? Jewish radicals fought conventional religion by framing social revolution in sacred terms. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how socialist notables sacralized radicalism (and with it, freethought) in the 1890s.

### **Jewish Immigrant Radicals and Antireligious Propaganda in the 1880s**

When Jewish revolutionaries began settling on New York’s Lower East Side in the early 1880s, they embraced a Russian revolutionary identity, even fashioning a community called the

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<sup>77</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Iz religyon a privat zakhe?,” *AT* (New York, NY), May 26, 1893; idem, “Iz religyon a privat zakhe?,” *AT* (New York, NY), Jun. 2, 1893. Krants affirmed the German Social Democratic Party’s position, that religion is a private matter, in 1890, see Ph. Krants, “Di daytshe sotsyal-demokratye, I.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Nov. 7, 1890; idem, *Vos heyst sotsyal-demokratye?* (New York: Arbeter Tsaytung, 1894). Also see B.F., “Sotsyalizmus un religyon.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Nov. 29, 1895.

“Russian Colony.”<sup>78</sup> Intellectual solidarity aside, they felt adrift. Like most Jewish immigrants during these early years, many members of the “Russian Colony” lived in dilapidated tenements and worked in sweatshops. With negative attitudes toward Yiddish, they often spoke Russian among themselves. [Some members began or resurrected their careers as journalists through America’s Russian press.<sup>79</sup>] Coming from a context where they valorized, or were directly involved in, clandestine revolutionary activity, radical political culture in the United States, with its emphasis on unions and the ballot box, seemed to pale in the face of more immediate, aggressive tactics for social change.<sup>80</sup>

Several scholars have shown how the Lower East Side’s German immigrant radicals aided the Russian Colony’s transformation from a revolutionary spirit into radical movements. While some Jewish immigrant revolutionaries in New York had already encountered Marxism in Eastern Europe, contact with German radicals turned them toward socialism and anarchism. Jewish radicals developed a kinship with German radicals based primarily on language and political culture, but religious attachments played a role.<sup>81</sup> Irish labor activists, who also had a presence on the Lower East Side, remained tied to the Catholic Church and Tammy Hall politics.<sup>82</sup> Many German immigrant radicals, on the other hand, were nonreligious. They promoted a Marxist internationalism and cosmopolitanism that invited Jews into their ranks. Many Jewish revolutionaries, apt to view Jewish culture as “backward,” dove headlong into internationalism and cosmopolitanism. Alongside their veneration of Russian revolutionaries,

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<sup>78</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 36–7, 47–8.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–9; Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 15–48, esp. 22. Interesting commentary on the Jewish rise in socialist circles, see “Jewish in New York City Politics,” *American Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Feb. 7, 1895. For interesting commentary on radicalism and the particularities of the U.S. context, albeit with some inaccuracies, see “Why Russian Emigrants are Homesick,” *American Israelite* (Cincinnati, OH), Jan. 17, 1895.

<sup>82</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 42–3. Michels specifically highlights the work of Eric Foner, see *ibid.*, 273, n.36.

Jewish radicals soon added German political philosophers, like Ferdinand Lassalle; immigrant radicals in the United States, like anarchist Johann Most; and notable social democrats, or “socialists,” in Germany, like Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel.<sup>83</sup>

German immigrant radicals had roots in social democracy, which advocated gradual social revolution through political organization, e.g., unions, strikes, voting, etc. Since 1875, German social democrats maintained the position that “religion is a private matter” (an issue of personal conscience).<sup>84</sup> Another group of German immigrant radicals, however, turned to “revolutionary socialism,” better known as anarchism. Though foundational to America’s labor movement infrastructure, anarchists largely rejected social democracy’s tempered approach. Many anarchist intellectuals advocated “propaganda by the deed”—confrontational, even violent, action to precipitate revolution. [Advocating violence increasingly divided anarchists in the 1890s.<sup>85</sup>] For the anarchists, religion was a fundamental evil, and thus their opposition to religion tended to be more aggressive.<sup>86</sup> As one anarchist pamphlet in Yiddish stated, “we fight

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<sup>83</sup> On Yiddish-speaking socialists and German/Germany, see Gennady Estraiikh, *Transatlantic Russian Jewishness: Ideological Voyages of the Daily Forverts in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 16. For interesting commentary on cosmopolitanism in Jewish radical politics, see Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 356. On the German anarchists in New York, see Tom Goyens, *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880-1914* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007). Another interesting connection, see Mina Graur, *An Anarchist “Rabbi”: The Life and Teachings of Rudolf Rocker* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997). Johann Most’s antireligious speeches and antireligious writings were quite popular among Jewish immigrant radicals in Great Britain and the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. See, for example, Yohan Most, *Di religyeze mageyfe* (London: “Frayheyt,” 1901). YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection (000004512a/000065466b); idem, *Di gottespest*, trans. Y. Yaffa (London: Knights of Liberty, 1888). YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection (000047705).

<sup>84</sup> On the reason why German’s social democrats adopted the stance, see Vernon L. Lidtke, “August Bebel and German Social Democracy’s Relation to the Christian Churches,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 2 (1966): 258, also see 250–1. For the American scene, see Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 85. On the socialists, Tcherikower wrote: “Though undoubtedly still anti-religious, they rejected the direct, public, vulgar assaults upon religious sentiments and practices.” See Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 269.

<sup>85</sup> Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 31–2.

<sup>86</sup> Margolis, “A Tempest in Three Teapots,” 41. I. Kopeloff said the anarchists “were aggressive in their rejection of traditional Judaism. They upheld reason and science against ignorance and superstition, which for them lay at the root of every religion.” See I. Kopeloff, “M. Kats’s tetikeyt in der anarkhistisher un sotsial-revolutsyoner bavegung,” in *M. Kats zamlbukhsuder gelegenhayt fun zayn zekhtsigsten geburstog*, ed. Abraham Frumkin (Philadelphia: M. Kats Jubilee Committee, 1925), 22. Scholar C. Bezalel Sherman likewise stated: “The anarchists, anti-Marxian in their approach to social issues, accepted as gospel truth the Marxian injunction that religion was the

against private ownership, government, and religion because these three social institutions constitute the greatest part of humanity's misery and misfortune."<sup>87</sup> Despite their differences, socialists and anarchists shared a desire to actualize social revolution in the United States and eventually assimilate Jews into a singular proletarian mass. Even as they began building a distinct arm of America's labor movement in the 1880s, Jewish radicals happily forecast the disappearance of Jewish distinctiveness.<sup>88</sup>

With their early revolutionary spirit, many Jewish radicals were initially attracted to anarchism, but most progressively entered socialists ranks.<sup>89</sup> Political events in the mid 1880s channeled Jewish anarchists and Jewish socialists into more distinct camps. The Great Upheaval (March-May 1886)—a series of nationwide strikes and demonstrations—invigorated the radicals to use Yiddish in mobilizing fellow Jewish immigrants. It also energized the recently formed Yidisher Arbeter Fareyn in New York (est. April 1885), a socialist-oriented organization

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opiate of the working people, and made aggressive atheism an integral part of their program of action." See Sherman, "Nationalism, Secularism, and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement," 357. Also see Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 249–50; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 85; Polland, "'May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?,'" 380 n.12; G.M. Price, "That Yom Kippur Ball. What the Russians Have to Say about it.," *Jewish Messenger* (New York, NY), Oct. 10, 1890; "Ridiculed by Unbelievers. Anarchist Hebrews Made Sport of Yom Kippur with Dancing.," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep. 21, 1893; "Scoffers of Yom Kippur.," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 11, 1889.

<sup>87</sup> *Di naye toyre* (Leeds: Lidzer Anarkhistishe Grupe, 1902). Published in Leeds, this pamphlet appears to have been distributed in England and the United States.

<sup>88</sup> In the words of scholar C. Bezalel Sherman: "This is the reason why the founders of the Jewish labor movement, whose social conceptions were fashioned in the school of non-Jewish, primarily German, socialist thought, were able to instill an assimilationist philosophy into the young Jewish trade unions. They won by default because there was no one else at the time to guide the inexperienced Jewish workers on the untrodden path of proletarianization; and because, too, the sudden transplantation of the Jewish immigrant from a ghetto life in a tyrannical, semi-feudal empire to the clear air of an industrial civilization in a political democracy left him in a state of confusion and bewilderment. This was not a gradual transformation, not a planned or systematic growing into new conditions, but a political, socio-economic and psychological upheaval, one in which there was lacking a transitory period. The young Jewish worker had, as yet, had (*sic*) no time to break out of the cobweb of old prejudices and erase bitter memories that obscured his vision. At the time he first became acquainted with political activity, the image of government and religion he had brought over from abroad still colored his relationships with society. He was mistrustful of all authority, religious or secular." Sherman was not entirely right on everything said here, but it was true the leaders of the Jewish labor movement were often "mistrustful of all authority, religious or secular." See Sherman, "Nationalism, Secularism, and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement," 356.

<sup>89</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 42–8; Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 19–20.

specifically for the Jewish working-class.<sup>90</sup> The Haymarket Affair (May 4, 1886)—a Chicago strike that turned deadly and ended in criminal conspiracy convictions for eight anarchists (four were executed, one committed suicide, and three were given lengthy prison sentences)—roused Jewish anarchists to form the Pioneers of Liberty (Pionere der Frayhayt).<sup>91</sup> But, the violence also stimulated public backlash against the labor movement.

While most gains made by the early Jewish labor movement did not last past 1887, encouraging signs remained.<sup>92</sup> The Fareyn disbanded in July 1887, but the first Yiddish-speaking branch of the SLP organized two months later. The SLP permitted branches based on language, but, as historian Jonathan Frankel suggested, linguistic tolerance increasingly “went had in hand with a strict adherence to orthodox Marxism, to an unbending class-war ideology.”<sup>93</sup> This first Yiddish branch of the SLP would establish the United Hebrew Trades (UHT) in 1888, which sought to organize Jewish laborers across industries.<sup>94</sup> Another encouraging sign from the Great Upheaval was a sustainable, radical newspaper in Yiddish, *Di nyu-yorker yidishe folkstsaytung*. Edited by Fareyn members Abba Braslavsky and Moyshe Mints, the *Folkstsaytung* was privately-owned and officially *umparteyish* (nonpartisan). As the flagship periodical for New York’s Jewish radicals, it reflected the then-fuzzy boundaries between anarchists, socialists, and nonpartisans. In its “program” (June 1886), an early editorial outlining the paper’s goals, the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>91</sup> On the anarchists’ “black blood” (*shvartse blut*; i.e., their anger) after the Haymarket Affair, see “Di anarkhisten in nuyork.,” *Yudishe gazeten* (hereafter *YG*), (New York, NY), Aug. 27, 1886. For particularly strong rhetoric aimed at the anarchists, see Ahithophel, “Toyrat bombe,” *YG* (New York, NY), Dec. 15, 1893.

<sup>92</sup> Seán Cronin, “The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Labor Party of North America,” *Saothar* 3 (1977): 22. Upon attending a memorial rally in New York in 1888, anarchist poet David Edelstadt told family, “It was remarkable that our Russian Jews stood at the forefront with their dedication to humanity’s strivings. There were Russian Jews everywhere.” See Dovid Edelshtat, “‘Socialism Is Not a Dream’ (1888),” in *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History*, ed. Tony Michels (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 87.

<sup>93</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 454.

<sup>94</sup> Morris U. Schappes, “The Political Origins of the United Hebrew Trades, 1888,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5, Iss. 1 (1977): 13–45.

editors expressed a broad vision for educating and enlightening workers about “the struggle between two conflicting classes” (i.e., the proletariat and bourgeoisie).<sup>95</sup> As Tony Michels suggested, the *Folkstsaytung* appeared at “a time when socialist and nationalist (or quasi-nationalist) ideas were not yet fully divorced.”<sup>96</sup> So, its editors expressed a desire to address challenges working-class Jews faced as *Jewish* laborers, including “the Jewish Question.”<sup>97</sup>

The *Folkstsaytung* generally considered religious authorities to be capitalist allies working toward the oppression of the masses. As a case in point, famed sweatshop poet Morris Rosenfeld published his poem “The Year 1886” in mid-December 1886, wherein he accused Jewish religious authorities of entrapping Jewish workers through guilt and superstition. Addressed to “my people,” he wrote, “Sweet songs are sung to you,/in the cradle of ‘fanaticism’—you sleep soundly./You are told that it can be no other way/just see, my people, how you are being trapped./Religious judges—rabbis—swindlers of the world!”<sup>98</sup> The paper also expressed an evolutionary approach to religion and an alignment with freethought. The same month Rosenfeld’s poem appeared, an editorial declared: “On every page of human history, we always see the fear of freethought ruling over the world... A fear like that makes the human indifferent. It makes him content with the worst situation. It puts his value as a human on a very low level. It makes him into a slave of false theories, a slave of his old habits.” Freethought, in

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<sup>95</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 53–4, 61, 74. Also see “Der arbeter un di visnshaft,” *Folkstsaytung* (New York, NY), Jun. 6, 1886.

<sup>96</sup> Tony Michels, “‘Speaking to Moyshe’: The Early Socialist Yiddish Press and Its Readers,” *Jewish History* 14, no. 1 (2000): 77 n.59.

<sup>97</sup> This agenda revealed how the paper “professed identification with the Jewish people,” in Michels’ summary. The *Arbeter tsaytung* would not adopt this approach, see Michels, “‘Speaking to Moyshe,’” 59; “‘Strong, Firm, and Correct Propaganda’ (1886),” in *Jewish Radicals*, 83–4; also see the original, “Di program,” *Folkstsaytung* (New York, NY), Jun. 25, 1886. Because the paper was for Jewish workers in America, Braslavsky and Mints also promised special attention paid to American politics.

<sup>98</sup> Qtd. in Marc Miller, “The Poetics of the Immigrant Experience: Morris Rosenfeld’s Sweatshop Poetry” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005), 9. [Morris Rosenfeld, “Dos yor 1886,” *Folkstsaytung* (New York, NY), Dec. 17, 1886]

this framing, signaled progress. “Thought must be free, like the air one breathes,” while conservatism makes the worker feel resigned to an “enslaved condition.”<sup>99</sup>

The *Folkstsaytung* had eventual dissenters, largely because it was nonpartisan. Jewish anarchists struck out on their own in 1889, but their publication, *Di varhayt*, only lasted four-month run. During its run, the paper did comment on Jewish collectivity. Moyshe Katts, in an article entitled “The Jewish Question,” declared Jews were not a nation or religion but a “folk” bound by a history of “hate and persecution.” The persistence of antisemitism in so-called “civilized” societies, like Germany and the United States, proved that the overthrow of capitalism, not the assimilation of individuals, would resolve the Jewish Question.<sup>100</sup> “One unstated implication of this argument,” historian Kenyon Zimmer summarized, “was that Jews would cease to exist as a distinct group with the disappearance of anti-Semitism.”<sup>101</sup> SLP’s Yiddish-speaking socialists, as they preferred to be called, also grew dissatisfied with the *Folkstsaytung*’s nonpartisanship.<sup>102</sup>

The *Folkstsaytung* and its radical contributors had many opponents, but their most powerful adversary within the Yiddish press was Kasriel Zvi Sarasohn, a newspaper magnate from Suwałki who helped shape the contours of the American Yiddish press before most revolutionaries arrived.<sup>103</sup> Sarasohn landed on American shores in 1871, but already by 1874 he was helping found the first American Yiddish weekly to achieve sustained success, the *Yidishe*

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<sup>99</sup> “Di furkht far dem frayen gedank.,” *Folkstsaytung* (New York, NY), Dec. 10, 1886.

<sup>100</sup> Qtd. in Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 26–7. [“Di yudenfrage,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Feb. 15–Mar. 22, 1889]

<sup>101</sup> Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> There was, as Tcherikower stated, “not infrequent support extended to capitalists by religious leaders in the struggle against labor, as well as by the dependence of religious institutions upon wealthy contributors.” See Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 249.

<sup>103</sup> He left his studies to pursue commercial enterprises and eventually opened a paper-goods store. More generally on Sarasohn, see Moyshe Shtarkman, “Di Sorezon-zikhroynes vegn der yidisher prese in amerike,” in *Geklibene shriftn* (New York: CYCO Publishing House, 1979), 77–102.

*gazeten*.<sup>104</sup> Over the course of the 1870s, Sarasohn transformed the *Gazeten* from a more elite-oriented publication into a paper for the masses; by 1880, Sarasohn's dominance over the market was undeniable. Having faced obstacles in technology, expense, and the size and reading experience of his audience, the magnate triumphed by directly championing his readers' concerns and causes, a novel approach during this period of the American Yiddish press.<sup>105</sup>

While the mass immigration of Yiddish-speakers after 1880 eventually boosted readership, the market became more competitive as the newcomers became more established in the latter half of the decade. Between 1885 and 1889, nearly twenty Yiddish periodicals burst onto the scene, most lasting only a short time. In coping with these changes, Sarasohn created the world's first commercially successful Yiddish daily, the *Tageblat*, in 1885, though it would take almost a decade to become a true daily. Sarasohn described his papers with the words "*klal-yisroel*"—the Jewish people in entirety. In a recent article about the *Tageblat*, historian Gil Ribak noted

the *Tageblat*'s concept of *klal-yisroel* was very inclusive. In part, this inclusiveness naturally served the paper's interest to appeal to the widest number of readers. However, it also reflected a belief that every Jew should be loyal to his/her people and that the real dividing line is between Jews and *goyim* and not between the observant and nonobservant. This notion fitted well the old-world mentality of many immigrants, for

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<sup>104</sup> Ribak, "The *Yidishes Tageblat*," 802.

<sup>105</sup> By May 1880, Sarasohn had vanquished his former printer turned competitor, Moses Topolowski, whose weekly had been running since 1878. See Shtarkman, "Di Sorezon-zikhroynes vegn der yidisher prese in amerike," 86–91; Shalom Rosenfeld, "The Jewish Press Magnate from East Broadway," *Kesher*, no. 6 (1989): 28–38.

Several scholars have highlighted how a sensational murder in 1875 involving a Jew from Lithuania, Pesach Rubenstein, temporarily stabilized the Yiddish press. See Eric L. Goldstein, "A Taste of Freedom: American Yiddish Publications in Imperial Russia," in *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History*, eds. Ava F. Kahn and Adam Mendelsohn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 107. Also Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi*, 38–57.

whom the Jewish community had always been more of a communal-collective entity rather than a religious one per se.<sup>106</sup>

*Klal-yisroel* inclusivity notwithstanding, Ribak also found “The *Tageblat* artfully played on the traditionalism of its readers, abounding with assaults on ‘ungodly’ socialists and anarchists, vehemently attacking the corruptions of gentile America, and turning purple at the idea of Reform rabbis uttering the word Christ in sermons.”<sup>107</sup> Both the *Gazeten* and *Tageblat* also reflected Sarasohn’s *maskilic* sensibilities, and over the years, the papers would employ editors and journalists who were far from paragons of conservative traditionalism.<sup>108</sup> One figure was Getsil Zelikovits, whose own weekly, the *Folksadvokat*, supported radical causes (although not supportive of Yom Kippur balls). Sarasohn also hired the impious maverick Yoyné John Paley as *Tageblat* editor in 1895. Both Zelikovits and Paley had noticeable anticlerical tendencies.<sup>109</sup> Kasriel’s son, Ezekiel, who joined the business in the mid-1880s, had the same hiring practices as his father. Well into the 1910s, a forward-facing conservative coincided with a diverse array of staffers and contributors.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ribak, “The *Yidishes Tageblat*,” 821. Also see Brinn, “*Miss Amerike*,” 41–2; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 94; Examples for the categorization of the *Tageblat* as orthodox can be found in Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 2; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 201–2; Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and Ethnic Identity in New York, 1880-1939*, 65, 108; Sorin, *A Time for Building*, 94, 102, 124; Rischin, *Promised City*, 179, 246, 250. Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*, 141.

<sup>107</sup> Ribak, “The *Yidishes Tageblat*,” 804.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 795–822. On the consistency of its antiradical stance, see p. 810.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 805, 815–6. On the anticlericalism of Zelikovits’ *Yudisher herald*, see “Eykhe yeshive korobke!,” *Yudisher herald* (New York, NY), Jan. 31, 1890. The *Yudisher herald* on socialism, see “Vos vill der sotsyalist?” *Yudisher herald* (New York, NY), Mar. 7, 1890. The first installment of a tragicomic serial shows Getsil Zelikovits’ *Yudisher herald* did not support Yom Kippur balls: “Der yomkipper ball!,” *Yudisher herald* (New York, NY), Feb. 7, 1890. Also see Reyzen, “Paley, Yoyné,” *Leksikon*, vol. 2: 859–62; and Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 521–2.

<sup>110</sup> Ribak, “The *Yidishes Tageblat*,” 795–822; Yankev Magidov, *Der shpigel fun der ist sayd* (New York: author, 1923), 167–7. Paula E. Hyman, “Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902,” *American Jewish History* 70, no. 1 (1980): 91–105. On the general tensions regarding piety and impiety, Jeffrey S. Gurock, “How ‘Frum’ Was Rabbi Jacob Joseph’s Court? Americanization Within the Lower East Side’s Orthodox Elite, 1886-1902,” *Jewish History* 8, no. ½ (1994): 255–68.

While Chicago authorities did not convict any Jews for supposed connections to the Haymarket Affair's violence, the visible Jewish presence in radical politics made conservative Jewish leaders uneasy.<sup>111</sup> Conservatives, *at least by the calculus Jewish radicals used*, included Jewish leaders in an array of subcommunities and who regularly held divergent opinions on communal matters. On many occasions, Sarasohn and his more traditional allies butted heads with the already established American Jewish community, which was highly acculturated, Reform-oriented, and opposed to Zionism.<sup>112</sup> But in the anxious atmosphere of the mid to late 1880s, Sarasohn's Yiddish press found an ally in the broadly conservative Anglo-American Jewish press, periodicals like Cincinnati's *American Israelite*, Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent*, and New York's *Jewish Messenger* and *American Hebrew*. While the Anglo-American Jewish press and Sarasohn's Yiddish press showed vague awareness of ideological divisions within Jewish radical politics, they tended to lump all Jewish radicals together, regularly calling them simply "anarchists" and "nihilists."<sup>113</sup>

The threat posed by so-called "anarchists" and "nihilists" took a turn in summer 1886, when the compositors of the *Gazeten* and *Tageblat* went on strike.<sup>114</sup> Sarasohn and Co. told *The American Hebrew* that the strikes resulted from "the bold stand our papers have taken against the

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<sup>111</sup> On the trial, see Walter Roth, *Avengers and Defenders: Glimpses of Chicago's Jewish Past* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2008), 3–8. Also see "Oygust Shpiez [August Spies]," *YG* (New York, NY), Sep. 3, 1886; "Shon vieder ayn strayk.," *YG* (New York, NY), Jun. 11, 1886; "Der strayk in shikago.," *YG* (New York, NY), Nov. 16, 1886. Under immense pressure, the labor movement nationwide would increasingly develop fissures between more conservative elements and more radical elements. For summary of these trends, see Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 60–1.

<sup>112</sup> Ribak, "The *Yidishes Tageblat*," 802, 804, 812.

<sup>113</sup> For nascent distinctions between socialists and anarchists, see "Di nuyork 'tayms' gegen di sotsyalisten.," *YG* (New York, NY), Sep. 23, 1887; also see "Iber dos trayben der yudishen anarkhisten in nuyork.," *Yidishes tageblat* (hereafter cited as *YT*), (New York, NY), Oct. 4, 1889; "Oygust Shpiez." From the Anglo-American Jewish press, see "The Aims of Modern Socialism. II. The German School.," *Jewish Messenger* (New York, NY), Aug. 27, 1886. On another overlap between the Anglo-American Jewish press and the conservative Yiddish press—that of gender norms, see Brinn, "Miss Amerike," 54–9.

<sup>114</sup> On Sarasohn and his compositors, as well as the history of typesetters' unions, see Bernard Vaynshteyn, *The Jewish Unions in America: Pages of History and Memories*, trans. and ann. Maurice Wolfthal, first edition (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 76–9.

Jewish anarchists,” for which they had apparently “incurred the enmity and bitter opposition of ‘The Jüdische Arbeiter Verein’ (Yidisher Arbeter Fareyn).”<sup>115</sup> While refusing to comment on the strike, an *American Hebrew* editorial also noted that Sarasohn’s communiqué proved “there are a number [of Jewish immigrants and other immigrants] who have brought their Anarchist views with them from over the sea, and still retain them.”<sup>116</sup> A month later, the *Gazeten* published a version of *The American Hebrew*’s editorial and, following the original, charged that Jewish “anarchists” had besmirched “the good name which the Jews acquired as peaceful and law-abiding citizens in America.” Even worse, the radicals considered themselves “educated and enlightened,” though “their entire education doesn’t extend so far that they know America isn’t a Russian colony.” Jewish radicals, in other words, represented an extreme response to their original, oppressive environment. Attempting to transplant those ideas in the United States, however, was doomed and dangerous. Surely, the piece continued, “Jews, as a people, have their own history, their own literature, their own religion,” but “as workers they must be like Americans.” Jewish radicals agitating for Jewish workers was politically out of place in the United States.<sup>117</sup> The themes expressed by *The American Hebrew*, and thereafter the *Gazeten*—Jewish radicals as dangerous, foreign-minded, and unenlightened—fast became tropes in the Anglo-American Jewish press and the conservative Yiddish press.

The Jewish presence in radical politics made the Jewish community’s conservative elements fearful non-Jewish Americans would indiscriminately aim their rage at all Jews, and

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<sup>115</sup> Sarasohn and Co., “Communications: Troubles of the Jewish Gazette.,” *American Hebrew* (New York, NY), Aug. 27, 1886. Also see p. 4 of *YG* (New York, NY), Sep. 10, 1886, a page with smaller news snippets. On this date, the page contains commentary on the compositors’ strike. Also see “Inlendishes.,” *YG* (New York, NY), Oct. 13, 1886.

<sup>116</sup> “Anarchism in America.,” *American Hebrew* (New York, NY), Aug. 27, 1886.

<sup>117</sup> “Anarkhizmus in amerika,” *YG* (New York, NY), Sep. 24, 1886. *YG*’s version mostly summarized the original’s main points, though it translated some sections nearly verbatim. For a similar view, see “The Evil and the Remedy.,” *Jewish Messenger* (New York, NY), Jan. 10, 1890. The author of this piece wrote: “America is not Russia. ‘Hebrew anarchists’ must realize this fact, and the quicker the better.”

rage would have legal impacts. Rumors of impending immigration restrictions in the 1880s and 1890s made sure this fear would not fully dissipate. In another article adapted from the Anglo-American Jewish press (April 1887, *The Jewish Messenger*), the *Gazeten* offered the Yidisher Arbeter Fareyn pointed advice when it advocated the organization distance itself from “‘Czar killers’ and political anarchists.” Again, the trouble was potential antisemitism: “They have no right to identify themselves with any movement which may arouse and increase prejudice against themselves, and indirectly against the great body of American Jews.”<sup>118</sup> During the 1888 election season, a *Tageblat* editorial went further, claiming, “The Christian politicians of East Broadway, Canal Street, and Grand Street who saw these circulars (i.e., radical circulars) were incensed and swore they will take revenge on all Russian Jews—they will hold all Jews responsible for [the actions of] these few anarchists.”<sup>119</sup> Well into the 1890s, the *Gazeten* and *Tageblat* continued informing readers about how Jewish radicals negatively shaped public perception of Jews.<sup>120</sup>

Tensions tilted further toward religious matters with New York’s first Yom Kippur ball in 1889, hosted by the Pioneers of Liberty. As early as 1886, the Pioneers were reportedly hosting radical events on Yom Kippur, but they were not publicly advertised and were not

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<sup>118</sup> For the *Gazeten*’s commentary see “Eyne eytse toyve.,” *YG* (New York, NY), Apr. 29, 1887. The original, see *Jewish Messenger* (New York, NY), Apr. 22, 1887. Quote from the original *Jewish Messenger* editorial. Or, as the *Gazeten* informed readers in May 1887: “Most American newspapers now demand that the government should forbid the immigration of European socialists, anarchists, and nihilists to America.” See “Kabel depeshen: Iber aynvanderung und aynvanderer.,” *YG* (New York, NY), May 6, 1887.

<sup>119</sup> “Di yudishe anarkhisten.,” *YT* (New York, NY), Nov. 10, 1888. Similar in the Anglo-American Jewish press, see “The Crusade Against Foreigners.,” *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 28, 1887; “Jews in New York City Politics.,” “Labor and Anarchy.,” *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 7, 1887. An example of fear regarding the impact of Jewish radicalism in London, see a reprinted article from the *Recorder*: “Our London Letter.,” *Jewish Exponent*, (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 19, 1888; “On Immigration.,” *American Hebrew* (New York, NY), Apr. 13, 1888.

<sup>120</sup> For example, *YG* stated in 1893: “Jews are currently looking for sympathy in America, and in the end a group of ten dirty scoundrels come along and make the name ‘Jewish’ into a thing of terror! Nearly all the papers now say that the Russian Jews are a ‘dangerous group,’ ‘venomous snakes,’ and other such delightful names.” See “Di yidische anarkhisten.,” *YG* (New York, NY), Sep. 1, 1893. Also see “Mis Emma Goldman,” *YG* (New York, NY), Sep. 1, 1893.

balls.<sup>121</sup> As in London in 1888, the audacity of the New York ball's impious mockery startled Jews of all sorts, including the many Jewish immigrants whose religious observance had waned but still respected the sacred holiday.<sup>122</sup> There were reports of radicals parading the streets, each with "a piece of pork in his hand, growling the Marseillaise and other street songs in Russian and in jargon [i.e. Yiddish]."<sup>123</sup> Yom Kippur balls also presented an opportunity to distribute antireligious propaganda. Every Rosh Hashanah from 1889 to 1893, the Pioneers of Liberty published pamphlets, called *Tfile zaka*, parodying High Holiday prayers.<sup>124</sup> Agitation and propaganda were effective. Media attention far outstripped the size of the events themselves.<sup>125</sup>

In the more conservative Jewish context of Eastern Europe, most Jewish atheists and Jewish skeptics had maintained antireligious sensibilities in private display.<sup>126</sup> Public display in a free land was a different matter. *The American Hebrew* expressed its dismay in this form:

Every one (*sic*) has certainly the liberty, if he so chooses, to alienate himself from religious associations, and go his own way. When, however, an organized body of Israelites proposes to publicly desecrate the most sacred sentiments of the Jews and most solemn traditions of Judaism, and ostentatiously invite others to join them in their

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<sup>121</sup> Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 258.

<sup>122</sup> The London ball was fiercely attacked by opponents, too. Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 254.

<sup>123</sup> Qtd. in Zimmer, "The Whole World is Our Country," 73, brackets are Zimmer's. [M.E. Ravage, *An American in the Making: The Life Story of an Immigrant*, ed. Steven G. Kellman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 107]

<sup>124</sup> Margolis, "A Tempest in Three Teapots," 44. Notables like Hilel Zolotarov (1865-1921) and Y.A. Merison (1866-1941) published in the 1889 *Zaka*. See Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 256. Tcherikower also claimed, "The motivations of the anarchists, and hence the character of their anti-religious propaganda, differed markedly from those both of native American agnostics and atheists and of the maskilim." See p. 249.

<sup>125</sup> Ori Kritz, "The Poetics of Anarchy: David Edelshtat's Revolutionary Poetry" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1993), 70, 88-92; also Margolis, "A Tempest in Three Teapots," 38.

<sup>126</sup> Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 249.

disreputable scandal, we cannot ignore them and leave them to the contempt which they would receive from all respectable people, whether Jews, Christians, or unbelievers.<sup>127</sup>

The English-language weekly also doubted it would be possible to curtail such “a senseless exhibition of the fanaticism of unbelief” in free America, and so *The American Hebrew* advised distance. “The Jews of this city,” it wrote, “owe it to themselves to disavow them, and in every way—in every way to abstain from association with them.”<sup>128</sup> The *Tageblatt* also translated and published *The American Hebrew*’s editorial on the eve of Yom Kippur. The ball was indeed a sign that freethinking Jewish immigrants felt quite free in the United States (and England), a stark contrast to the scene in Russia. As scholar Gershon Winer summarized, “the fact that the origins of this behavior were in America rather in Eastern Europe... is to be attributed to the absence in the new land of the watchful eye of officialdom over the ideas and private acts of the citizenry—a condition alien to the Russian scene.”<sup>129</sup>

*The American Hebrew*’s hopes were, in fact, realized. Combined public pressure saw the ball cancelled when the proprietor of meeting’s scheduled location, Clarendon Hall, voided the contract at the last minute. The ball instead relocated to the Fourth Street Labor Lyceum, where the Jewish socialist aligned with the SLP were hosting their own, less controversial Yom Kippur event (not a ball!). There, the radicals adopted a resolution boycotting Clarendon Hall and criticizing the conservative Yiddish press for inciting negativity.<sup>130</sup> The boundaries dividing socialists and anarchists were still fuzzier in 1889 than they would be a year later. The 1889

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<sup>127</sup> *American Hebrew* (New York, NY), Sep. 27, 1889.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Winer, “The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism,” 80.

<sup>130</sup> *Folkstsaytung* (New York, NY), Oct. 11, 1889.

ball's chairperson, for example, was socialist activist Moyshe Hilkovits (later Morris Hillquit), and the nonpartisan *Folkstsaytung*, with its socialist editors, supported it.<sup>131</sup>

In responding to the 1889 ball, both before and after, writers for the *Gazeten* and *Tageblat* furthered the notion that, in the words of one *Tageblat* article, Jewish radicals were “entirely unacquainted with American relations.” They had “no sense for free institutions and absorbed the lowliest ideas from tyranny, persecution, superstition, and religious fanaticism.”<sup>132</sup> Another *Tageblat* piece specified how non-Jews had noticed this antireligious agitation, declaring American papers were aflame with the fact that “Russian Jews are against God and against the American government.”<sup>133</sup> Jewish radicals, the *Gazeten* and *Tageblat* maintained, did not care that “Whether we want it or not, the world holds us responsible for the immoral acts of individual Jews.” Sarasohn’s press, by contrast, assured readers it upheld a different principle: “*Kol yisroel arevim zeh lazeh*,” or “All Jews are responsible for one another.”<sup>134</sup> The editors and contributors associated with the conservative Yiddish press often did not use the word “freethinker” during the 1880s, drawing instead upon an array of pejorative terms and depictions from Jewish tradition and modern political discourse. They sometimes referred to Jewish radicals as *kofrim*, meaning “unbelievers” or “heretics,” or they employed longwinded descriptors like “atheists and Jew-haters, *apikorsim* and *soyne-yisroel* (lit., enemies of Israel, i.e., antisemites).”<sup>135</sup> One of the terms here, *apikorsim* (s., *apikoyres*), stemming from “Epicurean,” had Talmudic roots and was associated with shameless libertinism. The depiction of freethinking

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<sup>131</sup> I. Kopeloff, *Amol in amerike* (Warsaw: Kh. Bzhoza, 1928), 238; “A yomkipper mit klep un tents,” *Folkstsaytung* (New York, NY), Oct. 11, 1889. Also see Norma Fain Pratt, *Morris Hillquit: A Political History of an American Jewish Socialist* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 6–11; Morris Hillquit, *Loose Leaves from a Busy Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934).

<sup>132</sup> “Oyfruf an di yuden in nuyork.,” *YT* (New York, NY), Oct. 28, 1889.

<sup>133</sup> “Varum shvaygt ir?,” *YT* (New York, NY), Oct. 28, 1889.

<sup>134</sup> “Oyfruf an di yuden in nuyork (shluss),” *YT* (New York, NY), Oct. 29, 1889.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* They also denied the radicals’ Jewishness with qualifiers like “goyish.”

Jewish radicals as immoral undergirded claims they were antimodern and un-American. As “atheists,” radicals supposedly wanted people to live like “wild beasts.”<sup>136</sup> A *Tageblatt* editorial in early October 1889 epitomized this language when responding to that year’s *Tfile zaka*, charging that “the anarchists and nihilists... make a mockery of the Jewish faith, and laugh at and spit on all faiths, on God, on everything divine and sublime, on religion, and on social structures and institutions. In short, they want people to live like cattle, or like the savages in Africa—without God, without belief, and without every form of social unity and cohesion.”<sup>137</sup> Later that month, the *Tageblatt* told “*gloybensbrider*”—brothers in faith, or coreligionists—that “these nihilists have no sense for freedom. They believe licentiousness, debauchery, [*unclear*] is freedom.”<sup>138</sup> Just as *apikoyres* and *apikorsim* had strong negative associations, Jewish freethinkers would spend decades trying to sever popular connotations of freethought with immorality.

“Fanatics,” “fanatical,” and “fanaticism” also became salient terms used in debates about religion and freethinking radicals. A mainstay in the American and European press by the 1880s, “fanatics” possessed an assemblage of association, like “antimodern,” “violent,” “irrational,” and “uncivilized.”<sup>139</sup> Philosopher Alberto Toscano recently noted that “the fanatic” became a

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<sup>136</sup> M. Hilkovits, “Moral un sotsyalizmus.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Feb. 24, 1893. In this piece, Hilkovits described how opponents mischaracterize the socialists: “Their ideal is a life of wild beasts.”

<sup>137</sup> “Iber dos trayben der yudishen anarkhisten in nuyork.”

<sup>138</sup> “Oyfruf an di yuden in nuyork.” Also see “Nit yettst!,” *YG* (New York, NY), Nov. 25, 1892. For a similar claim, made twenty-five years later, see Khayim Malits, “Di heym un di froy: Muters un kinder,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Nov. 11, 1917; idem, *Di heym un di froy* (New York: author, 1918), 71–5.

<sup>139</sup> “The fanatic” and “fanaticism” played a role in imperial Russian political discourse regarding Jews. See Ellie R. Schainker, *Confessions of the Shtetl: Converts from Judaism in Imperial Russia, 1817-1906* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 126–33, also see Ch. 5, and idem, “On Faith and Fanaticism: Converts from Judaism and the Limits of Toleration in Late Imperial Russia,” *Kritika* 17, no. 4 (2016): 753–80; Mikhail Dolbilov, “Russifying Bureaucracy and the Politics of Jewish Education in the Russian Empire’s Northwest Region (1860s-1870s),” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 24 (2007): 121, 135, 141. Though generally more sympathetic toward the Jewish masses than imperial authorities, many *maskilim* depicted Jews in the Pale and Galicia as “fanatics” desperately requiring enlightenment. John Doyle Klier, *Imperial Russia’s Jewish Question, 1855-1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6, 26–7, 451–2; Jeffrey Veidlinger, “From Shtetl to Society: Jews in 19th-Century Russia,” *Kritika* 2, no. 4 (2001): 828–31.

particularly potent delegitimization tool in modern political discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It represented a figure “outside the frame of political rationality, possessed by a violent conviction that brooks no argument and will only rest, if ever, once every rival view or way of life is eradicated.”<sup>140</sup> The Yiddish press was replete with “fanatics,” and would remain so for decades. Conservatives and radicals labelled each other fanatics, but even within radical Jewish politics, socialists and anarchists would employ “fanatic” against each other. As socialist intellectuals struggled to maintain unity among themselves, they depicted dissenters within their circles as “fanatics.” The conservative Yiddish press showed similarly flexible usage, directing its fury at Reform “fanatics,” “fanatical” Christian proselytizers, “fanatic” assimilationists, and politicians with “fanatic” anti-immigration policies; there were even “fanatic” immigrant rabbis. The “fanatic” fit tendencies toward sensationalism in the American Yiddish press, tendencies gaining momentum in the 1890s.<sup>141</sup>

The radicals, meanwhile, found success in advancing the Jewish labor movement, a movement that spoke to the daily needs and desires of sizable portion of the Jewish working-class. Leaders of the Jewish labor movement sensed successes would continue apace, resulting in social revolution and the inevitable assimilation of Jewish immigrants into a proletariat mass. In the 1890s, however, Jewish radicals would find that success in the Jewish labor movement would not mean the rapid advance of social revolution. From Russian revolutionaries adrift in the New World, and contrary to the protests of conservatives, they had achieved stature in the Jewish immigrant community and carved a space for themselves within the wider public sphere in

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<sup>140</sup> Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism*, Kindle edition (New York: Verso Books, 2017), loc. 36.

<sup>141</sup> Part of what made mass-market Yiddish newspapers successful was their ability to mirror trends in the Anglo-American press, including the sensationalism popularized by magnates like Charles Dana, William Randolph Hearst, and Joseph Pulitzer. Even when Yiddish newspaper owners and editors ostensibly rejected sensationalism, they usually employed its conventions. See Brinn, “*Miss Amerike*,” 29–30. Also see Ze’ev Goldberg, “The Beginnings of the Yiddish Sensationalist Press in America,” *Kesher* 19 (1996): 58–63.

Yiddish. How would they gain further influence over that sphere? Where did throwing off capitalism's "yoke" intersect throwing off Judaism's "yoke"?

### **How Should a Freethinker Behave? Toward an Antireligious Middle Path**

The radical *Folkstsaytung* ceased publication in December 1889, finally succumbing to infighting between radical camps and the pressures exerted by Sarasohn.<sup>142</sup> Having found little success publishing the *Varhayt* independently, the Pioneers of Liberty sought a strategic partnership with the socialists.<sup>143</sup> When the proposed project failed to materialize, the socialists and anarchists established their own weeklies.<sup>144</sup> Unlike the privately-owned *Folkstsaytung*, the socialists adopted a cooperative structure, the *Arbeter Tsaytung* Publishing Association, which aligned with the UHT and SLP. The *Arbeter tsaytung* started publishing in March 1890 while the anarchists weekly, the *Fraye arbeter shtime* (nominally nonpartisan), began in summer. The *Arbeter tsaytung*'s institutional backing created an environment where its journalists could underscore ideological coherence and further distance themselves from the anarchists. "During the *Arbeter tsaytung*'s first two years," Cahan recalled, "the paper published innumerable articles against anarchism."<sup>145</sup> It cannot be overlooked that in the 1880s and 1890s, fears of being associated with violence and aggressive antireligion also led social democrats in other contexts,

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<sup>142</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 57–60.

<sup>143</sup> According to Bernard Vaynshteyn, the anarchists "understood very well that they were incapable of publishing and supporting their own paper." Bernard Vaynshteyn, *Fertsig yor in der yidisher arbeter bavegung* (New York: Der Veker, 1924), 118. N. Goldberg wrote, "The two camps prepared for the conference as if for a major battle, and each camp mobilized its men." See N. Goldberg, "Di yidische sotsialistische bavegung sof di 80er yorn," in *Geshikhte fun der yidisher arbeter-bavegung in di fareynikte shtatn*, ed. E. Tcherikower (New York: YIVO, 1945), vol. 2: 340. Burgin wrote that it ended in a "tragic, despondent fight," but it dramatically changed the Jewish labor movement. See Hertz Burgin, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher arbeter bavegung in amerike, rusland un england* (New York: Fereynigte Yidische Geveerkshaften, 1915), 311.

<sup>144</sup> For some very short commentary on the fallout, see Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 23–4.

<sup>145</sup> According to Cahan, the *Arbeter tsaytung* had three times as many readers as the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. See Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 3: 52, also see p. 51. Kritiz, "The Poetics of Anarchy," 89.

like Germany, to distance themselves from anarchists.<sup>146</sup> The *Arbeter tsaytung* reflected these wider trends during a tense moment in radical politics.

The Arbeter Tsaytung Publishing Association offered Philip Krants editorship of its weekly. Krants, whose resume as a radical was substantial, had been coeditor of London's *Arbeter fraynd* since 1888.<sup>147</sup> That same year, Krants played a role in fashioning London's first ever Yom Kippur ball. As the lines dividing socialists from anarchists grew stronger, especially in cities like New York and London, Krants embraced the socialist view of religion. He left the *Arbeter fraynd* when the anarchists took firm control over its direction, and he came to the United States in 1890. At the *Arbeter tsaytung*, Krants' style proved more intellectual and rigid than that of Cahan, who advocated using popular journalistic practices. Though the two clashed, they aided in directing the paper through initial conflicts with conservatives and anarchists.<sup>148</sup>

The Publishing Association's alignment with and support from the SLP indicated the ideological direction the *Arbeter tsaytung* would go. It took a strong internationalist position in its first edition, stating, "we do not recognize any differences between races, nations, or religions... we are convinced every day that the working class must strongly organize itself into a great international body in order more easily and more successfully to throw off the frightful capitalist yoke."<sup>149</sup> The paper, therefore, rejected Jewish nationalism and Jewish religious life. It

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<sup>146</sup> Lidtke, "August Bebel and German Social Democracy's Relation to the Christian Churches," 256.

<sup>147</sup> Margolis, "A Tempest in Three Teapots," 42; also see Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 270. For a more anecdotal account, see Chaim Leib Weinberg, *Forty Years in the Struggle: The Memoirs of a Jewish Anarchist*, trans. Naomi Cohen, ed. Robert P. Helms (Duluth: Litwin Books, 2008), 24. Krants was active in promoting Jewish immigrant Americanization in other ways, too. See, for example, Jacob Rombro [Philip Krants], *Krants's englishe methode*, third revised edition (New York: Jos. L. Werbelowsky, 1900). YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection (000082183).

<sup>148</sup> Anarchist Shoel Yanovsky became the *Arbeter fraynd's* editor when Krants left for New York. As Zimmer summarized regarding Yanovsky's time at the *Arbeter fraynd*, "under his direction [it] shed its nonpartisan character and became an explicitly anarchist paper." See Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 32. Brackets mine.

<sup>149</sup> Qtd. in Michels, "'Speaking to Moyshe,'" 58. ["Dos program fun Arbeter Tsaytung Publishing Association," *AT* (New York, NY), Mar. 7, 1890] Also see Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 123.

supported assimilation, which meant an Americanization consistent with internationalism and cosmopolitanism and devoid of nationalist chauvinism. The *Arbeter tsaytung*'s positions fit the American context. Despite some discrimination against Jews, antisemitism in the United States was weak compared to antisemitism throughout much of Europe. The main problem facing Jewish immigrants was economic exploitation. So, unlike the *Folkstsaytung*, which showed an explicit interest in the Jewish Question, the *Arbeter tsaytung* devoted less space to Jewish communal concerns and Jewish history.<sup>150</sup> But even at the start, some of its journalists tailored the newspaper to their audiences' Jewish background. Parody of religious texts had a long history in Jewish culture by 1890, and many Jewish radicals were well-versed in reaching the masses through impious parody.<sup>151</sup> When the *Arbeter tsaytung* was set to appear for the first time in March 1890, Cahan reportedly informed colleagues the weekly needed a feuilleton with "a true Jewish character." He landed on a column styled after the *droshe*, a sermon on the weekly Torah portion. Entitled "Di sedre," his radical commentary on the Torah, written under the pseudonym "The Proletarian Preacher," proved popular.<sup>152</sup>

Internationalism did not mean the *Arbeter tsaytung* could or would completely ignore religion. In light of conflicts with the conservative Yiddish press in 1880s, the Yiddish journalists aligned with the SLP had to outline their stance on religion early in the paper's run. In

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<sup>150</sup> Michels, "'Speaking to Moyshe,'" 58.

<sup>151</sup> Tanja Rubinstein estimated that from 1883 to 1910 "more than twenty socialist and anarchist pamphlets resembling Hebrew prayer books appeared in Great Britain and, later, in the United States." See Rubinstein, "An Alternative Version of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith," *Zutot* 13 (2016): 82. Also see Kritz, "The Poetics of Anarchy," 169–70. On parody in Jewish history, see Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), esp. Ch. 5; also see David G. Roskies, "Major Trends in Yiddish Parody," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 1 (2004): 109–22. While in England, Vintshevsky and Faygenboym were some of the best-known parodists. See Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 252, esp. n.13.

<sup>152</sup> Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 3: 28–30. As Michels summarized, Cahan "excelled in translating foreign concepts into familiar Jewish terminology: he likened a boycott to a *kheyrem*, Congress to the Sanhedrin, Marx's writings to Tosafot, etc." See Michels, "'Speaking to Moyshe,'" 59; and Kellman, "The Newspaper Novel in the Jewish Daily Forward (1900-1940)," 36. See some of Cahan's archived works from the *Arbeter tsaytung*: YIVO Archives, Abraham Cahan Papers, RG 1139, box 15, f. 319.

line with classical Marxist thought, they asserted religion was, like culture, part of a society's superstructure. The superstructure legitimizes the base, i.e., the forces of production, which lay in the hands of capitalist elites. Religion was a conservative force that would disappear, but the socialists' energies were better spent combating economic exploitation. Again, context was key: declining regular observance among Jewish immigrants in the United States seemed to spell their impending victory over the "yoke" of religious observance. The *Arbeter tsaytung* also regularly quoted SDP leaders to legitimize their position. In November 1890, for instance, the *Arbeter tsaytung* translated a speech by Wilhelm Liebknecht, a founder of Germany's SDP and an adored figure in the SLP, who claimed: "Religion isn't in a position to oppress us when the state's power doesn't support it. Our fight is aimed at the class-state, against its economic foundations and against its political edifices, but not against the church. When the class-state falls, the church must fall."<sup>153</sup>

With their own weekly platforms, relations between socialists and anarchists turned increasingly antagonistic in New York. The *Arbeter tsaytung* was on the front lines.<sup>154</sup> Both the *Arbeter tsaytung* and the *Fraye arbeter shtime* doubled down on their visions for social revolution. As Boston-based, SLP activist and Yiddish journalist Y. Finn outlined in September 1890, undoubtedly with a negative tone, "[The anarchists] are against strikes, against propagandizing through election campaigns, against Labor Day, against demonstrations—in short, against all that the social democrats do. They are only in favor of extreme means and sharp revolutionary agitation, the 'propaganda by deeds' as they call it."<sup>155</sup> Anarchist leaders did not deny it. In February 1891, the anarchist poet Dovid Edelshtat, editor of the *Fraye arbeter shtime*

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<sup>153</sup> Krants, "Di daytshe sotsyal-demokratye, I."

<sup>154</sup> Michels, "'Speaking to Moyshe,'" 55.

<sup>155</sup> J. Finn, "Vos tuen di anarkhisten?" *AT* (New York, NY), Sep. 19, 1890.

at the time, wrote, “strikes are an economic disease... We don’t participate in elections because they’re useless... Politicians deceive everyone only to gain a few more votes.”<sup>156</sup> *Arbeter tsaytung* contributors went so far as completely delegitimizing anarchist involvement in the labor movement.<sup>157</sup> With an early circulation somewhere between 6000 to 8000, the *Arbeter tsaytung* quickly outpaced its struggling, anarchist competitor.<sup>158</sup> Coalescing internal and external factors—economic downturn, the loss of immigrant anarchist notables, political repression, and party strife—keyed the socialists’ growing influence over New York’s Jewish labor movement in the 1890s.<sup>159</sup>

The Pioneers of Liberty also organized New York’s second Yom Kippur ball in 1890; the fledgling *Fraye arbeter shtime* promoted it heavily. Projected to be a larger affair than the previous year’s, the 1890 ball proved even more controversial than the first. The anarchists continued their aggressive antireligious agitation leading up to the ball. In mid-September, Edelstadt published a poem excoriating the orthodox, entitled “To the Defenders of Darkness.” It read, “Every age has its new Torah—/Our Torah is freedom and justice... /We have new prophets too—/Börne, Lassalle, Karl Marx;/They will save us from exile...”<sup>160</sup> Another piece in the same edition of the *Fraye arbeter shtime* stated, “It is said that even a fish in the water quakes before the Days of Awe. We do not believe that fish have enough sense to be so stupid as

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<sup>156</sup> Dovid Edelshtat, “Der veg tsum tsil,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Feb. 27, 1891. On eventual modifications to the anarchist agenda, see Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 28–9.

<sup>157</sup> Moyshe Hilkovits, a former anarchist turned fierce opponent of anarchism, summarized in September 1890, anarchists who participated in the labor movement were, strictly speaking, “untrue to their principles and ceased being anarchists.” True or untrue, such claims helped socialists create a strict delineation between their activity and anarchist activity. See Hilkovits, “Ver iz a revolutsyoner?,” *AT* (New York, NY), Sep. 12, 1890.

<sup>158</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 101.

<sup>159</sup> Zimmer, “Saul Yanovsky and Yiddish Anarchism on the Lower East Side,” 39. For an example of debates over socialism and anarchism in the socialist Yiddish press, see M. Hilkovits, “Sotsyalizmus un anarkhizmus,” *AT* (New York, NY), Aug. 8, 1890. Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 29.

<sup>160</sup> Dovid Edelshtat, “Tsu di fertheydiger fun finsternish.,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Sep. 19, 1890. For the publication of “To the Defenders of Darkness,” see Kritz, “The Poetics of Anarchy,” 91–2. On Dovid Edelshtat’s poem, also see Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 256.

to believe in a heaven.”<sup>161</sup> Even the tickets for the ball, as reported by New York’s *Sun*, were not much different in tone: “Arranged with the consent of all new rabbis of liberty. Kol Nidrei Night and Day in the year 6851 (5651), after the invention of the Jewish idols, and 1890, after the birth of the false Messiah... The Kol Nidre will be offered by John Most (*sic*). Music, dancing, buffet, Marseillaise and other hymns against Satan.”<sup>162</sup>

The *Tfile zaka* of 1890, which advertised the Yom Kippur ball, became the focus of concerted efforts to have the ball canceled. When opponents went looking for ammunition, they claimed to find it on the pages of the *Tfile zaka*, which reportedly included a reference to “bombs.” In truth, vague references to violence were likely overstated in the English translation opponents rendered. Regardless, considering high-profile anarchist violence in the 1880s, even the whiff of a bomb threat was enough for Brooklyn’s mayor, Alfred Chapin, to have the event cancelled.<sup>163</sup> The *Fraye arbeter shtime*’s editors and contributors were livid. Referring to some of the specific conservatives involved, one writer declared the alliance may have won the day but would lose the final battle—“Not forever will the rule of butchers, crooked coroners, rabbis, and priests darken the sun of enlightenment.”<sup>164</sup> A week later, the anarchist newspaper lambasted

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<sup>161</sup> Qtd. in Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 251. [Cited simply as *FASH* (New York, NY), Sep. 19, 1890]

<sup>162</sup> *Sun* (New York, NY), Sept. 24, 1890; qtd. in Rischin, *The Promised City*, 155. Also see Arnold Edward Rothkoff, “Vision and Realization: Bernard Revel and His Era” (D.H.L., Yeshiva University, 1967), 7. The conservative Yiddish press and Anglo-American Jewish press continued their opposition. One case appeared in the form of a reprinted speech by Adolph Radin, a Reform rabbi and recent immigrant (1886) whose activism brought him into “uptown” Jewish circles. Published in Philadelphia’s *Jewish Exponent* but delivered at the Russian American Hebrew Association in New York, Radin’s speech chastised “the pioneers of atheism, the champions and representatives of an anti-Jewish or anti-religious movement” for arranging a Yom Kippur ball. He even said: “We intentionally and emphatically say ‘former co-religionists,’ for by their actions they long ago lost the right of being called Israelites.” Rev. Dr. Adolph M. Radin, “Black sheep among Russian Jews,” *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), Sep. 26, 1890.

<sup>163</sup> For a summary of the case, see Margolis, “A Tempest in Three Teapots,” 75–6, n.45. On debates surrounding the “bomb” reference in the *Tfile zaka*, see Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 262. For differences between the socialists and anarchists, in the Jewish socialists’ own words, see Hilkovits, “Ver iz a revolutsyoner?”; J. Finn, “Vos tuen di anarkhisten?”

<sup>164</sup> Qtd. in Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 263. [Cited simply as *FASH* (New York, NY), Sep. 26, 1890]

conservative leaders as “hypocrites and swindlers” who oversee their “communal cesspool,” i.e., religion. “Next year,” the *Fraye arbeter shtime* promised “there will be three times as many freethinkers and fighters for freedom on our side.”<sup>165</sup> The optics of the ball’s cancellation were not lost on New York’s English-language press. New York’s *Sun* also criticized Chapin, albeit with much less vitriol.<sup>166</sup>

For journalists at the *Arbeter tsaytung*, the cancellation presented a conundrum. Krants penned an editorial, entitled “The Yom Kippur Ball and the Orthodox,” critical of both the anarchists and their conservative opponents. As he understood it, the orthodox and their allies were trying to expand their power in the United States. Upon reading a story about the ball’s cancellation in New York’s *Sun*, he told readers he had exclaimed aloud, “Next year, I’ll use all my power to make sure a Yom Kippur ball happens again.”<sup>167</sup> Once Krants gave his rage time to subside, however, he admitted he could not, “as a convinced freethinker and socialist,” help organize a Yom Kippur ball. He certainly did not want fellow socialists to think he supported “mocking God or mocking truly pious Jews,” because unnecessary provocation only hardened hearts, it did not convert them.<sup>168</sup> Still, the Pioneers had a right to hold a Yom Kippur ball.<sup>169</sup> Bolstering his case, he accused “the orthodox” and their allies of violating freedom of assembly, and the trampling of constitutional freedoms could have a direct impact on the rights of freethinkers across the nation. And so, “the question is now very simply, ‘If freethinkers in America can have the same freedom to enjoy themselves on Yom Kippur, just as the orthodox

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<sup>165</sup> Qtd. in Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 263. [Cited simply as *FASh* (New York, NY), Oct. 3, 1890]

<sup>166</sup> Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 263. Also justifying this section’s focus on Yom Kippur balls was their use as a setting for a tragicomic serial. See “Der yomkipper ball!”

<sup>167</sup> Ph. Krants, “Der yomkipper bol un di ortodoksen.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 3, 1890.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* Krants even said, “this ban... [has] entirely changed the issue.” The German socialist *Volkszeitung* also did not find the Yom Kippur ball wise but still supported the anarchists’ right to have a ball.

have complete freedom to suffer and act insanely on this day?” Just as the conservative Yiddish press united in their fight against Jewish radicals, so too could freethinkers unite in protesting the cancellation. A protest should be, Krants remarked, “organized by all freethinkers—whether socialist or not—to show that we have the same freedom here as the orthodox.”<sup>170</sup> In this way, Krants clearly recognized freethought as a commitment cutting across distinct political camps. Since the power of conservatives posed a problem for *all* freethinkers, even the socialists who detested Yom Kippur balls should fight for their rights as freethinkers.

Jewish radicals often argued for their *American* right to oppose religion. They asserted it a regression that public officials in a land trumpeting freedom of speech and freedom of assembly would cave to conservative pressure. Even the *Fraye arbeter shtime* wrote, “one butcher [Moses May, an opponent of the ball] has more power than a thousand Jeffersons, Paines, and Franklins together [i.e., the freethinkers].”<sup>171</sup> Radicals elsewhere turned to this language when conservative opponents thwarted Yom Kippur balls. After a Pioneer-sponsored Yom Kippur ball was disrupted in Philadelphia in 1891, a letter published in the *Arbeter tsaytung*, presumably by an anarchist, opened with the declaration, “Jefferson! Franklin! Paine! Washington! Arise from your graves! Take a look at what’s become of your ‘freedom of speech,’ your ‘freedom of the press,’ your ‘Constitution,’ and your ‘Declaration of Independence’.”<sup>172</sup> The socialists especially argued for irreligious rights by noting the foundational role freethinkers played in American history. In 1893, Benyomen Faygenboym informed *Arbeter tsaytung* readers

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid. Krants also said protesting the 1890 cancellation was a freethinker’s “sacred duty.”

<sup>171</sup> Qtd. in Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 263. [Cited simply as *FASh* (New York, NY), Oct. 3, 1890]

<sup>172</sup> “Geratevet dem reboyne-sheloylem.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 16, 1891. The article also called Yom Kippur “the great ‘holy’ day of all Jewish hypocrites and old oxen.” *Oksen* [*oksn*], also meaning “fools,” was a play on *ortodoksen* [*ortodoksn*]. On the controversy surrounding Yom Kippur balls in Philadelphia’s radical circles, see Weinberg, *Forty Years in the Struggle*, 24–5; also see Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 265.

that “the Constitution stipulates religion is a private matter” and its framers were “avowed *apikorsim!*”<sup>173</sup> The most famous early American freethinker, Thomas Paine, was beloved above all.<sup>174</sup> Again, Faygenboym took the lead in spreading word about the freethinking Paine. In 1896, he contributed a biographical sketch of Paine to the *Tsukunft*, praising the founding father for remaining an *apikoyres* in the face of social ostracism.<sup>175</sup> He ended the article by quoting an inscription in Paine’s honor: “The world is my fatherland and doing good—my religion.”<sup>176</sup> Krants too, in his history of the French Revolution, pinpointed Paine as “a freethinker and great writer who was one of the most important fighters in the American Revolution.”<sup>177</sup> The veneration of Paine as a founding father and freethinker mirrored how native-born freethinkers felt about him.<sup>178</sup>

According to Krants, freethinkers of *Jewish* background were united in another sense—they had come from an oppressive context. A contrast between the New World and the Old World was essential to Krants’ insistence that the cancellation be taken seriously. In the Old World, he wrote, “vile hypocrites made [freethinkers’] lives miserable,” so “we must show them

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<sup>173</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Roym vil di velt aynnemen.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Dec. 8, 1893. Faygenboym also said in this article: “There’s no official religion here. The American government isn’t Catholic, Protestant, [or] Jewish—[it’s] nothing at all.”

<sup>174</sup> For example: “Vos iz der ikhus mit ir?,” *AT* (New York, NY), Mar. 3, 1895. Also see the short advertisement for the Thomas Paine Literary Society in “Yidishe naves,” *AT* (New York, NY), May 31, 1902. Later see: Y. Khaykin, “Thomas Pein [Thomas Paine],” *Arbeter* (New York, NY), Jun. 12, 1909; Thomas Paine, *Di tsayt fun farshtand: Di epohke fun ratsyonalizm: A shtudye vegn dem emes un lign fun religye*, trans. N. Perelman (New York: Max Jankovitz, n.d., likely 1920s).

<sup>175</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Thomas Paine,” *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1896): 10. *Apikoyres* was Faygenboym’s word.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* 10, full text is pp. 5–10.

<sup>177</sup> Ph. Krants, *Di geshikhte fun di groyse frantsoyzishe revolutsyon nokh di beste un nayeste verk un nokhforshungen* (New York: International Library Publishing Co., 1903), 151. Also see P. Wiernik, *Geshikhte fun di yiden in amerika* (New York: The Jewish Press Publishing Company, 1914), 88. Here, Wiernik writes, “There were many freethinkers and enlightened people among the spiritual leaders of the revolution, but the rank and file colonists were very pious...” Also see B. Faygenboym, *Vashington* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1907); Ph. Krants, *Vos heyst natsyon? Zaynen yiden a natsyon?* (New York: A.M. Yevalenko/International Library Publishing Co., 1903), 15. Also see Cahan’s commentary on Abraham Lincoln: YIVO Archives, Abraham Cahan Papers, RG 1139, box 15, f. 321.

<sup>178</sup> See, for example, Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Church of Saint Thomas Paine: A Religious History of American Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). Also see, Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 1–24.

that they've made a huge mistake, that New York isn't Berdichev." A failure to take the cancellation seriously would, in the end, send the wrong message, that freethinkers have no power in the United States. Old-World oppression proved the point: "The terrible example of sinister fanaticism in Polish or Lithuanian towns has shown us what kind of sorrows one might endure at their hand if no one gets in their way." Again, freethinkers of all stripes needed to return fire with fire: "We, freethinkers, need to show them that we also have a bit of influence in America."<sup>179</sup> Krants' depiction of freethinkers in the United States presented them as both emboldened and embattled. Freethinkers enjoyed the freedoms afforded by the American context, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, etc., freedoms distinguishing the New World from the Old. And yet, freethinkers had to be vigilant in fighting the encroachment of religious authorities. Krants used the cancelled Yom Kippur ball to frame the orthodox as antimodern and un-American. Other Jewish freethinkers, whether socialist or anarchist, would echo this same refrain in the Yiddish press for decades.<sup>180</sup> Jewish radicals, especially those who emigrated from Eastern Europe during the 1880s, often referenced Old-World instances of persecution as signs of their radical devotion to freethought as well as the "backwardness" of Jewish religious tradition.<sup>181</sup>

While Krants argued for the *right* to hold a Yom Kippur ball, he still deemed this form of agitation detrimental to the revolutionary cause. Krants recognized that many Jewish immigrants were not strictly observant in the United States but still held an affection for Jewish holidays. A Yom Kippur ball was "stupid and boorish... a coarse and undeserved slap in the face."<sup>182</sup> If

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<sup>179</sup> Krants, "Der yomkipper bol un di ortodoksn."

<sup>180</sup> Polland, "May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?" 386–7.

<sup>181</sup> For example, see Ab. Cahan, "Apikorsim," *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 13, 1911; also, idem, "Apikorsim," *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 17, 1911. Also see Khayim Aleksandrov's article on pp. 5–6 of the *Arbeter tsaytung* (New York, NY), Dec. 31, 1899. Unfortunately, the microfilm scan of the article made its title unintelligible.

<sup>182</sup> Krants, "Der yomkipper bol un di ortodoksn"; trans. from Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 269.

arguments against conservatives pivoted on power, modernity, and acculturation, arguments against the antireligious agitation hinged on defining how freethinkers *should* confront religion. The *Tfile zaka* took center stage. Krants claimed that “any thinking person” should regard this particular parody with “contempt and disgust.” For such a ferocious bark, their propaganda also revealed few teeth. In Krants’ words, “[They] didn’t want to struggle with God and religion in any other way than the famed comic protagonist Don Quixote struggled with windmills.”<sup>183</sup> Krants’ assessment did not stand alone. Cahan also wrote that the *Tfile zaka* have “no use in the struggle for a social revolution.” He, like Krants, recognized a general alignment with the anarchists while simultaneously rejecting their approach. “I’m an atheist as well,” Cahan declared, “I eat on Yom Kippur too, and I also fight against religion, but I want to do something useful with my fight.”<sup>184</sup> Jewish socialists would declare this tempered approach throughout the 1890s. When leading socialist and Yiddish journalist Mikhail Zametkin spoke to a group of socialists and anarchists in Chicago in 1891, a city where relations between anarchists and socialists were warmer, he too stressed a muted tone despite opposing religion. After reportedly speaking about the “silliness” of fasting on Yom Kippur, Zametkin said, “As an atheist, I preach against religion only when I have the opportunity, when I know that my speech would bring patient contemplation, but not at a time when it only extracts a hate, a contempt, a bloodthirsty vengeance from the unknowing masses.”<sup>185</sup> This rhetoric conveyed the sense that direct

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<sup>183</sup> Krants, “Der yomkipper bol un di ortodoksn.” [Here, translation from Kritz “The Poetics of Anarchy,” 89]

<sup>184</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Tfile-zaka-ne khvates.,” in “Shtimen oys dem folk.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Sep. 19, 1890. Cahan said it was “even written in such a bungling manner that according to several opinions it is revolting reading material.” Here, Cahan was criticizing the *quality* of the parody, not parody itself.

<sup>185</sup> “Korespondents.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 30, 1891. Jewish communities in different American cities had varying relationships to radical politics. See, for example, Eric L. Goldstein and Deborah R. Weiner, *On Middle Ground: A History of the Jews of Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 154–60. On small-town Jewish life, see Ewa Moraswka, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). The same could be said of Jews in Western Europe, see Karin Hofmeester, *Jewish Workers and the Labour Movement: A Comparative Study of Amsterdam, London and Paris 1870-1914* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017).

antireligious agitation was not helpful in removing the “yoke” of religious observance, i.e., making freethinkers out of pious zealots.

What, then, constituted an effective critique of religion? *Visnshaft!* In English: Science! Science was the best means, Krants wrote, for “throwing off the yoke of religion and superstition.”<sup>186</sup> Or, as Cahan also stated, “I’m sure an article about what thunder is, [or about] where the difference between day and night comes from, is a much better bomb against superstition than provocative *Tfile zakas (sic)*.”<sup>187</sup> Though many modern Jewish movements considered science a means for ridding the Jewish masses of so-called superstitions, the socialists gave science a preeminent position in their program. As a case in point, in 1891 the SLP’s Yiddish sections declared, “Socialism not only is a science built on a sharp critique of the ruling social order, but touches all aspects of social life and almost all aspects of human knowledge.”<sup>188</sup> In classical Marxist thought, socialism itself was a science, known as “scientific socialism,” which Krants firmly espoused in the first edition of the *Arbeter tsaytung*.<sup>189</sup> Venerating science had other resonances, too. A broad array of intellectuals in the late 1800s asserted that science was inherently cosmopolitan. As one notable American botanist commented in 1895, “It must first of all be kept in mind that *world-wideness* is in the fabric of all science (*sic*). Since

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<sup>186</sup> Krants, “Der yomkipper bol un di ortodoksn.” More on science and the Yiddish press, see Stephen M. Cohen, “Chemical Literature in Yiddish: A Bridge between the Shtetl and the Secular World,” *Aleph*, no. 7 (2007): 183–251.

<sup>187</sup> Cahan, “Tfile-zaka-ne khvates.”

<sup>188</sup> Qtd. in Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 118. Krants was, in fact, the first editor of the *Tsukunft*. See Steven Cassedy, *Building the Future: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and the Making of Tsukunft* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1999), 14. For commentary on popular science and radical Yiddish journals, see Elias Shulman, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in amerike, 1870-1900* (New York: Biderman, 1943), 65–74.

In the 1890s and into the 1900s, the Yiddish publishing market produced translations of world literature—e.g., Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne, Leo Tolstoy, etc.—for a public hungry for anything modern. Aside from profit, radicals and nonradicals used world literature to spread popular scientific knowledge. To the same extent, radicals and nonradicals began publishing Yiddish textbooks about science, politics, and history—whether translations, adaptations, or original productions.

<sup>189</sup> Ph. Krants, “Iber gezelschafts-visenschaft.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Mar. 7, 1890

induction is objective, the scientific method is cosmopolitan.”<sup>190</sup> This view of science offered seemingly objective lenses or a neutral space from which to challenge religious beliefs and nationalist sentiments.<sup>191</sup> In his commentary on the cancelled ball, Krants explicitly noted how scientific discoveries challenged traditional Jewish narratives, like the Exodus from Egypt, the universal flood, and the age of the earth. Science helped Krants and similar socialist intellectuals thread the needle. They could critique religion indirectly but with apparent authority.<sup>192</sup>

Krants’ calls for freethinker unity did not extend far. A month later, he was back to upbraiding anarchists as “Hasidim,” which, like “fanatic,” rhetorically signaled an irrational devotion to an idea, movement, or leader. He called them Hasidim while affirming Liebknecht’s tolerance in the same article; Liebknecht had said, “we don’t need to hide from anyone that we’re freethinkers,” but still, nobody “has the right to assault another’s conscience with brutal power.”<sup>193</sup> The anarchists, it should be noted, responded to Krants in kind. In an article entitled “Kosher Pig’s Feet,” the *Fraye arbeter shtime* accused him of misrepresenting the *Tfile zaka*, and, more importantly, reminded readers that Krants himself had been “the initiator and organizer of the first Yom Kippur ball” (London 1888).<sup>194</sup> But, while Krants’ war with the

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<sup>190</sup> Conway MacMillan, “The Scientific Method and Modern Intellectual Life,” *Science* n.s. 1, no. 20 (May 1895): 541, italics his; full piece: 537–42. This reference was found in Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 23.

<sup>191</sup> Later in the decade, for example, science gave Faygenboym confidence to declare he was “so happy to be able to look at Jewishness dispassionately.” See B. Faygenboym, “Dos letste vort,” *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 16, 1898.

<sup>192</sup> Krants, “Der yomkipper bol un di ortodoksn.” It was science that, at least in part, gave Krants confidence in his call to arms in the final lines of this article: “Down with superstition and fanaticism—long live the free spirit! Down with the tyranny of capital and the shop-politicians—long live freedom, equality, and fraternity! Long live the Socialist Labor Party!” It is also worth noting that Krants figured the ball controversy reveal another call to arms—the exercise of political power through the American political system. Consonant with SLP strategy, socialists should use the ballot box to make the Brooklyn mayor “see and to feel” the frustrations of “the enlightened Jewish worker.” By the end of October, the editor or editors of the *Arbeter tsaytung* were clearly annoyed by still having to discuss Yom Kippur balls, see “Briefkasten.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 31, 1890.

<sup>193</sup> Krants, “Di daytshe sotsyal-demokratye, I.” The antagonism went both ways. Following violent disruptions after New York’s Yom Kippur ball in 1893, anarchists accused “social-democratic-hangers-on,” “swinish saloonkeepers,” and “Irish and American bums” for joining hands as “pogromists” against them. Qtd. in Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 266. [Cited simply as *FASH* (New York, NY), Sep. 22, 1893, and *FASH* (New York, NY), Sep. 29, 1893]

<sup>194</sup> Qtd. in Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 270. [Cited simply as *FASH* (New York, NY), Oct. 10, 1890, and *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 24, 1890]

anarchists accelerated, they were not the only freethinkers with whom he was concerned. He also cautioned *Arbeter tsaytung* readers not to become “bourgeois atheists.”<sup>195</sup> By “bourgeois atheists,” Krants meant nonradical freethinkers, like Robert Ingersoll. While freethinking Jewish immigrants did not establish formal ties with native-born American freethinkers, they still embraced the antireligious writings of English-speaking freethinkers.<sup>196</sup> Ingersoll did, in fact, become the main object of their affections.<sup>197</sup> Even critics noticed connections between freethinking non-Jews and freethinking Jews. When a Philadelphia-based journalist published a turn of the century pamphlet criticizing “so-called scholars” (i.e., freethinking Jewish youths in the United States) for rejecting the Torah outright, he blamed the influence of “*goyshe* critics” (non-Jewish critics), specifically Thomas Paine and Robert Ingersoll.<sup>198</sup> But, why would someone like Krants consider bourgeois atheism such a potential problem? While Krants thought bourgeois atheists performed helpful, enlightening work, he also thought overemphasizing the fight against religion threatened to distract from “the downfall of the capitalist social order,” the socialist’s true objective<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Krants, “Di dayshe sotsyal-demokratye, I.”

<sup>196</sup> Scharfman, “On Common Ground,” 32, also 33 n.64. Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 153.

<sup>197</sup> Yiddish journalists of all stripes would quote liberally from Ingersoll’s works, cover his speaking engagements, and translate his books into Yiddish. For example, see “Mitln gegen apikoyrus Ingersoll,” *Teglikher herald* (New York, NY), Dec. 2, 1898; “Ingersoll erkleret,” *Teglikher herald* (New York, NY), May 14, 1896; “Selbstmord,” *Teglikher herald* (New York, NY), Feb. 17, 1897; “Ingersoll redt,” *Teglikher herald* (New York, NY), Apr. 20, 1896; “Ingersoll un di kirkhe,” *Teglikher herald* (New York, NY), Jan. 16, 1896; see the news listed under “Der strayk in shikago,” *YG* (New York, NY), Nov. 19, 1886; Ab. Cahan, “Yesurim-instrumentn fun der inkvizitsie,” *AT* (New York, NY), Feb. 23, 1894. Simon Freeman translated Ingersoll’s “The Errors of Moses” for London’s *Arbeter fraynd* in 1892, and later in book form. By 1910, the translation had undergone four editions in book form. See Reyzen, “Freeman, Simon,” *Leksikon*, vol. 4: 203–4. Freeman was also publishing a translation of Paine’s *Di tsayt fun farshtand* in the *Arbeter fraynd*, but the published translation was never finished, as the *Arbeter fraynd* ceased publication. Also see Shoel Yanovsky, *Ershte yorn fun yidishen frayhaytlekhn sotsyalizm* (New York: Fraye Arbeter Shtime, 1948), 219. Jacoby estimated “Some Mistakes of Moses” was “the Ingersoll lecture most frequently translated into Yiddish.” See Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 152; also see Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 247. Eyges, too, noted Ingersoll’s importance, as well as that of Paine. See Eyges, *Beyond the Horizon*, 76.

<sup>198</sup> Hillel Malakhovsky, *Di yidische oysres* (Philadelphia: n.p. [possibly author], 1900), 7. Also see Reyzen, “Malakhovsky, Hillel,” *Leksikon*, vol. 2: 296–8.

<sup>199</sup> Krants, “Di dayshe sotsyal-demokratye, I.”

Krants resigned as *Arbeter tsaytung* editor in 1891, but he remained involved in the SLP-aligned Yiddish press, becoming the *Tsukunft*'s editor in 1892.<sup>200</sup> Possibly modelled on thick, intellectual journals Jewish revolutionaries encountered in Russia, the *Tsukunft* contained longer, more detailed articles than anything previously published in American Yiddish periodicals. Though the *Tsukunft* was not as popular as the *Arbeter tsaytung* or the *Abend blat*, the Publishing Association's daily (est. 1894), Krants and later editors still recognized the need to make the journal accessible to an average Yiddish readership.<sup>201</sup> Most importantly, *Tsukunft* contributors, including Krants, were constantly talking about religion from a historical and scientific perspective [Figure 1.1]. Elias Shulman, Jewish immigrant and Yiddish scholar, aptly summarized Krants' contribution to moderate antireligious propagandizing: "[He was] well-acquainted with the foundational works on religion, and brought to the Yiddish reader, in popular form, the results of research on the subject of religion... [He] gave a materialistic explanation of religion's development, so that he, with his works on the subject, lent a hand to the fight against religion that the Jewish radicals conducted."<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> On Krants' career after the *Arbeter tsaytung*, see Reyzen, "Krants, Philip," *Leksikon*, vol. 3: 728–40. Also see Burgin, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher arbeter bevegung*, 533–4. See some of the earliest correspondence related to the *Tsukunft*: YIVO Archives, Records of the *Zukunft*, RG 362, box 5, f. 14.

<sup>201</sup> Cassedy, *Building the Future*, 10–11.

<sup>202</sup> Shulman, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in amerike, 1870-1900*, 72.



readers to submit their own articles for a ten-dollar prize, they chose the relationship between science and religion as the topic.

Some anarchists and fiercely antireligious socialists continued their aggressive antireligious propaganda and agitation after 1890, including Yom Kippur balls, though not without some controversy within their own ranks.<sup>203</sup> While some antireligious radicals took pride in audacious impiety, participants and onlookers would later recall the practical results were unsuccessful. Another Jewish immigrant and scholar, Elias Tcherikower, stated that “The violent attacks of the anarchists against religion were directed against the very core of [the Jewish immigrant’s] being and identification, and this could not be forgiven.”<sup>204</sup> Others would instead recall how the balls served a purpose in their time. As Yankev Milkh said in the late 1910s, “Crude, foolish, and shameful as the Yom Kippur ball was, it nonetheless signaled a progressive movement that was going its own way.”<sup>205</sup> Positive or negative, they propelled the public proclamation of one’s posture toward religion and the religious.

### **Is a Middle Path Possible?: Tensions in Antireligious Tendencies**

The SLP Yiddish journalists had an apparent problem—posture and practice did not always align. Disparaging remarks about religion and the religious appeared to contradict “religion is

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<sup>203</sup> Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 255.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 267, also see p. 268. Tcherikower specifically cites anarchist leader Isidore Kopeloff, who stated in 1928 that “The war against God played a great part in the decrease of anarchist influence in Jewish life.” See Kopeloff, *Amol in amerike*, 275. Zimmer, citing Kopeloff directly, notes that Kopeloff’s quote here “must be balanced against his observation that ‘perhaps the Pioneers gained more from the negative publicity’ than they lost.” See Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 26. Jewish anarchist ranks undoubtedly grew because of these acts of impiety. Still, many Jewish immigrants found Yom Kippur balls distressing.

<sup>205</sup> Yankev Milkh, “Reaktsyonere shtremungen,” in *Shriften*, second edition (New York: Farlag America, 1919/1920), 8, the pagination of this collection is not standard. From context, it is clear that while Farlag America’s *Shriften* was already in its second edition by 1919/1920, Milkh had written the article after World War I. It should also be mentioned that Milkh thought Yom Kippur balls were an “outgrowth” of radical Jewish politics in America, not a “guide” in the movement. Also see a reprint: idem, “Reaktsyonere shtremungen,” in *Yidishe problemen* (New York: Farlag America, 1920), vol. 2: 47–80.

private.” Even from the *Arbeter tsaytung*’s start, Cahan’s “Sedre” commentary flouted traditional readings of Jewish texts and was a launchpad for hostilities against everything from rabbinic authorities to Zionism to notions of *klal-yisroel*.<sup>206</sup> *Arbeter tsaytung* contributor Moyshe Hilkovits, meanwhile, sounded more in step with the anarchists when he elevated religion’s dangers in September 1890, identifying the proletariat’s quintessential enemy as “the powerful union of capital, tyranny, and religion.”<sup>207</sup> In July 1892, an *Arbeter tsaytung* editor suggested socialism and religion were fundamentally opposed: “since religion stands in contradiction with science, and socialism is based on science, [religion and socialism] must be hostile.”<sup>208</sup> Several months later, Faygenboym called religion “the wild Asiatic cholera.”<sup>209</sup> Even in the first edition of the *Tsukunft* (January 1892), Krants called religions “empty fantasies.”<sup>210</sup> These declarations did not necessarily contradict “religion is private,” but they revealed muddy waters.

In light of disparaging statements from SLP journalists, not to mention criticism from anarchists, Cahan defended his paper’s policy on religion in May 1893 with a two-part article, entitled “Is Religion a Private Matter?”<sup>211</sup> The seemingly exasperated editor wanted to finally put the religion question to rest. His primary target was, he claimed, “hackneyed, unscientific socialists,” those who say, “the person who has religious convictions can’t be a true socialist.” A series of other questions lay behind the religion question: how should the SLP’s Yiddish sections

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<sup>206</sup> See, for example, Der proletarishker magid, “Di sedre,” *AT* (New York, NY), Jan. 8, 1892.

<sup>207</sup> Hilkovits, “Ver iz a revolutsyoner?” As Tcherikower summarized the anarchist position, “religion, to the anarchists, was part of the unholy trinity of state, capitalism, and the church.” See Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 267.

<sup>208</sup> “Briefkasten.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Jul. 15, 1892.

<sup>209</sup> B.F., “Vu zaynen mir in der velt?,” *AT* (New York, NY), Sep. 23, 1892. He also wrote: “Woe to you, religion, for how you ‘refined’ humanity after a reign of thousands of years! Woe to you priests, rabbis, clergymen, and bourgeoisie moral preachers, for how you elevated the spirit of the enormous herds of kosher cattle who believe in you and consider your Torahs sacred!” Judaism as “Asiatic” also appeared in Rozentsvayg, *Brismile*, 20.

<sup>210</sup> Ph. Krants, “Got, religyon un moral.,” *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1892): 14, entire article 7–15; also see idem, “Got, religyon un moral.,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1892): 9–16; idem, *Got, religyon, un moral* (London: Radical Publishing Company, 1906).

<sup>211</sup> A great example of creative anarchist criticism can be seen in M. Koh., “‘Religyon iz a privat zakh’.,” *FASH* (New York, NY), Sep. 20, 1901.

police party membership? Should they inquire as to members' personal convictions on religion? Did they need an explicitly antireligious stance?<sup>212</sup> Cahan's commentary reflected common strategies Jewish socialists employed when addressing religion—they differentiated religious impulses, e.g., innate desires and needs, from formalized religion, e.g., ritual, dogma, institution, etc. The nuanced rhetoric would play a notable role in American Jewish radical politics far beyond the 1890s.<sup>213</sup>

Cahan began his first "Is Religion a Private Matter?" article by defining "religion." He stated, "we, as particular persons, do not have any kind of beliefs that are typically called religious."<sup>214</sup> By "we," he meant the *Arbeter tsaytung*'s editors and contributors—they did not believe in a divine being, whether Jewish, Christian, or Islamic, nor did they trust "divine miracles in the fantastical tales of the Jewish Torah, the Gospels, or Islamic Qur'an." Cahan's commentary recognized the word "religion" was at play in popular culture. For one, Jewish socialists were known for using the expression "socialism is our religion." It was a rhetorical means by which Jewish radicals communicated how strongly they held their convictions.<sup>215</sup> It was especially popular in the SLP's Yiddish sections. At the first congress of the Yiddish-speaking worker's organizations, held on October 10, 1890, one decorative banner read: "The world is our fatherland, socialism—our religion."<sup>216</sup> Similarly, when celebrating the fifth anniversary of the *Arbeter tsaytung* in March 1895, Cahan also used this language, writing about how Jewish socialists had undergone a remarkable transformation. Their former declaration, i.e.,

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<sup>212</sup> Cahan, "Iz religyon a privat zakhe?" (May 26); idem, "Iz religyon a privat zakhe?" (June 2); also see Krants "Di daytshe sotsyal-demokratye, I." and B.F., "Sotsyalizmus un religyon."

<sup>213</sup> "The anarchists," Tcherikower summarized, "rejected the oftentimes fine distinction between the religious impulses and needs of individuals and the institutionalized and ritualized character of formal religion." See Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 249.

<sup>214</sup> Cahan, "Iz religyon a privat zakhe?" (May 26).

<sup>215</sup> Jewish anarchists, like poet Dovid Edelshtat, showed similar creativity with the word "religion." See Kritiz, "The Poetics of Anarchy," Ch. 3.

<sup>216</sup> "Der ershter kongres fun di yidishe arbeter fun amerika un kanada.," *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 10, 1890.

“The little Jews are my people, the little sliver of the Land of Israel is my world, and the tiny, little Torah is my religion,” had turned into a radical declaration, i.e., “Humanity is my people, the wide world is my fatherland, and helping everyone advance toward happiness is my religion!”<sup>217</sup>

“Socialism as religion” had a significance beyond belief. *Arbeter tsaytung* writers used “religion” to invoke agitation. “Religious” conviction necessitated action. In January 1893, for example, Cahan demanded readers act “religiously” upon socialist convictions: “remember, you who have found a new religion in socialism—remember that a religion demands obligations! Remember one doesn’t do their duty with feeling alone!”<sup>218</sup> Approximately two years later, on the eve of the November elections, the *Arbeter tsaytung* implored readers, “do your duty for your conviction!” which meant turning socialism “into the inspired ‘religion’ of the masses” (Cahan used quotation marks, likely to note the unorthodox use of “religion”).<sup>219</sup>

The socialists’ play on “religion” reflected intellectual trends in modern times. Cahan’s article defending “religion is private” hinted at this history by mentioning French, positivist philosopher Auguste Comte’s “religion of humanity.” Comte and his followers called their “philosophical social system” a religion, “though the sole Torah this system recognizes is pure science.”<sup>220</sup> The SLP’s Yiddish journalists also put it to use in negative senses. Faygenboym

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<sup>217</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Unzer 5ter yohresfest.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Mar. 3, 1895. [Here, I have used Michels’ translation as the basis for my own, see Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 1]

<sup>218</sup> Full quote: “Think, you thousands who applaud the speeches of our agitators with such enthusiasm, think, you who have found a new religion in socialism—think about the fact that a religion demands obligations! Think about how one doesn’t do their duty with feeling alone!” See Ab. Cahan, “Di yidishe sotsyalisten un di yidishe yunyons.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Jan. 13, 1893.

<sup>219</sup> “A vort tsu di lezer.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Nov. 1, 1895. Cahan employed this rhetoric, too.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. Cahan mentioned that Comte’s followers “even call their places of assembly ‘churches’.” In nonradical circles, the freethinking Ingersoll had also recently proclaimed “secularism is a religion.” Another interesting article, see “Di religyon fun der visenshaft.,” *Morgn tsaytung* (New York, NY), Jan. 18, 1906. The *Morgn tsaytung* was a short-lived socialist daily published in New York. For more on Cahan and Comte, see Sarah Kimmet, “Abraham Cahan, Auguste Comte, and the Positivist Future,” *MELUS* 42, no. 2 (2017): 79–93.

claimed in June 1892, “The practical religion of today’s time, the religion that is worshipped world over with great ardor, with word and deed, is—‘money making’.”<sup>221</sup> But even here, Faygenboym reflected a common trope. Vintshevsky too had recently stated in London’s *Arbeter fraynd*, “The cannibalistic capitalists... all testify that the lord cash is king.”<sup>222</sup> Socialist Paul Lafargue, Marx’s son-in-law, had also recently published *La Religion du Capital* (“The Religion of Capital,” 1887), a biting satire of capitalism as religion. The *Tsukunft*, in fact, published a translated, redacted version of *La Religion du Capital* in April 1892.<sup>223</sup> Similarly, just as Krants called Jewish anarchists “Hasidim,” so too did Wilhelm Liebknecht call the propaganda by the deed “the religion of tyrannical power.”<sup>224</sup> Like other radical and nonradical intellectuals, Jewish radicals would, for decades, play with “religion” in both positive and negative senses.

Cahan’s main proof against “hackneyed, unscientific socialists” came from experience. Experience showed the socialists were better at making freethinkers than “professional ‘*apikorsishe* agitators’,” likely meaning nonradical freethinkers (e.g., Ingersoll). Socialist success, Cahan claimed, relied on making material interests primary, not religion. In his words, “it’s much, much easier to make most workers into economic *apikorsim* than religious *apikorsim*.” One need only remember, in Marxist language, that “false views of economic circumstances go hand-in-hand with religious superstitions, but the former is the foundation.” Cahan, like many socialist intellectuals, did not think most individuals were deeply invested in religion; they maintained religious sentiments and religious practice out of habit. Religious individuals had a disposition, fostered by traditional religion, that shielded their religious

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<sup>221</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Kapitalistische meshuges,” *AT* (New York, NY), Jun. 3, 1892.

<sup>222</sup> Qtd. in Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 251. Also see Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, 252.

<sup>223</sup> “Di religyon fun kapital (nokh Poyl Lafarg),” *Tsukunft* (Apr. 1892): 27. The translation was by A. Ortman.

<sup>224</sup> On the propaganda by the deed, Liebknecht also said: “We socialists know ourselves and teach others that no individual person has the right and the power to force the society to follow his will.” See “Der sotsyalismus un daytshland,” *AT* (New York, NY), Feb. 24, 1895.

sentiments from doubt or direct critique, but socialists had the upper hand once material interests became the focus. The worker exposed to the socialist critique of society will, when confronted by the evils of “the boss or landlord,” remember the hope expressed in socialist propaganda. The worker eventually becomes “enchanted” with the socialist vision. Science continues the transformation—“[the worker] becomes free from all foolishness, and he will begin respecting science instead of the Torah.”<sup>225</sup> It was therefore possible to be religious and a socialist—the individual socialist may be on the progressive path toward relinquishing religious sentiments.

It was also possible to be a socialist and religious because, according to Cahan, the two were not fundamentally opposed. He understood religious traditions as diverse and flexible, allowing for multifaceted readings of the same sacred texts. An individual can find a unity between socialist principles and religious precepts. Christianity presented the clearest case in Cahan’s view. Christians, “especially the Anglo-Saxons,” he claimed, had developed ways of blending science and modern politics with Christianity. They could argue “very sincerely, although very stupidly, that Jesus Christ was even a socialist.” The unity was only temporary, however. Socialist would, again, naturally progress toward renouncing religious beliefs. In a similar fashion, he criticized “so-called Christian socialists” who create entire Christian socialist parties. These parties merely “quibble[d] over half-hearted socialist ideas from the *chumash* or the gospels.” Only as individuals could religious socialists temporarily remain both religious and “ardent socialist revolutionaries.”<sup>226</sup>

A problem remained. Socialist agitators like Krants, Cahan, Faygenboym, and others, regularly published propaganda contradicting conventional religious claims, if even mostly from

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<sup>225</sup> Cahan, “Iz religyon a privat zakhe?” (May 26).

<sup>226</sup> Cahan, “Iz religyon a privat zakhe?” (June 2). There may have been historic reasons for Cahan’s assessment of Christian revolutionaries versus religiously observant, Jewish revolutionaries. See Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 14–15.

a scientific standpoint. If socialists were supposed to concentrate their energies on creating “economic *apikorsim*,” why expend any effort propagandizing about religion? First, he argued, the primary audience of most antireligious propaganda was the already initiated. Critical commentary on religion was for transforming economic *apikorsim* into religious *apikorsim*—it was not published to turn pious nonradicals directly into religious *apikorsim*. Second, socialists who propagandized against religion did so “not as socialist class warriors, but as peaceful preachers of progress.” In other words, they published antireligious propaganda as private, freethinking individuals spreading personal views.<sup>227</sup> Cahan referred to Germany’s SDP organ, the *Vorwärts*, to bolster his case. In the *Vorwärts*, Liebknecht declared “religion is a private matter,” and yet the flagship party organ also advertised scientific works challenging common religious beliefs.<sup>228</sup>

Conventional religion would still become a relic of the past. Cahan’s case for religion’s inevitable decline relied on popular notions about humanity’s evolutionary development through stages. Cahan wrote, “A particular sort of religion matches every stage of humanity’s economic growth... economic freedom will bring with it the freedom from religious foolishness.”<sup>229</sup> As proof, he quoted Ferdinand Lassalle, who said, “the working class is the cornerstone on which the religion of the future will be built.” In Cahan’s interpretation, Lassalle meant, “when the working class has economic self-rule, freedom, equality, fraternity, and science will be like a religion.”<sup>230</sup> Radical Yiddish writers like Cahan were generally aware of multistage theories of human progress, especially those derived from philosophers like Comte and Henri de Saint-Simon. When writing about religion’s evolutionary progress, they not only referenced radical

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

philosophers like Lassalle, but also popular, nonradical Victorian positivists like Lewis H. Morgan, Edward Burnett Tylor, and Herbert Spencer. Spencer's theory of religion's origins was an especially popular reference point for the radical Jewish intelligentsia.<sup>231</sup> Cahan, in fact, recalled coming across Spencer's work in the United States while still exploring the intricacies of anarchism and socialism sometime in the 1880s. He developed a general appreciation for Spencer and devoured whatever works by Spencer he could find.<sup>232</sup> Popular Victorian intellectuals like Spencer wrote often about "residuals"—lingering, evolutionary imprints of religion on secular, scientific minds. Some Jewish radicals likely encountered nonradical Victorian intellectuals, Morgan, Tylor, Spencer, etc., first through the writings of radical political theorists, like Lassalle, Marx and Engels, Peter Kropotkin, or Nikolay Mikhaylovsky.<sup>233</sup> The idea

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<sup>231</sup> Ph. Krants, "Herbert Spenser [Herbert Spencer].," *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1904): 8–11. Milk published several translations of Spencer's writings on religion. See Yankev Milk, "Fun vanen shtamt religyon? Nokh Herbert Spenser," *Tsukunft* (Sep. 1904): 18–23; idem, "Fun vanen shtamt religyon? Nokh Herbert Spenser," *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1904): 22–28; idem, "Di obshtamung fun religyon," *Tsukunft* (Nov. 1904): 10–14; idem, "Di obshtamung fun religyon. Nokh Herbert Spenser," *Tsukunft* (Dec. 1904): 26–32; idem, "Fun vanen shtamt religyon? Nokh Herbert Spenser," *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1905): 23–7. Also see a later work: idem, volume three of *Yidishe problemem*, subtitled *Fun vanen shtamt religye un andere eseys*. Several other translations of relevance, Herbert Spencer, "Eynige bedoyeringen," trans. Max Jolles, *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1909): 47–9; idem, *Di erste printsipen*, trans. Dr. Y.A. Merison (New York: International Library Publishing Co., 1910); Herbert Spencer, *Evolutsye*, trans. M. Kats, from the "Visenshaftlikhe bibliotek," ed. Dr. Isaac A. Hourwich, (New York: Farlag Heym, Inc., 1920), vol. 1. These are just some of the many Yiddish books and articles about Spencer. A testament to Spencer's recognition as a public intellectual, the American Yiddish press radical and conservative American Yiddish newspapers eloquently eulogized the Englishman with few reservations.

<sup>232</sup> Cahan on Spencer, see Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 2: 353–6. Regardless of whether Cahan knew about Lewis H. Morgan and E.B. Tylor at the time he encountered Spencer, he could eventually reference these two anthropologists just as well. Cahan referencing Tylor, see Ab. Cahan., *Historye fun di fereynigte shtaatn* (New York: "Forverts," 1910), vol. 2: 253–4. M. Terman did the same, see Terman "Tsvey teorien iber der entshtehung fun religyon," *Tsukunft* (Mar. 1913): 257–66; "Di religyon," in *Di velt un di menshheyt*, ed. M. Terman (New York: Educational Committee of the Workmen's Circle, 1913), 351–91. Also see M. Terman, *Religyon un ihr entwicklung* (New York: Russishe Revolutsyonerer Hilfsverband, 1900).

<sup>233</sup> See, for example, Petr Kropotkin, *Gegenzaytige hilf bay hayes un menshen als a faktor fun entwicklung*, trans. Dr. Y.A. Merison (New York: Kropotkin Literatur-Gezelschaft, 1913), 113, 119; in the same work, Kropotkin mentions Lewis H. Morgan on several occasions, for examples see *ibid.*, 113, 121, and 402; also see idem, *Kropotkin's lebens-beshraybung*, trans. M. Kohn (London: Frayheyte, 1904), 239. Finally, see Ph. Krants, "N.K. Mikhaylovsky," *Tsukunft* (Apr. 1904): 3–8. *Tsukunft* also published a biographical sketch of Lewis H. Morgan, see B. Faygenboym, "Lewis H. Morgan," *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1896): 1–9. Alexander Harkavy also translated popular anthropologists on religion, most notably French anthropologist and anarchist Élie Reclus. He published these translations in the monthly *Fraye gezelschaft* between October 1895 and October 1896.

that humanity progressed in stages, and “a particular sort of religion” accompanied each stage, reflected the wider intellectual milieu of the time, both in the United States and Europe.

Cahan’s two-part article prompted some backlash. The *Arbeter tsaytung* published a snippet from one negative response in its “Correspondence” section. The letter writer, seemingly observant to some degree, excoriated Cahan for shifting the paper’s direction, supposedly making it more explicitly antireligious. [The letter writer specifically mentioned “Di Sedre” columns.] Adding their own commentary, an editor, possibly Cahan himself, interpreted the letter, and others like it, as justifying their stance on religion. Admittedly, “many pious [letter] writers... can’t stand the fact that we are not ‘religious’,” but the fact that they submitted letters showed they were reading the *Arbeter tsaytung* and could “stomach socialism.” Assuming these letter writers were “still new readers,” the editor confidently claimed negativity would soon change: “They may read and curse, but in time they will also begin stomaching the *apikorsishe* articles as well as the socialist ones, and then they will begin sending letters with blessings, like hundreds of other readers do—unless some of them are such ignorant people that no doctor can help them.”<sup>234</sup> Because the *Arbeter tsaytung* addressed material concerns, that is, it spoke to poor pious readers. The more they read about socialism, the more they would find themselves enjoying articles challenging conventional religion.

Cahan’s article did not accomplish what he desired—it did not put the religion question to rest. Debate persisted through the 1890s and beyond. In 1894, for instance, there was a proposed change to the stance on religion at a convention for the SLP’s Yiddish-speaking sections. The change was ultimately rejected on the grounds that the religion issue should be decided by the party as an international body. “It isn’t necessary,” the convention’s leadership

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<sup>234</sup> “Fun nohent un fun vayten.,” *AT* (New York, NY), Jun. 2, 1893.

determined, “for the Yiddish-speaking socialists to establish their own particular principles as a particular organization.”<sup>235</sup> The proposed change showed that the religion question remained a topic of controversy and debate within the SLP. The debate in the SLP’s Yiddish sections, however, reflected a partywide debate. As covered by the *Arbeter tsaytung*, in 1895, Germany’s SDP considered trading “religion is a private matter” for the less pithy, “social democracy fights with all its power the representatives of the various denominations, as well as religion itself, as far as its teachings get in the way of the proletariat’s struggle for independence.”<sup>236</sup> This proposed change was also ultimately rejected. The SDP maintained “religion is private,” and the SLP and the SLP’s Yiddish sections officially followed its lead. The Yiddish journalists aligned with the SLP continued critiquing religion, especially Jewish religious traditions, from an ostensibly scientific standpoint, but critiques still had the potential to limit the growth of the labor movement.

### **Embracing Piety’s Power: Radical Politics as Religion**

Radicals of all stripes struggled with another problem. Just as religious authorities in America faced challenges in enforcing piety, radicals faced challenges in enforcing impiety. Rank and file radicals, especially socialists, sometimes had attachments, e.g., familial, romantic, friendly, etc., drawing them toward sacred matters. Strict policing was one way radical institutions managed this problem. The Arbeter Ring’s early attitudes toward religious observance are a case in point. Founded in New York in 1892, the Arbeter Ring offered mutual aid, educational programs, and social functions for the Jewish working class, but unlike *landsmanshaftn*, it was explicitly

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<sup>235</sup> “Der partey-tog,” *AT* (New York, NY), Jan. 12, 1894.

<sup>236</sup> “Der daytsh partey tog. (shlus),” *AT* (New York, NY), Nov. 22, 1895. The last part of the quote literally reads: “azoy vayt vi ire leres shteyen als a shterung oyf dem veg fun dem bafayungs-kampf fun proletaryat.”

radical.<sup>237</sup> By rule, the Arbeter Ring permitted observant Jews to become members. In practice, its branches shunned all religious rituals.<sup>238</sup> In his 1925 history of the Arbeter Ring, A.Sh. Zaks noted that, “As an organization founded by freethinkers, [its members] considered the Arbeter Ring their strongest fortress from which they threw their *apikorsishe* arrows at the believers.”<sup>239</sup> So, if members discovered another member had gone to *shul*, they “let him have it... for [committing] such a transgression against freethought.” Zaks noted several instances of such transgressions, and there were likely many unrecorded.<sup>240</sup> During these early years in radical Jewish politics, freethinkers constructed an all-or-nothing divide: religion or irreligion.

Radical, Yiddish-speaking ideologues had another strategy for encouraging impiety: stimulating the individual’s affective connections to revolutionary ideologies, which would in turn promote radical community-building. Endowing their politics with a sacred sensibility, some thought, would be an effective binding agent for sustained affective connections. Addressed in brief above, using sacred language fit broader trends inside and outside revolutionary politics. Freethinkers, Jewish and non-Jewish, consistently found religion’s motivating power intriguing, even if they detested its means and ends. This section expands the conversation, highlighting how the socialist Yiddish press used freethinkers and freethought when framing radical politics as sacred. It focuses particular attention on Benyomen Faygenboym, the socialist most active in propagandizing for sacred revolution.

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<sup>237</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 180. Also see Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939*, 66–70.

<sup>238</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 183. Also see A.Sh. Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring, 1892-1925* (New York: Natsyonaler Eksekutiv Komite fun Arbeter Ring, 1925), vol. 1: 213–4; Polland, “‘May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?’,” 394 n.70.

<sup>239</sup> Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 291.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 291–2. For more on how the Arbeter Ring has been seen by later historians, see Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 45–6.

The language of sacred revolution was common in the radical Yiddish press. Yiddish-speaking radicals often framed their institutions and publications as “*shuls*” and “Torahs,” respectively. For example, when the *Abend blat* promoted a progressive educational society that met in an East Broadway Talmud Torah, the paper called it “a Talmud Torah for workers,” where “the new, Marxist Torah and the new, Darwinian creation story are taught.”<sup>241</sup> Holidays were a vital part of sacred radical culture, too, and radicals privileged the First of May, or May Day, above all.<sup>242</sup> First celebrated in 1889, May Day commemorated the radical martyrs of the Haymarket Affair. The socialist and anarchist press devoted considerable coverage to the embryonic *yontef*.<sup>243</sup> While the Yiddish word “*yontef*,” from the Hebrew “*yom tov*,” can simply mean “holiday,” Jewish radicals used the word to capture a sacred sensibility. Faygenboym was chief among them. In advance of May Day 1894, for instance, he described the holiday as “the main *yontef* of this religion,” by which he meant “the new religion of truth.” What shone the way to truth? Socialism.<sup>244</sup>

An outlier among his Russified, radical peers, Faygenboym was born in Warsaw in 1860 to a Hasidic family. He did not learn Russian or have the revolutionary background of Cahan or Krants. Faygenboym’s move away from Hasidism also came via the Hebrew writings of the

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<sup>241</sup> “A talmud toyre far arbeter.,” *Abend blat* (hereafter cited as *AB*) (New York, NY), May 6, 1897.

<sup>242</sup> Even if most Arbeter Ring members decided not to commit brazen blasphemy on Yom Kippur, Passover, or the Sabbath, they did not deem them holy. Thus, Zaks also said, “The members were freethinkers and the first and greatest mitzvot of the freethinkers of that time was not to observe the Jewish *yontoyvim* (which they considered religious *yontoyvim*).” Instead, they treated the first annual celebration of the Arbeter Ring as a *yontef*. In a similar fashion, the early members of the Arbeter Ring would create community through Sunday suppers at a member’s house. Zaks again wrote, “One waited impatiently an entire week for the ‘suppers,’ just like pious Jews (*frume yiden* [*yidn*]) wait for the holy Sabbath (*shabes-koydesh*).” Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 115–6.

<sup>243</sup> For example, see Ab. Cahan, “Der erster may.,” *Tsukunft* (May 1894): 47–8; “Der ershter may.,” *AT* (New York, NY), May 6, 1892; F., “Makt aykh greyt tsum ersten may,” *AT* (New York, NY), Apr. 22, 1892; Morris Rosenfeld, “Gedanken vegen ersten may,” *AT* (New York, NY), Apr. 29, 1892. Also see Leo Rozentsvayg, *Eyn ershter may in tsvantsigsten yohrhundert oder di kumende revolutsyon* (New York: S. Goldshteyn, 1896).

<sup>244</sup> B.F., “Oyf tsum ersten may!,” *AT* (New York, NY), Apr. 27, 1894. That same year, even the conservative *YG* was impressed by May Day’s rapidly growing popularity, calling its observance a “mitzvah” for “socialists and nihilists.” See “Ershter may in nuyork.,” *YG* (New York, NY), May 4, 1894. Faygenboym reportedly spoke at the rally.

*maskilim*, not the works of Russian radicals. It was during a stint in Belgium, where he temporarily settled in 1884, that the former Hasid began propagandizing for socialism in earnest. Krants, then still editor of London's *Arbeter fraynd*, invited Faygenboym to England, where the latter honed his skills in propaganda and agitation. He finally settled in New York in 1891. In the *Arbeter tsaytung*, *Tsukunft*, and *Abend blat*, Faygenboym became one of the most polarizing writers on religion, most especially Judaism.<sup>245</sup> His thorough religious education certainly helped him when attacking Jewish religious tradition.<sup>246</sup> As Shulman summarized, "he dedicated all his efforts and entire energy to the fight against that which is divine," but he did so "in a true, traditionally Jewish way."<sup>247</sup> He was, in fact, constantly dogged by opponents who claimed his antireligious fervor simply came from wounds received during his strict religious upbringing.<sup>248</sup> In truth, Faygenboym was enigmatic. He was passionately antireligious, and yet, he promoted tolerant policies in socialist organizations and held firmly to "religion is private."<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Cahan remembered his antireligious articles and pamphlets as being very popular, see Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 4: 466. On Faygenboym's ability to parody religious texts, see Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, 82–3. For two examples of how polarizing Faygenboym could be, see a positive account in Eyges, *Beyond the Horizon*, 76, and a negative account in Tsvi Hirsh Masliansky, *Masliansky's zikhroynes* (New York: Zerubabel, 1924), 207–8. Here, Masliansky discusses what was likely B. Faygenboym, "Ver hot ayngefirht yomkipper? Fun vanen shtamt di toyre?," *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1895): 9–21. It also appeared in pamphlet form, see idem, *Ver hot ayngefirht yomkipper, un fun vanen shtamt di toyre*, second edition (London: Frayhayt, 1907). Other interesting works, see idem, *Di yidishe inkvizitsye kedas rakhmonim bney rakhmonim*, likely a reprint (Leeds: Tsayt fun Farshtand, 1906); idem, *Vi azoy vert men poter fun der hefker velt?* (Warsaw: Progres, n.d.); idem, *Darvinizmus, oder Darvin hot getrofen* (Warsaw: Ferlag Progres, 1901); idem, *Liebe un familyen-leben loyt yidishkeit* (New York: A. Hillman, 1904); idem, *Mayse breyshes* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1907); idem, "Der vahrer kharakter fun dem alten yidishen got.," *Tsukunft* (Mar. 1894): 27–35.

<sup>246</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 84; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 242–4; Sherman, "Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement," 358. Also on Faygenboym, see Vaynshteyn, *Di yidishe yunyons in amerike*, 162–4; or, Vaynshteyn, *The Jewish Unions in America*, 92–3.

<sup>247</sup> Shulman, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in amerike*, 72.

<sup>248</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 243; Sherman, "Nationalism, Secularism, and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement," 358.

<sup>249</sup> Faygenboym towing the party line, see B. Faygenboym, "Kashus mit trutsim.," *AT* (New York, NY), Jul. 24, 1896; idem, "Kashus mit trutsim.," *AT* (New York, NY), Aug. 28, 1896; B.F., "Sotsyalizmus un religyon"; Sh. Peshes [Benyomen Faygenboym], "Di lere fun Karl Marx un religyon.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 28, 1904. For more on Faygenboym's life, and how he was remembered, see Dr. K. Fornberg, "B. faygenboym, der 'khosid' fun der bavegung.," *Tog* (New York, NY), Dec. 12, 1928.

Faygenboym also had a complex relationship with Jewish tradition. Ever the internationalist and cosmopolitan, he welcomed the eventual disappearance of Jewish distinctiveness. Because his criticisms were sometimes so ferocious, turning him into a lightning rod for conservatives and progressives alike, he regularly had to assure readers he was not antisemitic. In so doing, Faygenboym stressed Jewishness was no worse and no better than any other sense of national or religious belonging. He could, in his own words from 1898, “speak with respect and glory about the shimmering pearls found in the sea of Jewishness,” but this did not negate his central position on Jewishness—it was “an old, ancient culture that had outlived its time.”<sup>250</sup> In similar fashion, he liked to declare radicals were, in some cases at least, more “traditional” than strictly observant Jews. During the High Holiday season of 1887, for example, Faygenboym argued that festive revelry, not fasting, followed the original intent behind Yom Kippur, an intent the orthodox distorted.<sup>251</sup> He employed a reverse tactic as well, claiming that the “so-called observant” were more like Epicureans—“a person who thinks of nothing more than eating and drinking and merriment”—than *apikorsim*. Full of hypocrisy, the observant simply do whatever their heart desires when no one’s looking. Freethinkers, meanwhile, stick to a “burdensome code,” a kind of impious *Shulchan Aruch*.<sup>252</sup> This tendency in Faygenboym, writer Irving Howe later claimed, was what made him an effective propagandist with an older Jewish crowd. Howe summarized:

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<sup>250</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Dos letste vort,” *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 16, 1898. Also see Sorin, *A Time for Building*, 119. There seems to have been some differences between how Sorin and Michels understood Faygenboym’s attachment to Judaism. See Gerald Sorin, review of *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York*, by Tony Michels, *American Jewish History* 92, no. 3 (2004): 385–6.

<sup>251</sup> Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 252. Also see Faygenboym, “Ver hot ayngefirht yomkipper?” 20–1.

<sup>252</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Ver is an apikoyres?,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 24, 1906. The *Shulchan Aruch* is a compilation of Jewish law written by Joseph Karo in 1563. Faygenboym’s complex connection to Judaism reflected how some socialist non-Jews also discussed socialism and religion. See Lidtke, “August Bebel and German Social Democracy’s Relation to the Christian Churches,” 258–9.

Feigenbaum (*sic*) touched the older Jewish workers not merely because he knew his way around the Talmud but also because he shared their deep moral conservatism even while preaching socialism... Whether or not he knew it, Feigenbaum was preaching a Yiddish version of the ‘religion of humanity’ that had been advanced by English intellectuals a few decades earlier, the sense of ethical obligation which they wished to remove from its religious context.<sup>253</sup>

In January 1895, Faygenboym began a lengthy biographical series in the *Tsukunft*, a series profiling the lives of prominent freethinkers in Jewish history.<sup>254</sup> Before profiling his first historic Jewish freethinker, Elisha ben Abuyah, the *tanna* known as “Acher” (Heb., “other one”), Faygenboym explained the need for the series. He began, perhaps strangely for some readers, with an admittedly Christian maxim: “The blood of the martyrs is the seal of truth (*khsime fun emes*).”<sup>255</sup> Faygenboym saw the Christian attraction to martyrology as universal. Or in his words, “All religions take pride in their holy martyrs. They elevate their names as the heavenly witnesses regarding the purity of their belief.”<sup>256</sup> Jews do the same, with Tisha B’av as the quintessential example. On this day of mourning, Jews say the *kinah* “Arzei Halevanon” (Eng., “Cedars of Lebanon”), recalling ten rabbis martyred by the Romans. As Faygenboym saw it, martyrdom could have a profound impact on a Jew, even “a half-*apikoyres*”—a freethinker

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<sup>253</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 243–4. A. Sh. Zaks recalled Faygenboym as one of the “extreme freethinkers, fanatic apikorsim.” See Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, 1: 291.

<sup>254</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, I,” *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1895): 26–36; idem, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, II,” *Tsukunft* (Mar. 1895): 8–18; idem, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, III,” *Tsukunft* (May 1895): 13–19; idem, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, III (fortzetsung),” *Tsukunft* (Jun. 1895): 16–23; idem, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, III (shlus),” *Tsukunft* (Jul. 1895): 17–23; idem, “Hitsiger kampf tsvishen gloyben un vershstand bay yiden,” *Tsukunft* (Aug. 1895): 10–15; idem, “Hitsiger kampf tsvishen gloyben un vershstand bay yiden, shlus,” *Tsukunft* (Sep. 1895): 16–22; idem, “Ver hot ayngafirht yomkipper? Fun vanen shtamt di toyre?,” idem, “Tsveyerley fanatizmus,” *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1895): 32–8.

<sup>255</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, I,” 26. Possibly based on idem, *Elisha ben Abuyah* (London: B. Ruderman, [188?]). A similar adaptation, see *ibid.*, *Der Rambam* (New York: The International Library Publishing Company, 1901).

<sup>256</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, I,” 26–7.

holding onto or struggling with their pious past. A half-*apikoyres* may still shudder when hearing about the suffering of pious martyrs, thus feeling the sentimental pull of piety.<sup>257</sup>

From Faygenboym’s perspective, martyrdom was indeed a “seal of ‘truth’” (*khsime fun emes*, and here he added extra quotation marks around *emes*).<sup>258</sup> It was not evidence for the truth or falsity of a conviction, but it was the seal for how much a person *believed* their conviction to be true. One’s willingness to suffer or die, he confessed, revealed a “bitter seriousness” in their convictions. The lack of a freethinker martyrology, therefore, gave the impression freethinkers did not have such convictions. It seemed to give credence to the claim that atheism is “obviously mere frivolity.” With no evidence of martyrdom, no seal of truth, it seemed freethinkers were unwilling “to sacrifice their lives for their atheism.” Faygenboym believed this assertion a grave error. First, the religious only memorialize martyrdom in traditional contexts. They do not, for example, memorialize Jews “who laid down their lives for freedom and truth among the gentiles, far from the little Jewish world.” Second, freethinkers had martyrs! Faygenboym rhetorically asked an imagined religious reader, “Yes, good, pious people—what will you say if those with free sensibilities also resurrect such severed, chopped up, and hacked corpses as witnesses for the truth of their ‘atheism’—corpses whose blood was also a ‘seal of truth’ (*khsime fun varhayt*) for free thought?” He may have used *khsime fun varhayt* to contrast with *khsime fun emes*, a means of distinguishing freethinking truth (*varhayt*) from religious truth (*emes*). Even as Faygenboym developed this distinction, he collapsed the distance between the pious and impious. Their histories were, in fact, intertwined. At this point, Faygenboym highlighted the significance of his biography series—they can serve as “a type of *kinah*.” He hoped they would create a “sacred

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 27. For Leo Rozentsvayg on “Acher,” see Rozentsvayg, *Brismile* (New York: author, 1916), 14–16.

<sup>258</sup> Faygenboym, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, I,” 27.

feeling for free thought,” the same feeling brought on by Arzei Halevanon.<sup>259</sup> Faygenboym’s audience certainly included freethinking ideologues, but, as he described the series, it would aid those freethinkers who felt the pull of piety.

Faygenboym also felt the need to explicitly define “freethinkers” and explain his approach. In his definition, freethinkers were “people whose minds were not hardened by the frost of prevailing faith, but they had the courage to doubt if it’s really true in the way everyone believes, and so adopted different ideas (it doesn’t matter what kind).” So, though freethinkers in Jewish history were, by all accounts, bound to piety in some sense, a radical could replicate their rebellion against conventional religious authorities in modern, secularized times. Though Faygenboym was going to make well-known Jewish freethinkers central to his articles, he thought they were almost always present in Jewish history, maybe in large numbers. Freethinkers were even present at Judaism’s Talmudic foundations. Reading rabbinic texts between the lines, Faygenboym noted the Gemara contained numerous passages castigating *apikorsim* and *minim*, a likely sign they were prevalent and feared by early rabbinic authorities.<sup>260</sup> “There were always a lot of *apikorsim* in those old times,” he summarized, despite “very few descriptions of the life, the ideas, and the suffering of such *apikorsim*.” Faygenboym would, from his perspective at least, set right the wrong, starting with the life and times of Elisha ben Abuyah.<sup>261</sup>

Throughout the *Tsukunft*’s first run, from 1892 to 1897, Faygenboym stood out for his controversial attacks on religion in general and Judaism specifically.<sup>262</sup> He reaffirmed his

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. It was the *tannaim*, he stressed, who created the term that would eventually become *apikoyres* in Yiddish. They erroneously associated Epicureanism with hedonism. Later rabbis eventually labelled supposed heretics *minim*, a reference to Manicheism. The rabbis grew so afraid of *apikorsim* they told the pious to not argue with them, fearing the impious may lead the pious astray. Also see Krants, *Aristotel*, 21.

<sup>261</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Lebensbeshraybungen fun yidishe fraydenker, I,” 28. For a somewhat similar piece, see Kh. Aleksandrov, “Baruch Spinoza,” *AT* (New York, NY), Dec. 3, 1899.

<sup>262</sup> See, for example, Faygenboym, “Ver hot ayngefirht yomkipper? Fun vanen shtamt di toyre?”; and *idem*, “Tsveyerley fanatizmus.”

scientific approach to religion well into the 1900s. But, because he remained staunchly antireligious and cosmopolitan in the face of new trends, he became a lightning rod for criticism from freethinkers preaching different approaches. He still had longtime allies, even if they disagreed at times. Prominent among them was Leo Rozentsvayg (1869-1916), a Romanian-born socialist who arrived in the United States in 1891. He, like Faygenboym, referred to a lineage of Jewish and non-Jewish freethinkers who paved the way for his own freethought, figures ranging from Socrates to the Acher to the Portuguese Jewish skeptic Uriel da Costa. And he too referenced traditional Jewish sources and applied sacred, martyrological language to his favorite models of impiety.<sup>263</sup> Faygenboym, in other words, was rare for the legwork he put into freethought, but he was not entirely alone, nor would he remain alone as times changed.

### **Conclusion**

Many freethinking socialists recognized that, according to their own party, members could be committed socialists and observant. Not every socialist or member of the SLP maintained “religion is private,” but influential, socialist Yiddish journalists promoted freethought while holding the party line. They were confident conventional religion would someday disappear, with science and equality reigning in its place. Their confidence showed in a more relaxed approach to religion than that of the anarchists, though even their criticisms proved too sharp for some. Socialist Yiddish journalists still waged war against the conservative Yiddish press. As freethinkers, they also recognized they were part of a broader amalgam of so-called “heretics,” though differences in political philosophy and political culture mattered.

The contours of Jewish radicalism in the 1880s and 1890s, especially debates about freethinkers and freethought, are vital for understanding what came next—a period of questions

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<sup>263</sup> See, for example, Rozentsvayg, *Brismile*, 14, see the full section on pp. 9–16.

and doubts about the sufficiency of the revolutionary vision. Could the envisioned socialist future, with its antireligious, assimilationist internationalism, *actually* replace Jewish communal belonging, and with it—Judaism? The socialist utopia seemed distant, elusive. An emerging group of Yiddish fiction writers dialogued with these tensions. They did so at a time when sweeping changes in Europe encouraged revisiting questions about radicalism and Jewishness in the United States. It was also a time of transition in the American Yiddish press. Proletarian Yiddish writers like Leon Kobrin and Zalmon Libin constructed freethinking characters who openly doubted the radical vision of the future. Chapter two turns to these depictions and similar debates.

## CHAPTER TWO: “What Are We Then?": Freethought, Religion, and Jewishness in the Socialist Yiddish Press (1897-1904)

### Introduction

In August 1898, the *Abend blat* received a letter from a reader in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The paper published a summarized version of the letter and a response from staff member Benyomen Faygenboym.<sup>264</sup> The letter writer praised Faygenboym for his antireligious, socialist propaganda because it furthers the enlightenment of “thinking people.” But for the “uncultured,” the letter writer complained, his propaganda “only has the effect of taking his old religion away from him,” offering no replacement. Said differently, Faygenboym’s antireligious propaganda was simply destructive, not constructive.<sup>265</sup> Faygenboym wholeheartedly rejected this idea. “We give more religion than we take,” he wrote, “Our aim is to give a new religion.” He illustrated his point by likening the socialist to a gardener: “When we tear out nettles it’s only a secondary task in order to accomplish the main task—we remove the plant to sow the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the best religion.” He apparently did not want to confuse readers with his use of “religion” and defined his terms. By “religion,” Faygenboym meant certain impulses, not the structures and dogmas of conventional religious traditions, what he called “the old religions.” Religious impulses remain important for human flourishing, he explained. They “elevate the spirit to a higher level and give it the more noble nourishment it requires,” and without them “[one’s] life has no flavor and no aroma.” What offered the greatest flavor and aroma then?

Socialism! It elevated the spirit higher than the old religions *because* it solved material

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<sup>264</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Der sotsyalizm als religyon,” *AB* (New York, NY), Aug. 9, 1898. Example of Faygenboym’s interest in religious history, see his commentary on Der kritiker, “Yeyshu-hanoysri fun D. Hermalin. (shlus).” *AB* (New York, NY), Sep. 25, 1897, and Der kritiker, “Yeyshu-hanoysri fun D. Hermalin.,” *AB* (New York, NY), Sep. 24, 1897. Another interesting article, see B.F., “‘Ziser’ oder ‘biterer’ sotsyalizmus?,” *AB* (New York, NY), Oct. 21, 1897. The *Abend blat* was, like the *Arbeter tsaytung*, antireligious. See, for example, N. Lempert, “Simkhes-toyre,” *AB* (New York, NY), Oct. 19, 1897; and, “‘Moral ohn a got.’,” *AB* (New York, NY), Dec. 15, 1897.

<sup>265</sup> Faygenboym, “Der sotsyalizm als religyon.”

problems.<sup>266</sup> In this way, argued Faygenboym, socialism not only offers the “spiritual bliss” and “salvation” promised by religion, but delivers “a thousand times greater” on this promise. It even promoted positive moral formation, especially among the Jewish youth, who found religion completely irrelevant. Socialism, in other words, did not encourage “pointless ‘*apikorses*,’” i.e., antireligion unmoored from a revolutionary teleology.<sup>267</sup>

Faygenboym’s commentary tapped into a powerful discourse: Western societies, secularizing individuals even, recognized religion’s power. Using the rhetoric of religion, he could help the letter writer, and other readers, step forward into the socialist future—a freethinking future—with confidence. They were not losing the moral values that religion had previously provided but gaining a stronger, more reliable moral foundation. The letter writer from Colorado Springs was not the only radical wrestling with the standard teleology of social revolution. In the waning years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the early twentieth century, radical Yiddish journalists—“thinking people,” in the letter writer’s words—openly questioned their distance from Jewish religious tradition. Could revolutionary politics, they wondered, offer anything close to the flavor and aroma offered by religious tradition?

This chapter focuses on how journalists in the radical Yiddish press depicted and debated freethought and religion between 1897 and 1904, a period of mounting uncertainty punctuated by sudden, dramatic change. As Jewish radicals further embraced American norms and witnessed upheaval in the Old World, some of the most influential voices of the movement recalibrated the meaning of, or their attachment to, internationalism and cosmopolitanism. They shifted,

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid. In Faygenboym’s own words: “Its work ennobles the spirit better than the best religion... [because it’s] built on the foundation of the real, material life and needs.”

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. According to Faygenboym, statistics proved the religion of socialism wasn’t as destructive as “the old religions.” He claimed: “The greatest number of crimes and the deepest moral swamp are in the places where the darkest belief reigns.” Similarly, because today’s youth do not naturally gravitate toward religion, and the alterative was “debauchery,” socialist clubs were paragons of elevated moral character.

sometimes slowly and unevenly, from an assimilationist vision of the radical future to an embrace of Jewish distinctiveness. But how should they relate to religion? Radicals revisited this question as they discussed and debated their relationship to Jewishness. I argue that freethinker depictions and debates about freethought were shaped by questions surrounding the teleology of revolutionary politics.<sup>268</sup>

Beset by disagreements over leadership and strategy, the SLP's dominance over the socialist Yiddish press came to an end. This chapter addresses fractures within socialist ranks before turning to several sections that explore how the popular, radical writer Leon Kobrin used fictional freethinkers to pose questions about one's distance from historic Jewish norms. His exploration of these issues, appearing in the *Abend blat*, caused some controversy.<sup>269</sup> In the *Forverts*, the *Abend blat*'s chief radical competitor, a comparatively tolerant tone toward religion prevailed, and the chapter continues by discussing the *Forverts*' approach to religion and the religious. Events in Europe also propelled growing doubts about the radicals' stance on Jewishness, and the next section centers on radical politics in the immediate wake of the Kishinev pogrom (1903). Debates about Kishinev's implications even reverberated into fictional depictions of freethinkers.<sup>270</sup> Acculturation and Kishinev continued to have an impact in 1904.

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<sup>268</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson's commentary on Avrom Lesin, Yankev Gordin, and Leon Kobrin is particularly useful to this chapter, see Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 94–111; Jonathan Frankel's work on Jewish socialist in America is also important, see Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 453–547.

<sup>269</sup> L. Kobrin, "Anna's Ma Nishtana," *AB* (New York, NY), Mar. 25, 1899; idem, "Vos iz er?...", *AB* (New York, NY), May 18, 1899; "Shtimen fun folk: virklikhe sotsyalistishe muters.," *AB* (New York, NY), May 23, 1899; L. Kobrin, "A tsveyte bletel," *AB* (New York, NY), May 31, 1899; "Shtimen fun folk: 'ver iz er?...'," *AB* (New York, NY), Jun. 1, 1899. Also see the two different versions of *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike*: Leon Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (New York: YKUF, 1966), esp. 191–200; and idem, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (Buenos Aires: Farlag "Yidbukh," 1955). Finally, see Kobrin, *Erinerungen fun a yidishen dramaturg* (New York: Komitet far Kobrin's Shriften, 1925). The YIVO Archives holds the Leon Kobrin Papers collection. While I have examined some of these papers, they need to be more compressively explored later. See YIVO Archives, Leon Kobrin Papers, RG 376.

<sup>270</sup> Z. Libin, "A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist," *Forverts* (New York, NY) Aug. 13, 1903; idem, "A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Aug. 14, 1903; idem, "A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist," in *Gezamelte verk* (New York: Forverts, 1915), vol. 1: 132–40.

Were there new ways to approach religion? Had tolerance toward the observant reached its limit? The last section of this chapter analyzes two debates about the relationship between freethinkers and religion.

### **Division and Discord in Socialist Politics (1897-1899)**

The increased grappling with religion was part of a larger set of reconfigurations and reconsiderations that were taking place in Jewish radical ranks on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean at the turn of the twentieth century. By the mid to late 1890s, internal and external pressures began fragmenting America's Yiddish-speaking socialists. Internally, and mirroring wider fractures within the SLP, a group of Yiddish-speaking, socialist notables dissented from the party's authoritarian tendencies in 1896, mainly rejecting the leadership of Daniel De Leon, an acculturated Jew of Dutch background who exercised a heavy-hand over party policy and did not, in their estimation, understand the needs of the Yiddish-speaking members of the movement.<sup>271</sup> The final break occurred in early 1897, when a minority group of the Arbeter Tsaytung Publishing Association walked out of an Association meeting in protest. Aside from their grievances about De Leon's leadership, the split also likely resulted from disagreements over the best journalistic practices for popularizing socialism among immigrant Jews.<sup>272</sup> Members of the dissenting group, which included Cahan, Miller, and Zametkin, among others, became known as the "opposition"; they soon established the Forverts Publishing Association

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<sup>271</sup> Seán Cronin writes, "De Leon was convinced that in the new century, the SLP would truly become not only the party of labor but achieve the revolution and create in America a socialist society. This dream was not as far-fetched as it may seem now. During the decade of the 1890's, the SLP had the socialist field to itself. De Leon believed that socialism could be won through the ballot box. He had a theory that capitalism would fall in America first, not in England or Germany as other socialist theorists maintained. To achieve this a disciplined party was required—the SLP... Actually, whatever his intentions, De Leon built up not a head of steam for the revolution with his tactics but great hostility, first among trade unionists and later within his own party." See Cronin, "The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Labor Party of North America," 24–5; also see p. 30.

<sup>272</sup> Michels, "'Speaking to Moyshe,'" 68–9; Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 466–7.

and were publishing the daily *Forverts* (Jewish Daily Forward) by April 1897.<sup>273</sup> Formally expelled from the SLP in June, the Forverts Publishing Association joined ranks with an emerging leader in American socialism, Eugene V. Debs, and supported his party, Social Democracy of America (SDA, est. June 1897). Known as “loyalists,” venerable Yiddish journalists, like Krants, Faygenboym, and Yankev Milkh, remained with the Arbeter Tsaytung Publishing Association, despite also harboring some concerns about De Leon’s leadership. By summer 1897, the two socialist Yiddish publishing associations and their newspapers were battling for readership and influence. Cahan, meanwhile, departed the *Forverts* that same year, joining Lincoln Steffen’s *New-York Commercial Advertiser*.<sup>274</sup> [Cahan still published in the *Forverts* occasionally.<sup>275</sup>]

In the United States, where antisemitism was less vigorous than in Europe, interethnic proletariat solidarity seemed promising, and De Leon wielded his heavy hand, the dominant brand of socialism encouraged assimilation to American standards and frowned upon the elevation of distinct national cultures among immigrant groups. Attention paid to expressly Jewish political self-interests in the Yiddish press was antithetical to the movement’s long-term

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<sup>273</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 467. It should be noted that, according to scholar Bernard Bloom, the “opposition,” reflecting Bundist politics, considered forming a specific American Jewish socialist party, though they ultimately deemed a separate party unwise. See Bernard H. Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” *American Jewish Archives* 12, no. 1 (1960): 56.

<sup>274</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 467, and Moses Rischin, “Abraham Cahan and the *New York Commercial Advertiser*: A Study in Acculturation,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 43, no. 1 (1953): 10–36. Also see Yankev Milkh, *Di antshteyung fun “Forverts” un zayn kamf mit “Abend blat”* (New York: author, 1936).

<sup>275</sup> See, for example, Ab. Cahan, “Vos thut zikh do mit di republikaner un demokraten.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 29, 1900; idem, “Vos thut zikh do mit di republikaner un demokraten. (shlus).,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Oct. 13, 1900; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 17, 1900; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 24, 1900; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 1, 1900; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 15, 1900; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 22, 1900; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 29, 1900; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 5, 1901; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 12, 1901; idem, “Di neshome yeseyra.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 19, 1901.

interests.<sup>276</sup> Yiddish journalists, however, had learned over the previous decade that a certain degree of engagement with the language, culture, and concerns of Jewish immigrants was necessary to effectively popularize the socialist message among their readers. Moreover, new brands of socialism, ones that were unapologetically intertwined with Jewish nationalism, were gaining traction in Eastern Europe, and their influence was spreading to the United States with the arrival of new waves of immigration.<sup>277</sup> The formation of the socialist General Jewish Labor Bund (“the Bund”) in Vilna in October 1897 was spurred by a desire to integrate the Jewish proletariat into the broader revolutionary movement.<sup>278</sup> Although the Bund’s early years were defined by constantly renegotiating the intersection of radical politics and Jewish interests, it increasingly aligned socialism with “nationalist paradigms of collective identity.”<sup>279</sup> Shortly after the Bund’s founding in Vilna, the fledging organization would have an impact on the radical Yiddish press in the United States.

Bundism, among other options for nationalist-inclined radical politics, remained a relatively small force in the American Jewish labor movement before 1905, but radicals with these or similar sentiment were making their presence known.<sup>280</sup> The American Yiddish press felt the Bund’s influence when renowned poet Avrom Lesin (1872-1938) arrived in New York in 1897. Lesin, a Minsk-born Talmudist turned freethinking radical, would recall that his discovery

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<sup>276</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 453. Frankel summarizes: “ultimately it was European nationalism, in its various manifestations, that tempered the internationalism of the melting pot.” See *ibid.*, *Prophecy and Politics*, 462; also see Jacobson, *Special Sorrows*, 98.

<sup>277</sup> Joshua Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 146–8; Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish Worker’s Movement in Tsarist Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), viii–ix.

<sup>278</sup> Nora Levin, “The Influence of the Bund on the Jewish Socialist Movement in America,” *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 5 (1976): 54–6.

<sup>279</sup> Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood*, 17; Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 359.

<sup>280</sup> The first New York branch of the Bund formed in 1900 and by 1904 there were fifty branches in the United States. Levin, “The Influence of the Bund on the Jewish Socialist Movement in America,” 54; Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 55–6.

of Karl Marx actually heightened his sense of Jewish distinctiveness. “When I learned I was a convinced Marxist,” he wrote in his memoirs, “I also discovered I was what I was: not a Russian, not just a human being (which is a mere abstraction), but a Jew. Marxism had intensified my sense of reality, and the reality surrounding me was Jewish.”<sup>281</sup> Lesin developed Bundist ties, and almost immediately upon arriving in the United States advocated socialism mixed with Jewish particularity in the *Forverts*.<sup>282</sup> At one point, he even said that “socialism did not demand the Jews abandon their nationality at this stage in history.”<sup>283</sup> There may be a time, that is, when assimilation into a proletariat international was necessary, but this stage was not yet on the horizon—Jews can embrace cultural distinctiveness at present. Perhaps more to the point, in an article about his childhood memories of Rosh Hashanah, Lesin wrote “Jewish belonging [lit., *yudenthum*], as a religion, will, when all is said and done, have to disappear along with all other religions, since Jews, as a nation, will have to disappear along with all other nations.” And yet, he also asserted that Jewish nationalist sentiments would outlive Jewish religiosity.<sup>284</sup>

While Bundism and other Jewish nationalist stances gained influence in these years, they remained a matter of controversy among Yiddish journalists and editors. Not surprisingly, the

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<sup>281</sup> Avrom Lesin, *Zikhroynes un bilder* (New York: L.M. Shteyn Folks-Biblyotek, 1954), 112.

<sup>282</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 471–2; also see Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 425; and Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 122–3. On Lesin in Minsk, see Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 22. Levin, “The Influence of the Bund on the Jewish Socialist Movement in America,” 54–6. In his introduction to *Gezamelte shriften* (1910), Kobrin cited Lesin by name as an important influence on his work. See Leon Kobrin, *Gezamelte shriften* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1910), vii–viii. For examples of Lesin’s writing, see Avrom Lesin, “Nokh a bletl, mayn folk” [1894] in *Lider un poemen* (New York: Forverts Association, 1938), vol. 3: 15; idem, “Martirer-blut” [1895] in *Lider un poemen*, vol. 3: 272–5; idem, “In shtreyt” [1896] in *Lider un poemen*, vol. 3: 278–9; idem, “Fun fintstern over” [1895] in *Lider un poemen*, vol. 3: 21; idem, “Der eybiker yid” [1894], *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 20, 1898. All are also cited in Jacobson, *Special Sorrows*, 287 n.42–n.47. Also see YIVO Archives, Abraham Liessin Papers, RG 201. Most of these papers are dated in the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>283</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 471.

<sup>284</sup> A.L., “Erinerungen.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 6, 1899. Brackets mine. As Irving Howe summarized, “The interweaving of socialist and nationalist themes—both responses to the desperation of Jewish life—found its strongest expression in a group of writers who first became known in eastern Europe but reached the peak of their careers after migrating to America at the turn of the century.” Avrom Lesin was Howe’s chief example: “Trapped for a time between the ideologues of socialism and the partisans of nationalism, he lived in a sort of cultural limbo, though his yearning See Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 425.

spectrum of tolerance and welcome toward these trends mirrored the already developing spectrum of attitudes toward breaking away from the doctrinaire socialism of the SLP and engaging Jewish cultural distinctiveness. Although most key figures at the *Forverts* never became Bundists themselves, their paper—more than the *Arbeter tsaytung* and *Abend blat* at least—became an outlet for an increasing number of Bundist-oriented writers, like Lesin, and later A.Sh. Zaks and Ben-Tsien Hofman, better known by his pseudonym Tsivion. The paper’s openness to these writers also stemmed from a recognition that speaking to the readers’ values and concerns would grow readership. In Jonathan Frankel’s words, “The fierce competition to attract mass interest was in itself a factor encouraging ideological multiplicity—nationalist sentiments side by side with internationalist—in the socialist press.”<sup>285</sup>

Indeed, the competitive pressured described by Frankel would eventually bring even the more doctrinaire Yiddish newspapers sponsored by the SLP into greater conversation with Jewish nationalist concerns.<sup>286</sup> In October 1898, for example, seasoned journalist M. Baranov wrote a sympathetic review of a recent book by Labor Zionist Nachman Syrkin, published in the SLP’s new Yiddish monthly, the *Naye tsayt*. In his review, Baranov’s openly stated, “we are everywhere regarded as a nation, a separate nation, . . . and we are held to a greater or lesser

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<sup>285</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 462. Though the *Arbeter Tsaytung* Publishing Association and *Forverts* Publishing Association shared an internationalist framework, the former was generally more “orthodox” in its Marxism. As a case in point, the *Forverts* sometimes stressed communal responsibility over class solidarity. See *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 22, 1901. Even Cahan, who was largely writing in the English-language press during this time, was publishing stories like “The Russian Jew in America” (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1898), which included a story about how the pogroms of 1881 drew secular, Russified Jews toward pious, traditional Jews. See Cahan, “The Russian Jew in America,” 128–39; also see Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, xvii.

<sup>286</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 469. To make matters worse, Krants and Faygenboym became embroiled in a libel suit brought by Sarasohn in mid-summer 1898. See Yael Levi, “Jewish Community, American Authority: The Turn-of-the-Century Yiddish Press in Supreme Court,” *American Jewish History* 105, no. 4 (2021): 459–77. Also see P-708, box 1, Kasriel H. Sarasohn Collection, AJHS; Milk, *Di antshteyung fun “Forverts” un zayn kamf mit “Abend blat”*, 117–9; “Sotsialisten un sotsializmus,” *YG* (New York, NY), Jan. 22, 1897; “87 dollar fun kolel amerika,” *YG* (New York, NY), Jan. 29, 1897; “Di amerikanishe sotsyalisten,” *YG* (New York, NY), Jul. 23, 1897; “Krants arestirt!” *Teglikher herald* (New York, NY), Aug. 23, 1898; “Sarasohn maser’t unz far’n gerikht als anarkhisten,” *AB* (New York, NY), Aug. 24, 1898; “Sarasohn gevint dem protses,” *AB* (New York, NY), Mar. 6, 1901.

degree in contempt as a nation.”<sup>287</sup> So, he then asked, “Is it not natural that your own nation should be dearer to you than other nations, . . . that you would defend it when it is held up to contempt?”<sup>288</sup> The editor of the *Naye tsayt*, likely Krants, rejected Baranov’s claims, stating the Jewish masses wanted “to be freed not from their special suffering, as Jews, but from the much more real oppression of poverty.”<sup>289</sup>

There were indications of pressure and shifting stances elsewhere. The SLP’s Yiddish press followed a more hardline socialist stance on the Dreyfus Affair—scandalous treason charges against a French Jewish captain, Alfred Dreyfus. For his stance on the issue, Faygenboym had to dodge criticism from fellow freethinkers who declared him a “mortal enemy of everything that’s Jewish (*yidishkeytlekh*).” He accused his critics of making a “god” out of “the Jewish ‘national spirit’.”<sup>290</sup> Yet, eight months later (June 1899), the *Abend blat* published a positive review of a recent Bundist publication, the *Yidisher arbeter*, giving an especially positive assessment of Khayim Zhitlovsky’s article “Zionism or Socialism.” The review noted Zhitlovsky was “a kind of nationalist,” but it also asserted his nationalism “has nothing at all to do with the ‘nationalism’ of the Jewish bourgeoisie.” Krants even added an editorial note declaring his own desire for an “international Jewish socialist committee . . . link[ing] together the Jewish socialists themselves” (likely inconsistent with SLP policy).<sup>291</sup>

### **Leon Kobrin and *Fraygezonenhey*t in “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” (1899)**

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<sup>287</sup> Qtd. in Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 470. [M. Baranov, “Di eybige frage; vegn dem bikhl ‘Di yidnfrage un di sotsyalistishe yidnshtat fun Ben Eliezer,” *Naye tsayt* (Oct. 6, 1898), 41]

<sup>288</sup> Qtd. in Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 470. [Baranov, “Di eybige frage,” 42]

<sup>289</sup> Qtd. in Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 470. [Ph. Krants, “Ken a yidisher sotsyalist zayn a yidisher patryot,” *Naye tsayt* (Oct. 6, 1898), 48]

<sup>290</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Dos letste vort,” *AT* (New York, NY), Oct. 16, 1898. Faygenboym’s critics did not come from the pious in this case. They were freethinkers since they “considered the spiritual part of Jewishness to be a shell.” He also chided them for trying to “squeeze a *contemporary* sense of the highest civilization and humanity into the *ancient* laws and customs” (emphasis mine).

<sup>291</sup> Qtd. in Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 470. [“Der ‘yidisher arbeter’ no. 6,” *AB* (New York, NY), Jun. 12, 1899]

In the 1890s, fiction and poetry in America's radical Yiddish press played a different role than editorials. Like translations of world literature, original fiction and original poetry boosted readership and helped spread radical sentiment. A generation of radical "pyonirn" (pioneers) in American Yiddish literature soon arose. Yiddish literary critics would fondly remember Kobrin and Libin as key pioneers, but also Rosenfeld, the sweatshop poet, and playwright Yankev Gordin.<sup>292</sup> In 1909, literary critic Mordekhai Dantsis spotlighted several members of this generation via the connection between their popularity and their politics. He wrote: "One volume of Libin's sketches or Rosenfeld's working-class poems accomplished more for the propaganda of socialist ideas, and more strongly awoke the consciousness of the masses, than hundreds of bombastic articles and brochures of our columnists and, *kavyokhl* 'theoreticians'."<sup>293</sup> Popularity did not mean total freedom, however. Through much of the 1890s, fiction and poetry in SLP-aligned Yiddish press did not directly undercut reigning ideologies. As Elias Shulman suggested, "The Jewish radical press of those years often admitted that the beautiful literature it publishes needs to serve a certain purpose—to help destroy the capitalist society and erect a socialist

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<sup>292</sup> In 1909, Dovid Pinski recalled that "The most important [figures] from Gordin's school are L. Kobrin and Z. Libin." See Pinski, *Dos yidishe drama* (New York: Sh. Drukerman, 1909), 36; B. Rivkin, "Grunt tendentsn fun der yidisher literatur in amerike," in *Zambikher*, eds. Y. Opatoshu and H. Leivick (New York: n.p., 1937), vol. 2: 346–7; [for a similar work by Rivkin, see *Grunt tendentsn fun der yidisher literatur in amerike*, comp. Mine Bordo-Rivkin, ed. Abba Gordin (New York: Ikuf, 1948).] Shulman, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in amerike*, 53, 104–39; Kobrin also mentioned Gordin, Libin, and himself as the key contributors to the *Arbeter tsaytung*. See Kobrin, *Gezamelte shriften*, v. On their similar entry into Yiddish theater, see B. Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishen theater* (New York: Maks N. Mayzel, 1923), vol. 2: 168; Wiernik, *Geshikhte fun di yiden in amerika*, 472. In *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, Hutchins Hapgood wrote at length about Libin, Kobrin, and Gordin, as well as B. Gorin, Morris Rosenfeld, and Z. Levin. For more on Gordin, see Goren, "Sacred and Secular," 269–305. On Gordin's politics, see Valleri J. Hohman, "Jacob Gordin and Jewish Socialism in America," in *To Have Or Have Not: Essays on Commerce and Capital in Modernist Theatre*, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 86–95; also see Barbara Henry, *Rewriting Russia: Jacob Gordin's Yiddish Drama* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

<sup>293</sup> Mordekhai Dantsis, "Naye shtremungen in der amerikanishe yidisher literatur.," *Arbeter* (New York, NY), Aug. 7, 1909.

society in its place.”<sup>294</sup> Rosenfeld, for instance, published quasi-nationalist poetry in the 1890s, but he mostly did so in book form.<sup>295</sup>

Demand for entertaining stories about Jewish life in Europe and the United States may have created a deeper paradox in the SLP’s Yiddish press. In his posthumously published memoirs, Kobrin claimed that internationalist periodicals offered a space for fiction writers, consciously or unconsciously, to bring “the national Jewish atmosphere into our local literature.” Specifically citing Gordin’s depictions of Old-World Jewish life (*hey mishn lebn*) and Libin’s stories of working-class American Jewish life (*arbeter-lebn*), he asserted original Yiddish fiction “protected the Jewish reader against the radical, anti-Jewish propaganda.” It “kept the heart of the Jewish reader of the radical newspapers in contact with Jewish life, awakened longing in him, preserved him in the Jewish atmosphere.”<sup>296</sup> Kobrin’s commentary undoubtedly reflected his later ideological designs (he became a staunch nationalist), leading him to overvalue fiction’s “protective impact.” The general sentiment, however—that the radical Yiddish press offered a thoroughly Jewish environment, was consistent with broader paradoxes scholars have found in Jewish radical politics. In his history of New York’s Jewish socialists, Tony Michels foregrounded “a tension inherent in the Jewish labor movement” during this early period, a tension between “its universalistic thrust versus its ethnic particularity.”<sup>297</sup> Another historian, Gil

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<sup>294</sup> Shulman, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in amerike*, 74. Also see Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 462, 466. This literary generation adopted the social realist style common in radical circles in Europe and America. See Yankev Gordin, “Realizmus un romantizmus,” *Tsukunft* (Apr. 1904): 9–13. Also see Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1955), 396; idem, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 53.

<sup>295</sup> In Marc Miller’s words, “Most Yiddish newspapers on the 1890s demanded universalistic works that promoted radical ideologies and addressed the working and living conditions of the proletariat.” See Miller, “The Poetics of the Immigrant Experience,” 14. Also see Marc Miller, *Representing the Immigrant Experience: Morris Rosenfeld and the Emergence of Yiddish Literature in America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 11. More on the relationship between press and literature, see Nathan Cohen, “The Yiddish Press and Yiddish Literature: A Fertile but Complex Relationship,” *Modern Judaism* 28, no. 2 (2008): 149–72; and Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 425–6.

<sup>296</sup> Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 193. For a similar idea, see Dr. Kh. Zhitlovsky, “Dr. Hilel Zolotarov un zayn natsionalistisher anarkhizm,” in Hilel Zolotarov, *Geklibene shriftn*, ed. Yoyel Entin (New York: Dr. H. Zolotarov Publication Committee, 1924), vol. 1: 12.

<sup>297</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 123.

Ribak, wrote that the Jewish environment fostered by specific labor institutions, e.g., the radical Yiddish press, Arbeter Ring, UHT, etc., “in effect strengthened Jewish separatism.”<sup>298</sup> Kobrin likely overstated the protective role Yiddish fiction played in the everyday lives of radical readers, but the paradox was present, and it occasionally spilled into controversy.

In the late 1890s, Kobrin began publishing short stories in the *Abend blat* that raised doubts about the Jewish radicals’ distance from Jewishness.<sup>299</sup> Born in Vitebsk, Kobrin had studied in a traditional religious setting as a boy, but he had also encountered Russian literature at a fairly young age. He left for the United States in 1892 and eventually landed in Philadelphia. Attracted to anarchism in his early years, he became friends with Emma Goldman, who introduced him to German anarchists there. Kobrin enjoyed the vibrant discussions about literature and politics, but during a birthday celebration in his radical circle, Kobrin and his wife witnessed the anarchists singing an antisemitic tune. Both soon defected from the group and, at least according to recollections, he started doubting the assimilationist model of internationalism.<sup>300</sup>

Kobrin began posing questions about Jewish radicals’ distance from tradition in the late 1890s.<sup>301</sup> The most notable cases appeared in 1899, when Kobrin published several short stories featuring freethinkers. The first was entitled “Anna’s Ma Nishtana,” and the second “What is

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<sup>298</sup> Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 102.

<sup>299</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 470.

<sup>300</sup> Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1955), 382–7. For critical commentary on Kobrin, see Bal-Makhshoves (Isidor Elyashev), “L. Kobrin,” in *Shriften* (Vilna: B.A. Kletskin, [1911?]), 103–9. Commentary in English, see “Leon Kobrin” in Harry Rogoff, *Nine Yiddish Writers: Critical Appreciations* (n.p., 1916), 109–19.

<sup>301</sup> See, for example, a debate about how to characterize Rosenfeld’s poetry between Kobrin and Marxist literary critic L. Budyanov (later Louis Boudin): L. Budyanov, “A blondzhender poet,” *Nayer gayst* (Oct. 1897), 103–7; Leon Kobrin, “A blondzhender kritik,” *Nayer gayst* (Dec. 1897), 168–72; also “Red.” comment on Budyanov, “A blondzhender poet,” 107 (bottom), and “Red.” comment on Kobrin, “A blondzhender kritik,” 171 (bottom). Secondary sources on the debate, see Miller, *Representing the Immigrant Experience*, 31–2, and idem, “The Poetics of the Immigrant Experience,” 37–8; and Paul Buhle, “Themes in American Jewish Radicalism,” in *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, eds. Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 111 n.15. On Budyanov generally, and his debate with Kobrin specifically, see Shulman, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in amerike, 1870-1900*, 78–82.

He?”<sup>302</sup> “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” stressed a longing for the Old World, while the open-ended question of “What is He?”—literally, *what is he?*—prompted critical responses from readers.<sup>303</sup>

Kobrin answered his critics, a back-and-forth that was uncommon for the *Abend blat*. The back-and-forth revealed the strong feelings surrounding the socialists’ relationship to Jewish tradition. Kobrin did not explicitly use the Yiddish words *fraydenker*, *fraydenkerin*, or *apikoyres* in either “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” or “What is He?,” at least not in their earliest versions. Kobrin did use *fraygezonenheyt* to describe Anna, the protagonist in “Anna’s Ma Nishtana.” *Fraygezonenheyt* is an odd word in Yiddish. Below, I have maintained its original form in my narrative summary and commentary, though I interpret its meaning as “free sensibility.” It appears to function like *fraygezanener* (m.)—“a person of free senses or broadminded,” a far more common word

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<sup>302</sup> A discrepancy in the publication of these two stories must be noted before turning to the stories themselves. There were two different editions of his memoirs, *Mayne fuftsik yor in merike*, both published posthumously. One in Buenos Aires in 1955 and one in New York in 1966. In the 1966 edition, Kobrin remembered “What is He?” as the first short story of its kind in the America Yiddish press—a story openly questioning the loss of Jewishness published in a staunchly radical, internationalist newspaper. See Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 194. Kobrin stated the *Abend blat* published the story in 1897 (*ibid.*, 198–9). A republished 1910 version, appearing in a collection of stories, proposed August 1897 as the date of writing or publication (See Kobrin, “Vos iz er?” in *Gezamelte shriften*, 614–20). The 1910 version most closely resembles a 1908 version, actually entitled “Ongevehtogte fragen,” and appearing in *Dos folk*, a short-lived monthly published by the Jewish Socialist Territorialist Labor Party of America. See L. Kobrin, “Ongevehtogte fragen,” *Dos folk* (Mar. 1908), 34–7. In his memoirs, Kobrin also explicitly stated that the 1897 version caused a stir among *Abend blat* readers, but Kobrin may have misremembered, since the version that caused a stir was published in 1899. The 1899 version is also much shorter than the republished 1908/1910 version and the version Kobrin published in his memoirs. It is possible there was an 1897 version, a more expansive version than the one published in 1899, and one more closely resembling the 1908/1910 version and the version published in his memoirs. Even then, while the 1908/1910 version and the memoir version are more alike than the 1899 version, they have some notable differences. The version from 1908/1910 has a male narrator while the version from his memoirs has a female narrator. Interestingly, the version from 1899 also has female narrator. It seems likely that the original story was the much smaller version published in the *Abend blat* in 1899. Kobrin then change the gender of the narrator and expanded its contents for later publication. When Kobrin was writing his memoirs, he likely tried to reconstruct the late 1890s version based on the 1908/1910 version. In that case, Kobrin simply misremembered the original date of publication. The discrepancy matters because it changes which of the two stories was published first. In 1899 at least, “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” came before “What is He?” This raises the question, why did “What is He?” spark such intense interest. I suggest it was the open-question—“what is he?”—that implored readers to write to the *Abend blat* with their answer. I’ve also found a reference to a version appearing sometime around 1907, with a reportedly female narrator, which would make it—if it existed—different from the 1908/1910 version.

<sup>303</sup> Kobrin suggested in 1910 that the *Abend blat* was, in fact, an ideal environment for American Yiddish writers who wanted to publish *belles-lettres*. In the competitive environment of the American Yiddish press, Kobrin said Krants created a collegial atmosphere. See Kobrin *Gezamelte shriften*, v–vi.

Yiddish speakers used to refer to freethinkers or people with secular sensibilities.<sup>304</sup> Regardless, Kobrin depicted his main characters in these stories as distant from any form of Jewish tradition.

As Kobrin constructed “Anna’s Ma Nishtana,” the narrator, who could be a male or a female, does not enter the dialogue. Anna is the only character who speaks directly. The reader must trust the accuracy of Anna’s storytelling and the narrator’s retelling. On only two occasions does the narrator impose their “voice” (not in dialogue form). The first occurs within the opening paragraphs, where the narrator calls Anna, who remains unnamed until nearly the end of the story, a “*landsmeydl*” and “an intelligent shop girl.”<sup>305</sup> Fictional freethinker depictions in the American Yiddish press reflected gender stereotypes of the time. Deemed more emotional and more religiously inclined, American Yiddish writers appear to have found female freethinkers ideal for expressing emotionally charged connections to the past.<sup>306</sup> In the hands of writers like Kobrin and Libin, female freethinkers could symbolize intellectual inconsistency. As a case in point, writers sometimes depicted female freethinkers as those who were more likely to be drawn to freethought out of love for a man.<sup>307</sup> Said more succinctly, female freethinkers were uniquely volatile.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Polland, “May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?,” 385 n.33.

<sup>305</sup> Kobrin, “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” (1899).

<sup>306</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation*, 25–6.

<sup>307</sup> The prime example is Z. Libin “Es hoybt zey on tsu ferdrisen,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1913): 152–5; idem, “Es hoybt zi on tsu ferdrisen,” in *Gezamelte verk* (1915), vol. 4: 259–66. But Libin’s story “Di khomets’ dike eltern un di peysekh’ dike kinderlekh” (1909) should be considered a similar depiction. See “Di khomets’ dike eltern un di peysekh’ dike kinderlekh,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 7, 1909; idem, “Di khomets’ dike eltern un di peysekh’ dike kinderlekh,” in *Geklibene shriften* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1912), vol. 2: 22–6.

<sup>308</sup> Not all journalists or newspapers showed this sensibility all the time. *Tog* journalists wrote differently about women, see Shelby Alan Shapiro, “Words to the Wives: The Jewish Press, Immigrant Women, and Identity Construction, 1895-1925” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2009), 21, 156; Khayim Malits, a mainstay of the *Morgen-zhurnal*, sometimes depicted male freethinkers as volatile, see Malits, “Di heym un di froy: muters un kinder”; idem, *Di heym un di froy*, 71–5. Literary examples: Kobrin, “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” (1899); idem, “Vos iz er?...” (1899); Z. Libin, “Yohrtsayt nokh der muter,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 7, 1901; idem, “Yohrtsayt nokh der muter,” in *Geklibene skitsen* (New York: Forverts Association, 1902), 138–41; idem, “Shmertslike gedanken,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 12, 1902; idem, “Shmertslike gedanken,” in *Gezamelte verk* (1915), vol. 4: 145–9; idem, “Dzheni’s ayndruksfoler kholem,” in *Geklibene shriften*, in the section “II. Liebe,” 15–19; idem, “Di khomets’ dike eltern un di peysekh’ dike kinderlekh” (1909); idem, “Es hoybt zey on tsu ferdrisen” (1913). For another example, around the same time, see B. Gorin, “Yomkipper,” *AB* (New York, NY),

The meat of “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” begins with Anna remarking that “she feels so miserable” on the first night of every Jewish holiday, especially Passover.<sup>309</sup> Her heart feels like a “wasteland” on these days. Anna makes sure to reiterate to the narrator, who clearly knows her well, that she isn’t *frum* and doesn’t do anything Passover-related, like reading the Haggadah, drinking ritual wine, eating kneidlach, etc. She cannot, however, help thinking about the “plagues in her heart,” with “plagues” being a direct reference to the ten plagues of the Passover narrative (Exodus 7-10). Anna then remarks, “Are you laughing at me? You think I’m joking? But I assure you I’m thinking seriously about it...” This comment certainly helped emphasize the story’s serious tone. Anna self-reflexively wonders why she has these feelings. It might be, she tells the narrator, because she has no immediate family in the New World. It is also possible she is “not yet free of the pious upbringing” at the hand of her pious parents. But it also seems possible that Anna’s ache comes from, in her words, “my discontented ‘self’ (*ikh*) longing for those young, happy years of mine.” This last possibility unites the prior two—her ache may come from missing family and the joys they shared, joys that revolve around religious life. After a few lines about what Anna misses on Passover, she suggests that despite the unknown cause of her longing the feelings are real—“I feel I’m missing something I lost, *that* I can definitely tell you.”<sup>310</sup>

Narrative style and the dynamics of feeling commonly intersected in fictional depictions of freethinkers; a way of highlighting what the freethinker lost, stories about freethinkers of Jewish origin often featured sentimental descriptions of Jewish traditions. Thickly described

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Sep. 12, 1899; idem, “Yomkipper. (shlus),” *AB* (New York, NY), Sep. 13, 1899. Also, see some of the advice columns and human-interest stories written by D.M. Hermalin in Ch. 4.

<sup>309</sup> Kobrin, “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” (1899).

<sup>310</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

memories or visions of observant loved ones from the Old World were particularly prominent.<sup>311</sup> Narrative stylistics heightened sentimentality by placing increased emphasis on feeling. As a case in point, the main action of “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” occurs in a story within a story. Though not all freethinker stories featured this form of narration, American Yiddish writers regularly created distance between the reader and main action. This distance emphasized feeling. Truth value—*did events happen as described*—fell into the background while feeling—*how did storytellers or characters feel about the events described*—stepped into the foreground. As Kobrin constructed “Anna’s Ma Nishtana,” *why* Anna felt the way she did remains relevant, but it is not as relevant as *how* she felt. Anna herself suggests the “why” may be unclear. What is certain, however, is that Anna *feels* she is “missing something”—“*that I can definitely tell you.*”<sup>312</sup>

Kobrin’s Anna dives into these feelings by describing her struggles on the previous *erev* Passover (the eve of first night of Passover). That evening, while sitting in the shop, she suddenly became melancholy. Anna sensed she shared this melancholy with her fellow shopgirls: “If I’d have seen tears in the eyes of all the Jewish shopgirls, it wouldn’t have surprised me at all.” In the Old World, these women would be preparing for Passover. Though convinced all the Jewish shopgirls shared her thoughts, Anna did not want to admit these feelings. She posed herself a question: “When I asked myself at that moment, ‘what’s my concern for all these ceremonies, for this *yontef*, for this Passover—do I believe in it?’” Anna’s “intellect” responded—“foolishness, ignorance.” Another internal voice chimed in, however,

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<sup>311</sup> For examples, Kobrin, “Ongevehtogte fragen” (1908)/“Vos iz er?” (1910); Z. Libin, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist” (Aug. 13, 1903); idem, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist” (Aug. 14, 1903); idem, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist,” in *Gezamelte verk*, vol. 1: 132–40; idem, “Es hoybt zey on tsu ferdrisen” (1913). Note: the two versions of the just mentioned short story have a slight difference—“zey” (“they”) and “zi” (“she”)—in the title.

<sup>312</sup> Kobrin, “Anna’s Ma Nishtana” (1899).

reminding her of her melancholy state. As Kobrin described it, Anna descended into a heated internal battle between intellect (*fershtand* [*farshtand*]) and soul (*neshome*). Every time Anna felt the weight of deep sorrow, her intellect would respond with rebuttals. It is especially noteworthy that Kobrin depicted Anna's soul as responding in a sort of groan, alluding to the depth of her longing.<sup>313</sup> The idea of an inexpressible pain or urge, formulated as a groan of longing, an uncertain feeling, was also common in fictional depictions of freethinkers.<sup>314</sup>

Not only did Anna fear admitting her feelings to herself, but she also feared expressing her feelings to others. Her intellect asked her, "What kind of opinion would they get of your so-called intelligence and *fraygezonenhey*?" Again, the groaning voice of her soul fired back with counterquestions about her freethinking sensibility, "Wouldn't it be better, wouldn't you feel happier, if you observed Passover? What did your *fraygezonenhey* give you in its place?" The voice of her soul posed even stronger questions by comparing her *fraygezonenhey*, a sign of her apparent modernization and progress, with her parent's seemingly provincial disposition: "Are your parents not happier when they know of no elevated ideas and do what their parents did? Do you know of anything comparing to their *yontef* delight?" These questions raised another set of questions, centering on whether Anna's longing was for material comfort or something deeper. The emerging subtext was a critique of strict materialism, and she turned to a comparison between animals and humans. While animals find all their needs in materiality, humans need ideals beyond "eating well, or drinking wine, or putting on a new garment." Said otherwise, Anna sensed her draw to "*yontef* delight" was not simply about the materiality of the holiday; it was not a longing for the objects of Passover.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. Also see Libin, "A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist" (Aug. 13); idem, "A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist" (Aug. 13).

<sup>315</sup> Kobrin, "Anna's Ma Nishtana" (1899).

As Anna narrates her story, she wandered the streets of East Broadway on her way back to her boarding house that Passover night. Arriving late, the family with whom she boards was about to conclude the seder, their table decked in ornate refinements for the occasion. Once in her room, she sat alone in the dark and looked out her window, the silvery moon leading her, “against her will,” to envision a scene from the Old World. She saw her former house and saw herself “in a white dress with a long, black braid.” Signaling the piety of the scene, Anna described the “blue, beautiful, familiar sky” as “a great yarmulke.” Closing her eyes, she tried to forget everything “there,” but instead imagined a large hall with a long table set for the Passover seder. At the seat reserved for the head of household, sat her father in a white *kitl*, his face “radiat[ing] with the grandeur of a true king.” She saw her mother adorned in pearls and earrings sitting beside to her father. Her eyes read, “God should favor me next year to sit at the seder with my husband and darling children...” (in Yiddish, this expresses a wish).<sup>316</sup> It is a sad irony. With Anna in the New World, it seems her mother did not have her wish granted.

Amid Anna’s imagined scenes, Beyle, the woman with whose family she boards, roused Anna to invite her to the Passover table. After Anna declines, Beyle pointedly asked, “What kind of life is this? That a person doesn’t know of *yontef*, of the Sabbath... I’m no longer talking about piety...”<sup>317</sup> Beyle’s invitation, with a short description of the foods Anna could be enjoying, ended with “How can a person totally renounce the Jewish holidays!” Here, Beyle seemed to argue Anna, despite her *fraygezonenheyt*, could enjoy the fruits of a Jewish life. The forlorn Anna responded, however, “Ah, Beyle, the wine and your nice things can’t give me what I’m missing... I’m dreadfully gloomy...” Beyle inquired why she was so miserable, but Anna, unable to provide an explanation, was choked by tears.

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid. She used the word *frumkeyt*.

With her story of *erev* Passover concluded, Anna tells the narrator, “It’s a strange thing, after all, that I feel so miserable precisely on the eve of Passover.” The narrative as a whole finishes with a direct reference to the Passover seder; Anna asks, “Why is it so... ma nishtana?” During the seder, “ma nishtana” is the opening phrase that begins the four questions, questions probing why Passover is special. Rendered in English, the first question asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Anna’s free sensibility should have, it appears, turned *erev* Passover into a night indistinguishable from all others, and yet here she is asking “ma nishtana?” Passover is still, it seems, special for Anna, confirmed by the groan of her soul. Anna even rejected Beyle’s invitation to enjoy the material comforts of Passover.<sup>318</sup>

Anna’s story is, at its core, about a displacement operating on multiple levels. Anna clearly feels physically displaced. She laments her distance from the comforts of the Old World, including her family and the spaces she knew intimately. People and place recall shared joys, and physical displacement turns into a deeper displacement. Her *fraygezonenheyit* thus reveals a deeper level of displacement. Her soul even asks, “What did your *fraygezonenheyit* give you in its place?” Her version of modernization and progress has distanced her from the signs, rituals, and joys of her past, the very aspects of the past to which other immigrant Jews turn when they want to find some sense of placement amid physical displacement. Her “discontent ‘self,’” the fight between intellect and soul, speaks to these tensions. In an ironic twist, the modern Anna is miserable while her parents, who “know of no elevated ideas and do what their parents did,” are likely happier. Recalling that the words *yidishkeyit*, internationalism, and socialism never appear in “Anna’s Ma Nishtana,” Kobrin’s story narrated tensions beyond radical politics alone. But, in

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

narrating these tensions, *fraygezonenheyt* operated as a sign of one's radical distance from Jewish tradition.

Loneliness and longing for one's Jewish milieu in Eastern Europe undoubtedly affected some of the earliest arriving radical intellectuals. In a 1936 article about his first Passover in the United States, 1883, Cahan recalled his loneliness and longing. Immigrant Jewish life in early 1880s America was drastically different than decades later; there were simply fewer *landslayt* and the Yiddish press and Yiddish theater “[were] not even a fantasy.” So, he remembered, “Back then, immigrant lonesomeness and alienation were far greater, and homesickness stronger and longer lasting.” Though Cahan spent his time with a close-knit group of radical friends from his hometown of Vilna, which somewhat eased feelings of loneliness, he still recalled, “my yearning for home was agonizing beyond words... My dreams were painful, each one linked to my home across the ocean, my parents, relatives, friends and acquaintances, neighbors and colleagues,” even the very streets of his hometown.<sup>319</sup>

Cahan's longing for family, friends, and place also recalled happy memories of Jewish holidays and religious rituals. In 1883, Cahan was not yet the political radical he would become, but he remembered it as “a point in time when I was at my most fanatical atheism.” Still, observing the Passover hustle and bustle on the Lower East Side spurred memories of Passover seders back home, where family and ritual blended seamlessly. This was certainly the case for most Jewish immigrants, he believed, as he told readers in 1936:

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<sup>319</sup> Cahan, “My First Pesach In America—in 1883”; Pollack's translation is only part of the original article, see Ab. Cahan, “Mayn ershter peysekhn in amerike.” In this article, Cahan talks about having felt incredibly lonely, but perhaps not as lonely as Jewish immigrants did not have *landslayt*, and political ideals also gave him life. But, even later, when new arrivals were more likely to have *landslayt* in America, adjusting to the new context was still hard. In his translated “Bintel Brief” collection, *Forverts* journalist Isaac Metzker included many cases of homesick Jewish immigrants. For example, see *A Bintel Brief*, 117–8. For commentary on urban life and the role played by newspapers, see Brinn, “*Miss Amerike*,” 116–7. On nostalgia's role in Cahan's own fiction, see Oster, “The Ethics of Evaluation,” Ch. 2.

The Seder, and Pesach specifically, play a central role in Jewish homes and Jewish life. Everybody gathers round the family for Seder. Those few hours at your father's table, as he sits recumbent at the head, draped in his white *kitl*, are among the most profoundly spiritual moments in Jewish family life. So it's also a time of peak homesickness for immigrants.<sup>320</sup>

Cahan received two Passover invitations from observant male friends. He initially refused the first invitation because, as he informed his companion, "I don't believe in it, I can't go to a Seder." Cahan confessed he attended the seder while an *apikoyres*, but that was back in Vilna, and he was with his parents. "Who has the heart to back out of their parents' Seder?" he rhetorically asked. Distant from family in 1883, and despite a homesickness strengthened by the Passover season, he could be more consistent with his convictions in the United States, and so he told the man, "I cannot be a hypocrite." In the end, Cahan and the man found a suitable compromise. Cahan visited for Passover dinner after the first half of the Haggadah had been read.<sup>321</sup>

"Anna's Ma Nishtana" fit a growing body of stories the *Abend blat* would publish with greater regularity—external displacement (immigration) and internal displacement (a lack of "something" Jewish). Declining observance played a notable role in these narratives, but direct commentary on radical politics did not. Freethought, at least explicitly stated, did not necessarily play a role in many stories. Even in Kobrin's oeuvre, freethinkers were only one depiction of Jews distant from Jewishness. Kobrin also published "Jenny's Kol Nidre" in the waning years of the nineteenth century. A story about a sex worker named "Jenny," it begins, on *erev* Yom Kippur, with the protagonist watching fellow Jewish immigrants arrive at a *besmedresh* (Heb.,

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<sup>320</sup> Cahan, "My First Pesach In America—in 1883."

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

bet midrash; lit. “house of study”) opposite her residence. She, like Anna, “felt unhappy whenever a Jewish *yontef* rolled around, especially Yom Kippur. It was as if a worm was making its way into the depths of her soul, into some corner somewhere, and was eating away at it and drilling further down...” When Jenny notices “a pious, seriousness” on the immigrants’ faces, she “sees” her deceased father among them. Upon closing her eyes, she is transported, “against her will,” to the memory of an *erev* Yom Kippur in the Old World, where her family eats dinner with “holy seriousness.” Jenny even envisioned herself among them, or better said, a version of herself bearing her birthname—Zlate. Returning to her senses, an internal battle begins: Is she Jenny or Zlate? She tries to forget Zlate by gulping glasses of whisky, but the internal Zlate cannot be ignored. When Jenny hears the “Kol nidre” waft through the window, tears stream down her face and she yells, “I’m Zlate. Zlate. Not Jenny!”<sup>322</sup>

Apart from similar imagery and narrative conventions, Kobrin’s Jenny resembled his Anna in a deeper manner—the freethinker and the sex worker symbolize a *radical* break from Jewish piety. Anna was distant from Jewish piety based on intellectual self-positioning while Jenny’s distance emphasized moral dimensions. But both offered literary extremes stressing a particular predicament: If the heart of a literary extreme (a freethinker and sex worker) could not avoid the tug of the Jewish past, how could anyone else? Uncomfortable freethinkers sat comfortably in a wider literary field asking the same question. Freethinkers emerged as one tool, albeit with increasing regularity, for exposing the soft underbelly of modernity’s opportunities, most especially the opportunity to remake oneself outside the constraints, positive or negative, of the past.

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<sup>322</sup> Kobrin, *Gezamelte shriften* (1910), 273; Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 199. Also see Leon Kobrin, “Blessed is the True Judge,” trans. Jessica Kirzane, *In geveb* (May 2018), accessed Sep 20, 2022, <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/blessed-is-the-true-judge>.

Kobrin was not the *Abend blat*'s only writer posing angst-filled questions about distance from Jewish tradition. Bernard Gorin, a pseudonym of Yitskhok Goyde (1868-1925), published a similar story immediately before Yom Kippur 1899.<sup>323</sup> Aptly entitled “Yom Kippur,” the narrative follows a pious Jewish woman as she emigrates to the United States to join her husband. Anglo-American journalist Hutchins Hapgood (1869-1944) even found Gorin’s “Yom Kippur” notable enough to summarize for English readers, quite effectively capturing its feel: “The details of the way in which she left the old country, how she had to pass herself off on the steamer as the wife of another man, her difficulties with the inspecting officers, etc., give the impression of a life strange to the Gentile world.”<sup>324</sup> The woman arrives in New York to find her husband has given up most religious mores—he is clean shaven, doesn’t keep kosher, and works on the Sabbath. He eventually convinces her to doff her *sheytl*, a wig commonly worn by observant, married Jewish women. Over time, she succumbs evermore to America’s secular ways.<sup>325</sup> When Yom Kippur rolls around, she finds herself eating instead of fasting. The guilt is overwhelming. In her grief, she dreams that her father and mother visit and chastise her for her impiety. She also dreams about being hunted by wild beasts. The dreams last for a week and in the end, she dies “with her right hand on her heart” (a sign of her inner turmoil).<sup>326</sup>

### **Leon Kobrin, *Ibergangs-Menshen*, and the Controversy Surrounding “What is He?” (1899)**

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<sup>323</sup> Born in Lide in the Vilna Gubernia to a wealthy, observant family, Yitskhok Goyde attended the venerable Mir Yeshiva before, at about the age of sixteen, relocating to Vilna. He received some secular education and began an impressive literary career, which included publishing in Morkhe Spektor’s *Hoyz fraynd* and I.L. Peretz’s *Yidische bibliothek*. He emigrated to the United States in 1894, where he first resided in Philadelphia and then New York. At some point in his literary career, he adopted the pen name Bernard Gorin, or B. Gorin. In America, he became a regular contributor to the *Arbeter tsaytung*, *Abend blat*, and *Forverts*, as well as a noted critic and playwright. See Reyzen, “Gorin, B.,” *Leksikon*, vol. 1: 531–7. Furthermore, when Gorin published “Yomkipper,” Krants had already departed.

<sup>324</sup> Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 218–20.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>326</sup> B. Gorin, “Yomkipper. (shlus),” (Sep. 13), 5; also see idem, “Yomkipper.,” (Sep. 12). Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 221.

Kobrin turned more explicitly to freethinking radicals not long after “Anna’s Ma Nishtana.” “What is He?,” written as a diary entry, focused on a socialist mother who doubts how she will raise her son in light of internationalism.<sup>327</sup> She begins by saying that “the closer I look at life around me, the more I analyze a few facts about the surrounding reality, all the sadder my heart grows and the thoughts that steal into my mind unnoticed like snakes make the feelings stronger”; these thoughts “torture and harass, pose questions and demand an answer...”<sup>328</sup> As the socialist mother defines herself and others like her, they are *ibergangs-menshen*, or “people in transition,” those who have “detached themselves from the old and go over to the new.”<sup>329</sup> The problem with being “in transition” for the socialist mother is that the reality around her does not conform to her personal transformation.

Just as Jewish immigrant women generally emerged as volatile figures in freethinker depictions, freethinkers raising children was a staging ground for questions surrounding Jewishness and a child’s well-being or place in American society. With immigration reorienting family dynamics, challenges facing the Jewish home became central to the American Yiddish press, setting the longstanding tone for depictions of Jews in the United States.<sup>330</sup> As Jonathan Krasner put it, “At least since the great East European Jewish migration at the turn of the twentieth century, the centrality of the family has been a defining feature of American Jewish life. More so than the synagogue, the home has been the primary stage on which American Jews

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<sup>327</sup> Kobrin, “Vos iz er?...” (1899); “Shtimen fun folk: Virklikhe sotsyalistishe muters”; Kobrin, “A tsveyte bletel”; “Shtimen fun folk: ‘Ver iz er?...’”

<sup>328</sup> Kobrin, “Vos iz er?...” (1899).

<sup>329</sup> *Ibergangs-menshen* comes from the German, “Übergangsmensch.” Georg (György) Lukàcs, for example, used “Übergangsmensch” to describe Heinrich Heine as a “transitional figure.” See Georg F. Peters, *The Poet as Provocateur: Heinrich Heine and His Critics* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000) 118.

<sup>330</sup> Examples where generational gaps are key, see H. [D.M. Hermalin], “Frume eltern un fraye kinder,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Feb. 16, 1907; idem, “A frume mame in a fraydenker’s hoyz,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Jan. 16, 1915.

have performed their Jewishness.”<sup>331</sup> American Yiddish fiction writers found freethinking mothers particularly interesting because they appeared more in tune with the everyday lives of their children and lifecycle rituals. Undoubtedly, gender stereotypes were not usually flattering, but gendered depictions of freethinkers should not be read as wholly negative in all cases. To extend the case of the freethinking Jewish mother, she sometimes emerged as a character with better insight, more honest, and more in tune with social realities than male counterparts.<sup>332</sup> [These tendencies did not foreclose the possibility of diverse depictions of male and female freethinking Jews, but generalizations did emerge.]

Like Anna, the socialist mother lives in an environment where vocalizing her questions and expressing her feelings has risks. Hence, the reader gains access to her interior life through the imagined diary. This narrative mode aided Kobrin’s critique of how a hardline internationalist atmosphere dominated radical political discourse. Driving this interpretation is the fact that the socialist mother feels uncomfortable expressing her questions and feelings to her own husband, Adolph. She imagines that if she were to tell Adolph, who Kobrin described as an atheist and principled internationalist, he would call her a *yidishke*, here a gendered pejorative signaling residual attachment to Jewishness. Adolph would blame her questions and feelings on a nostalgia for the “tastes” of her Jewish past, literally described as the lingering taste of “tzimmes and kugel.” His assumed response would not satisfy her, and she doubts Adolph himself would be satisfied with his response, since “he knows me too well and knows I’m as free of all these religious stupidities as he is.”<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Jonathan Krasner, “The Interwar Family and American Jewish Identity in Clifford Odets’s *Awake and Sing!*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 13, no. 1 (2006): 2. This is a notable theme in Polland, “‘The Sacredness of the Family’.”

<sup>332</sup> As a case in point, see Malits, “Di heym un di froy: muters un kinder”; idem, *Di heym un di froy*, 71–5.

<sup>333</sup> Kobrin, “Vos iz er?...” (1899).

A persistent “worm” of doubt has burrowed into the socialist mother’s mind, one centered on the mismatch between hope and reality.<sup>334</sup> She finally elaborates on what is at stake in her family: her questions and feelings revolve around her son’s experience with antisemitism. Non-Jewish children call her five-year-old boy, named Ferdinand after famed socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, a “sheeny.”<sup>335</sup> But “what,” she asks, “does my little five-year-old Ferdinand, my darling son, know of Jewishness? What kind of a Jew is he?”<sup>336</sup> Ferdinand is uncircumcised, and he has no knowledge of the Sabbath or Jewish holidays. It is not, however, only Christians who reject Ferdinand. Her pious sister and Adolph’s pious aunts call Ferdinand a “goy,” and she believes, in their hearts, they call him a “*mamzer*” (here, bastard). Young Ferdinand is betwixt and between. His mother summarizes the situation with a Russian saying, roughly translated as “disconnected from one’s own and unattached to anyone else.” It is a sad twist of fate for the socialist mother. Raising her child to be simply part of an undifferentiated humanity has led to complete rejection.<sup>337</sup>

Without an anchor, Ferdinand begins to sense his displacement. After Christian neighbors put up a Christmas tree, the boy runs to ask his mother where their Christmas tree is. She informs him they are not Christians. Temporarily satisfied, he asks nothing further. But when Passover arrives, Ferdinand notices Jewish neighbors dressing their children in new clothes and celebrating with wine and mead. The curious boy again runs to ask his mother some questions, like where his new clothes are and where their wine and mead are. She answers, “We don’t observe the holiday.” Ferdinand bursts into tears and, after his mother wonders what’s wrong, he

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid. The first number of the 1895 volume of the *Tsukunft* included illustrations and a biography of Ferdinand Lassalle, see *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1895).

<sup>336</sup> The socialist mother uses the word *yidishkeyt* for Jewishness.

<sup>337</sup> Kobrin, “Vos iz er?...” (1899).

asks, “Are we ‘sheenies,’ mama?” They are clearly not Christians or Jews, after all. Adolph, suddenly present in the conversation, tells Ferdinand they are socialists. “Half appeased,” Ferdinand follows, “When is our holiday?” Adolph answers, “Ah, in our holiday, people will march with music and red flags. You, Ferdinand, will also march with me...” With this, Ferdinand seems reassured.

Ferdinand finds temporary satisfaction in his father’s assurances, but his mother cannot find the same satisfaction. The mother’s complaint revolves around the rhetoric of socialism as religion. Recalling that the word “religion” became a sign of how passionately socialists were devoted to their cause, Kobrin socialist mother recognizes the “socialism as religion” rhetoric. She writes, “If the socialists would actually have their holidays, like the Christians and the other religious sects, what kind of a choice it would be for people like me, for our children!” The socialist mother feels there are other “intelligent socialists” whose children are like Ferdinand; those parents too must wonder, “Why do [the socialists] not make at least two holidays a year?” According to the socialist mother, “[such holidays] would also help implant the socialist spirit in our children.” And yet, the very word “*yontef*” haunts many socialists, reminding them of “those holidays we lost.” She engages the “socialism as religion” rhetoric further, openly asking, “Isn’t socialism a kind of religion?” An affirmative answer does not seem to make much difference: “Ah, were I able to soothe myself with this thought!” In other words, “Socialism as religion” does not satisfy. In the end, the socialist mother reiterates the questions that haunt her, posed in Ferdinand’s imagined voice: “Mama, what am I? Who am I?” The socialist mother concludes her letter by turning to matters of love. Who will reciprocate Ferdinand’s love when he’s of age? If he falls in love with a Christian girl, she will reject him because he’s a Jew. If he falls in love

with a Jewish girl, she will reject him because he's not a Jew. It seems Ferdinand will not see socialism's promised joys, only further displacement.<sup>338</sup>

While Kobrin never explicitly utilized the words *fraydenker* or *fraydenkerin* in "What is He?," he drew a direct connection between socialism, internationalism, and one's distance from Jewish tradition, a connection not directly made in "Anna's Ma Nishtana." Like Anna, the socialist mother feels displaced, but her displacement emerges not simply from immigration and modernization (*fraygezonenheynt*). Displacement, rather, comes from immigration and an explicit ideology. The socialist mother is a socialist, an internationalist, and an *ibergangs-mensch* "free from all these religious stupidities," raising her son without any sense of Jewish belonging. Herein, she has constructed some sense of placement in the socialist vision of the future. The socialist mother finds placement in the very idea of "being in transition." This sensibility changes when she considers her son's displacement. While Ferdinand seems "placed" in an undifferentiated humanity, it turns out he is not, evidenced by the antisemitism he faces and how Jewish family rejects him. He is, thus, "disconnected from one's own and unattached to anyone else."

Kobrin's story provoked responses showing how some readers interpreted the stakes behind answering "What is he?" Kobrin remembered the *Abend blat* receiving a flood of letters about the story, but Krants only published two responses at first. He did, however, devote the entire "Shtimen fun folk" ("Voices of [the] People") section wholly to the responses, which was unusual for the daily. Even more unusual, he provided the responses with a subtitle: "Actual socialist mothers." While the subtitled proclaimed women were responding, Kobrin maintained he knew the author of the first letter, and it was a well-known socialist man writing under the

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

pseudonym “a sotsyalistishe mame.”<sup>339</sup> Kobrin never unmasked the suspected author, but it was possible the author was male. Irrespective of the letter writer’s gender in daily life, the author presented as a woman in the response, in so doing claiming their authority. “I’m also a socialist mother,” they began.

The first response expressed considerable animus toward Kobrin’s main character. The writer stated quite harshly, “[Ferdinand] is the son of a weak *yidene*,” a “God-fearing *zogerke* and *klogerke*” (all gendered pejoratives).<sup>340</sup> This respondent asserted the socialist mother sought to hide in the *ibergangs-mensh* role because the times demanded it. With this response, the letter writer normalized Kobrin’s socialist mother—pretenders are naturally attracted to what feels new and exciting. Now recognized as a pretender, what should be done with Kobrin’s socialist mother? It would be better, the respondent claimed, if such “bubbes” not play the role of *ibergangs-menshen*. That role is reserved for “those who find in it alone so much satisfaction, so much ‘*yontevdikes*’ (solemnity or festivity), so much majesty that they don’t begin dreaming of troubling themselves with such trifling questions as: ‘what is he’...” Instead, the socialist mother should “put on a headscarf,” “buy a *korbn-minkhe*” (a Yiddish prayerbook marketed to women), and take up fasting, finally becoming the “God-fearing bubbe” she truly is. The letter writer, for “her” part, was “very happy to remain ‘a socialist mama’.”<sup>341</sup>

The animus revealed an anxiety regarding the boundaries dividing freethinking socialists from those with observant sentiments—there were fakers among staunch socialist internationalists. These pretenders, in the writer’s opinion, do not find satisfaction in

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<sup>339</sup> Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 195.

<sup>340</sup> See “*zogerke*” in Beinfeld and Bochner’s Yiddish dictionary, which states, “woman who reads prayers in the women’s section of the synagogue, for the other women to repeat.” See “*kloger*” in Beinfeld and Bochner’s Yiddish dictionary, which states, “person in mourning; whiner, sniveler; complainant.”

<sup>341</sup> A sotsyalistishe mame in “Shtimen fun folk: virklikhe sotsyalistishe muters.” On women in a socialist organization, see Mary McCune, “Creating a Place for Women in a Socialist Brotherhood: Class and Gender Politics in the Workmen’s Circle, 1892-1930,” *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 3 (2002): 585–610.

relinquishing their pious pasts because they do not find true satisfaction in the radical future. Those who find satisfaction in the radical future do not have the anxieties and questions expressed by Kobrin's socialist mother. Kobrin's mother needed to pick her side—piety or progress. It would be better for everyone, the letter writer believed, if she did not straddle the fence. By calling Kobrin's socialist mother a “bubbe,” the writer drew on the intersection of gender stereotypes and generational gaps to emphasize Old-World “backwardness.” The word “bubbe” aided in constructing a contrast between Kobrin's so-called socialist mother and the supposedly authentic “socialist mama,” the letter writer “herself.”

The second letter was also critical but had a different tone. The letter writer began with their main point: “Chiefly, I do not understand how the *Ab. bl.* [*Abend blatt*] goes about publishing such a pessimistic article.” As this writer saw Jewish immigrant life, most Jewish mothers were stepping away from the old and toward the new, but they did so “uncertain, with doubt.” As a socialist, it was Kobrin's job to “illuminating the midday light... to drive away the doubts of weary mothers.” This respondent was particularly upset Kobrin did not answer “What is he?” He should have written a story ending with “a warm and refreshed hope.” Both the mother and father, the letter writer asserted, needed to implant in their son the idea that he is simply a person and not “awaken national patriotism.”<sup>342</sup> The son will in turn preach universal values. This second letter revealed a concern regarding the tensions rank-in-file socialists might be facing, especially socialist women. Kobrin's duty was to relieve doubt, not revive it.

Kobrin responded with a “Second Page” of the socialist mother's diary.<sup>343</sup> He wrote the entry with no pretense of having not read the published letters (he quotes directly from them in fact). Kobrin's socialist mother begins her response by admitting her jealousy. She is jealous of

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<sup>342</sup> Gertrud Philips (possibly Gertrude Phillips) in “Shtimen fun folk: virklikhe sotsyalistishe muters.”

<sup>343</sup> “A tsveyte bletel.”

the mothers who are *ibergangs-menshen* and receive so much “*yontevdikes*” from their socialism. Directly responding to the first letter, Kobrin’s socialist mother invokes Adolph, her husband, to deflect the claim she should simply adopt the signs of a pious woman and become a “bubbe.” Adolph would defend her because she is only twenty-four years old, hardly a “bubbe.” She has, in fact, taken on all signs of a fashionable, modern woman. Why should she read a *korbn-minkhe* when she has “an *Abend blat*, an *Arbeter tsaytung*, and many, many good newspapers, journals, and books in the Russian, German, and English languages?!...” Adolph would also counter that his wife’s critics do not know her lack of piety. The socialist mother simply wants to be able to pose questions about one’s distance from Jewishness while remaining a respectable socialist. She is “observing the surrounding darkness with open eyes” and has “a head that thinks, that reflects, that analyzes.” She likewise has “a heart that beats with ardent, zealous love for [her] child.” Does her radicalism mean she cannot, “at the same time, . . . have doubts”? Critical voices, she admits, will say, “No, not strong enough!”<sup>344</sup>

The socialist mother also used socialist thought against itself. In the “Second Page,” Kobrin depicted his mother as a socialist who grasps the “social question . . . no worse than the average socialist.” She believes, therefore, in the power of context, the impact of material circumstances; she “knows the individual’s effect on circumstances is like a small stream’s effect on the wide, large, deep sea! . . .”<sup>345</sup> She cannot keep Ferdinand “bound to her side”<sup>346</sup>; he will grow up alongside Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish children. There will be many similar influences on the street and in school. She cannot be sure Ferdinand will end up on intended, radical shores. He may end up lost, “like a tiny twig broken off of a tree.” This thought “tortures”

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid. Lit., *tsugebunden tsu-zikh*.

her. The socialist mother is, again like Anna, betwixt and between. “I can’t go back to the past with my darling little Ferdinand,” she confesses, “because the perpetual darkness, the terrible darkness of Egypt and the spiritual cold that rules there would certainly suffocate me and my child....”<sup>347</sup> The past is a step backward, into darkness and cold. The present is cold too, and their son’s future looks bleak.<sup>348</sup> Kobrin’s “Second Page” only extended the feelings of displacement.

Controversial stories published in the *Abend blat* did not diminish the internationalist fervor of many socialist ideologues, but they revealed growing questions surrounding the prevailing antireligion. The stage was set for full-throated debates about the relationship between radical politics and religion. In the meantime, the SLP’s Yiddish press underwent another series of transformations. By July 1899, Faygenboym and Krants, the *Abend blat*’s leading figures, departed during another party split. Together, they attempted a new socialist daily. When it failed, they found positions at conservative Yiddish newspapers (Krants: *Yidishe velt*; Faygenboym: *Morgn-zhurnal*).<sup>349</sup> Krants eventually edited the *Tsukunft* for a time while Faygenboym, also after a stint as editor of the *Tsukunft*, joined the *Forverts*’ staff. The *Abend blat* stumbled onward, but its run ended in 1902. Moving forward, the most popular radical Yiddish newspapers supported specific parties, most especially the Socialist Party (est. 1901),

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid. Lit., *eybige finsternish* (*eybike fintsternish*); and lit., *der shrekliker egyptisher khoyshekh un di gaystige kelt*.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid. Referring to the second letter, Kobrin’s socialist mother turned aside the notion she was “too pessimistic.” The socialist mother asked, “What does she have to fear from my pessimism?” Her questions, she responds, should not harm the person “whose socialism doesn’t hang by a thread” For the person whose socialism does, in fact, hang by a thread, the socialist mother expects they are already in a position where the “smallest breeze” would change their course. Krants published one more response to Kobrin’s story, but it largely repeated the critiques of the first two.

<sup>349</sup> Y. Khaykin, *Yidishe bleter in amerike* (New York: M. Shklarsky, 1946), 108; Fornberg, “B. Faygenboym, der ‘khosid’ fun der bavegung.”

but they were no longer party organs, and these new norms shaped the conversation surrounding freethought and religion.<sup>350</sup>

### **Acculturation, Tolerance, and the American Yiddish Press (1900-1902)**

The *Forverts*, as previously mentioned, featured radicals with diverse positions on Jewish issues. This was true about religion as well. Scholars and popular writers have often credited Cahan's return as editor in March 1902 with the daily adopting a tolerant tone. Irving Howe, for instance, wrote that it was Cahan who "began to curb the excesses of the Yiddish secularists."<sup>351</sup> This interpretation accepts Cahan's personal narrative regarding editorial policies in place before his return. Cahan undoubtedly stressed tolerance, and did so more vocally than most, but his impact was less revolutionary than he remembered or depicted.<sup>352</sup> Under the influence of Lesin and Louis Miller, the *Forverts* published varying views on religion before March 1902, albethey still radical; it also covered everything from concerns about Christian missionaries on the Lower East Side to cultural-historical articles about the Huguenots, Mormonism, and Buddhism.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> On the 1899 party split and its impacts, see Vaynshteyn, *The Jewish Unions in America*, 105–7.

<sup>351</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 528.

<sup>352</sup> Lipsky, *The Rise of Abraham Cahan*, 85. Here, Lipsky describes the change as "a slight softening of the *Forward's* fiercely antireligious stance." I believe this better describes Cahan's influence on the paper's antireligion. Ayelet Brinn found a similar tendency regarding Cahan's influence on the *Forverts's* features. Cahan's return was noteworthy, but many scholars have overestimated his ingenuity. Rather than *introducing* certain popular, journalistic practices, Cahan often *refined* practices already present at the *Forverts* or other Yiddish newspapers. See Brinn, "Miss Amerike," 59–77, esp. pp. 70–1. Implementing his editorial vision also came in fits and starts—Cahan left again in late 1902 after another dispute, only to return early the next year.

<sup>353</sup> Examples, see "Moyshe rabeyne, Yezus Kristus un Karl Marks," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 3, 1897; "Adam a mensch.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 18, 1897; "Burzshuazne gezettse.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 18, 1897; "Eynige bemerkungen vegen yudzhin debs.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Oct. 17, 1897; "'Dayn got iz mayn got!'," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 9, 1897; L. Miller, "Di todes-shtrafe.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 5, 1897; "Oys liebe tsu a kristin," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 9, 1897; Lesin, "In der land fun vunder un legenden," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 16, 1898; "Der kristenthum in mitel-alter.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 13, 1898; Lesin, "Dos mitel alter.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 20, 1898; Lesin, "Di hugenoten.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 6, 1898; "Di hugenoten.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 13, 1898; A. Kaspe, "Di kristlikhe religyon.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 3, 1898; Yoysef Petrikovski, "Yidishe mithologye," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 12, 1898; "Misyonern shnayden fleysh fun yidishe kinder," *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 24, 1899; "Gelebt mit a khezshbm, geshtorben ohn vidoy," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 22, 1899; Gedanken fun Ingersoll," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Aug. 28, 1899; "Di religyon fun di mormonen.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 14, 1899; L., "Di ershte mormonen.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 15, 1899; S. Elizovits, "Kristmas.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 23, 1899; "Khasidizmus," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 20, 1900; "Prof. Herron

When diversely situated radicals wrote about religion in the *Forverts*, they increasingly framed their particular perspectives vis-à-vis those of other freethinkers. An interesting contrast, for example, can be seen in a series of articles by radical writers Avrom-Yankev Netter (1842-1918) and Zisl Kornblit (1872-1928), both entitled “The Jewish Religion” and published a little over six months apart between mid 1900 and early 1901. Netter, a veteran radical who arrived in the United States in 1882, was a founding member of the *Forverts*. He was also a fiercely antireligious propagandist; on matters of religion, he often reflected the tone taken by anarchist notables, with whom he had personal and literary connections.<sup>354</sup> In early July 1900, Netter began his “Jewish Religion” article series by outlining his overarching view of religion. He wrote: “From the day the human acquired self-consciousness... religion began to ruin him and make his life miserable.”<sup>355</sup> “There are even many so-called freethinkers,” he continued, “who dispute this claim. They say: as much bad as religion brought, it brought much more good for humanity.” These “so-called freethinkers,” Netter asserted, have adopted an erroneous, unscientific perspective on religion.<sup>356</sup> Netter may have had in mind precisely the view Kornblit

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iber sotsyalizmus un religyon,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 22, 1900; “Eyn un oys.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 30, 1900; “Religyon in shuhlen.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 20, 1900.

<sup>354</sup> Reyzen, “Netter, Y. [A.M.?,]” *Leksikon*, vol. 2: 584–5.

<sup>355</sup> The language Netter used was masculine.

<sup>356</sup> “Di yidishe religyon,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 7, 1900. Netter’s initials, A.Y.N., were not attached to this first article, but an advertisement published the day before, and subsequent articles in the series, provided his initials. See the front-page advertisement about the series: *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 6, 1900. Also see A.Y.N., “Yisroel v’orayta v’kudsha brikh hu khad hu.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 14, 1900; A.Y.N., “Yisroel v’orayta v’kudsha brikh hu khad hu.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 21, 1900; A.Y.N., “Yisroel v’orayta v’kudsha brikh hu khad hu.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 28, 1900; A.Y.N., “Der got fun Avrom fun Yitskhok un fun Yankev.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Aug. 4, 1900; “Erste bekantshaft fun got mit Avrom.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Aug. 11, 1900; “Ershte bekantshaft fun got mit Avrom,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Aug. 18, 1900; A.Y.N., “Pamalye shel mayle.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 1, 1900; A.Y.N., “Pamalye shel mayle.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 8, 1900; A.Y.N., “Di roles fun YHWH un eloyhim,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 15, 1900; “Di roles fun ‘YHWH’ un ‘eloyhim’,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 22, 1900; “Got redt mit Avrom,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 22, 1900; “Malakhei elyon,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Oct. 13, 1900; “Tshuve,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Oct. 13, 1900; A.Y.N., “Shaylus v’tshuvus,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Oct. 27, 1900. The microfilm is, unfortunately, missing several likely articles in the series.

pushed in the *Forverts* in February 1901.<sup>357</sup> Kornblit, opposing the view of religion adopted by “freethinking fanatics,” began his two-part series by saying, “Religion was not invented by swindlers ‘in order to oppress and exploit the people,’ as many who write and speak about religion aren’t ashamed to say. The source of religion is the human soul, and its first spring is clear as crystal.” Kornblit’s articles were still strongly anticlerical and welcomed religion’s supposedly inevitable end, but the contrasting tones taken by Netter and Kornblit were noticeable.<sup>358</sup>

Another fascinating piece appeared less than a week after Kornblit’s. Penned by Shmuel Peskin (1871-1939), a noted Revisionist Marxist, the article showed radical readers how modernity’s pressures were transforming religion, not making it disappear. *Forverts* readers, Peskin assumed, had been raised in traditional Jewish contexts where a strict dichotomy between piety and secularity prevailed. “We were convinced,” he summarized, “that to become a socialist or an intellectual we must first give up our old faith.” Jewish socialists applied this dichotomous logic to non-Jews, too—they thought nobody could be both religious and radical.<sup>359</sup> Considering this position erroneous, Peskin argued that context determined religion’s relationship to secularizing trends. To prove his case, he compared atheism throughout most of Europe and

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<sup>357</sup> The criticisms, see Z. Kornblit, “Di yidishe religyon II. Der talmud.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY) February 5, 1901; also see idem, “Di yidishe religyon\* I. Toyre moyshe.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), February 4, 1901.

<sup>358</sup> Idem, “Di yidishe religyon\* I.” Krants, like Kornblit and Peskin (below), addressed dual audiences in his 1901 book *Yetsies-mitsraim*, a “purely scientific investigation” (i.e., neutral) of the Exodus from Egypt. *Yetsies-mitsraim* undoubtedly contained arguments challenging conventional interpretations of Jewish texts. But, Krants claimed, “the most pious Jews can be satisfied with it because, in the most important points, it oddly agrees with the Bible about the facts themselves—that Jews were in Egypt at a certain time and escaped from there by force.” So, he also wrote, “As it pertains to freethinkers,” they too could “respect the historical part of the Bible.” Krants was still antireligious, especially anticlerical, but *Yetsies-mitsraim* framed the scientific study of religion as relevant for the pious and impious alike. See Ph. Krants, *Yetsies-mitsraim* (New York: International Library Publishing Co., 1901), 11–12.

<sup>359</sup> Sh. Peskin, “Sotsyalismus un religyon.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 10, 1901. On Peskin, see Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 4: 467; idem, “Dr. Sh. Peskin,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 25, 1939; “Genose Dr. Sh. Peskin,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 24, 1939. Also see Sh. Peskin, “Ken men kinder ertsihen ohn religyon?,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 13, 1901. On Peskin’s earlier work, see Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” 352.

atheism in the United States and England. Atheism was strong, he claimed, in countries dominated by one church, where religious diversity was comparatively lower, as in Germany, France, and Russia. In the United States and England, by contrast, widespread religious diversity weakened atheism—people had more religious options to select. The United States and England had their famous freethinkers, like Ingersoll and Charles Bradlaugh, respectively, but attempts to spread atheism were futile. Peskin did not fully articulate the apparent particularity of American piety, but he provided a hint—established religions in diverse, decentralized contexts could more readily adapt to modernity’s norms than in tightly controlled, centralized contexts.<sup>360</sup>

Peskin’s main evidence, and likely what prompted the article, came from *The Outlook*, a New York-based weekly where the famed Reverend Lyman Abbott was editor. Quoting at length from *The Outlook*, Peskin showed how the paper both affirmed religion’s relevance in modern times and welcomed advances in science, philosophy, and biblical criticism. American Christianity, or at least this expression of it, was proof “Religion isn’t always what we called religion in our childhood years, what we later rejected as a collection of superstitious tales.” *The Outlook* was admittedly not published for the masses, but it still indicated religion could be remade in a modern, intellectual mode, what Peskin called “a philosophical system.” If religion could adapt in this manner, he wondered if there might someday be “a unification of philosophy and religion into one broad worldview, a worldview that will try to explain those questions which for centuries religion and science approached from two different perspectives.”<sup>361</sup>

The *Forverts* also featured a fictional piece about freethinkers during these years. Its author was Zalmon Libin, the pen name of Yisroel-Zalmen Hurwitz (1872-1955). Born to a poor

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<sup>360</sup> Peskin, “Sotsyalizmus un religyon.”

<sup>361</sup> Ibid. For another interesting article see Morris Rosenfeld, “Dos yudenthum amol un haynt,” *Yidische velt* (New York, NY), Jul. 3, 1902.

family in Gorki, Hurwitz received some formal, secular education around age thirteen. The family's breadwinner after his father's death, he fled to London in 1892 to avoid conscription. Approximately seven months later, Hurwitz left for New York, where he struggled to find his footing upon arrival. An unbending radical, Hurwitz, as Libin, liked to say he discovered his muse in the midst of hard labor.<sup>362</sup> In words of the Anglo-American journalist Hutchins Hapgood, "Libin, remembering his sweat-shop days, does not like a 'boss,' and is under the constant necessity of relieving his feelings by his work."<sup>363</sup> Cahan recruited him to contribute regularly to the *Arbeter tsaytung* and *Abend blat*, and his short stories, full of "good-natured humor and tragicomic style," became his claim to fame.<sup>364</sup> Cahan later recalled Libin as "the most talented writer of Yiddish sketches and short stories in America," while veteran Yiddish journalist Yoyel Entin labeled him "the court storyteller of the Jewish 'comrades'."<sup>365</sup> Libin was still writing stories for the *Abend blat* in the late 1890s, but his work was also appearing in the *Forverts*.<sup>366</sup>

In December 1901, Libin published a compelling story about a family of freethinkers, entitled "The Mother's Jahrzeit."<sup>367</sup> The story centers on the Ginzburgs, whose first child died

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<sup>362</sup> Reyzen, "Libin, Z.," *Leksikon*, vol. 2: 113–6. Over the coming decades, several publishers printed collections of his stories. See Z. Libin, *Geklibene skitsen* (1902); idem, *Z. Libin's geklibene skitsen* (New York: The International Library Publishing Company, 1910); idem, *Geklibene shriften* (1912); idem, *Gezamelte verk* (1915); idem, *Dertsehlungen, skitsen un felietonen* (New York: Veker, 1934). For a longer work by Libin, see idem, *Di gebrokhene hertser* (Warsaw: Ferlag Di "Yudishe Bihne," 1912). For later letters from readers and manuscripts, see YIVO Archives, Solomon Libin Papers, RG 1201.

<sup>363</sup> Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 203. For more on Libin, see Solomon Simon, *Kinder yorn fun yidishe shrayber* (New York: Farlag Matones, 1953), 145–61; B. Vladek, "Z. Libin," in *B. Vladek in leben un shafen*, ed. Ephim Jeshurin (New York: Forverts Association, 1935 [piece dated May 1915, from *Tsukunft*]); Bal-Makhshoves, "Z. Libin," in *Shriften*, 122–6. Analysis in English, see "Zalmon Libin" in Rogoff, *Nine Yiddish Writers*, 61–74; and Charles Rice, "Libin, A New Interpreter of East Side Life.," *The Atlantic Monthly* (January 1903), 254–60.

<sup>364</sup> Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 3: 371–2, and 468.

<sup>365</sup> Yoyel Entin, "Di naye yidishe dertsiung (der onheyb fun di yidishe folks-shuln)," in *Yidish-natsyonaler arbeter-farband, 1910-1946* (New York: General-Ekzekutive fun Yidish-Natsyonaln Arbeter-Farband, 1946), 159; Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 4: 468–9.

<sup>366</sup> See, for example, Z. Libin, "Familiye tsore," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 3, 1899.

<sup>367</sup> Z. Libin, "Yohrtsayt nokh der muter" (1901).

of a lung infection at two years and three months. They suffered immensely until bringing another child into the world, Deborah, or “Dorele” for short. Deborah was also the name of Mr. Ginzburg’s deceased mother. At this point, the narrator describes the Ginzburgs as “freethinkers, in the full sense of the word,” which means they did not name their daughter “Deborah” in accordance with the common Jewish custom of naming a child after a deceased relative. They wanted nothing to do with the “superstition” the custom represented.<sup>368</sup>

The newborn daughter brings the couple great joy, but they act in light of past tragedy. A question harasses them: What will happen when their child turns two and three months, the age when their first child passed? The date arrives, and the parents’ nightmares are realized—Dorele has a lung infection. Here, the narrator reiterates both father and mother believed themselves distant from past superstitions: “If you’d have told the Ginzburgs they aren’t totally free from superstitions, that belief in some kind of an incomprehensible, higher power also has its roots in their hearts,... they would have, from deep down in their hearts, laughed aloud at you, and their laughter would be quite serious.” Dorele’s illness changes them. It begins with Mrs. Ginzburg noting the specific illness and its timeline (same infection, same age) and wondering if something beyond the physical world is playing a role. Mr. Ginzburg assures her it’s “a simple, blind coming together of circumstances” and demands she avoid such “nonsense.” Dorele’s condition worsens, and she arrives on death’s doorstep. As Libin describes the suffering couple, “they don’t cry, they can’t cry, because they’re already more dead than alive.”<sup>369</sup>

Mr. Ginzburg’s mind is awash with recollections of death, especially those of their first child, his father, and his mother. While pondering, he remembers his mother’s death occurred on a “summer morning... like today.” The date, in fact, is May 1, the anniversary of his mother’s

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

death. Having been awake all night, Mr. Ginzburg eventually falls asleep. He sees his mother in a dream as she sits beside Dorele. “Mama,” he begs, “save my child.” As he weeps, his mother responds, “Dearest Yisroel, I brought a remedy for your child, for my name.” She soon follows with a question, accompanied by a reproachful look, “Why don’t you light a *yahrzeit* candle for me?” He can only respond, “Mama, take pity, save my child.” She affirms the child will remain alive, “but you have to light a *yahrzeit* candle for me.” After Mr. Ginzburg petitions once again, his mother repeats the demand: “Light a *yahrzeit* candle... be quick... be quick...” Mr. Ginzburg awakens to the sound of his wife saying, “Our child’s dead! Go get the doctor.” When the doctor enters the room, he informs them that the “point of crisis” has arrived (either life or death). Some medicine administered, they await Dorele’s fate. Mr. Ginzburg, moving “like a shadow,” heads to a corner table and lights a lamp. His wife asks what he is doing. He responds, “Nothing... *yahrzeit*... for my mother.” The doctor immediately declares, “Your child will live.” The couple weeps for joy. Libin ended with the line, “And the fire in the lamp began to burn brighter.”<sup>370</sup>

Libin’s “The Mother’s *Yahrzeit*” raises many questions: Did so-called “superstitions” play a role in the death of their first child? What actually saved Dorele’s life, the medicine or the ritual? Did the Ginzburgs become observant in some sense? Answering these questions was not the story’s point. Libin, rather, used suffering and death to collapse presumed boundaries between ardent freethinkers and sacred matters.<sup>371</sup> The line—“If you’d have told the Ginzburgs they aren’t totally free from superstitions... [they would have] laughed aloud at you”—portends the eventual collapse of presumed boundaries. Before 1903, Libin’s depiction of freethinkers primarily centered on freethinker inconsistencies, both humorous and serious. Regardless,

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Libin, “Shmertslike gedanken” (1902); idem, “Shmertslike gedanken,” in *Gezamelte verk*, vol. 4: 145–9; idem, “Dzheni’s ayndruksfoler kholem,” 15–19.

Libin's "The Mother's Yahrzeit" showed how radical fiction writers at the *Forverts* did not necessarily pen stories about religion with mockery in mind.

Cahan extended the *Forverts'* tolerance when he became editor in March 1902. The most succinct example can be seen in a short quip that appeared right after he took the reins. Stressing a romantic view of religion, it read:

Three chapters in the life of a thinking *apikoyres*: 1) when he passes a *shul* and gnashes his teeth. 2) when he passes a *shul* and smiles. 3) when he passes a *shul* and, though wanting to sigh because the world is still so ignorant, simultaneously respects the moments when people stand together engrossed in something that has nothing to do with life's daily filth.<sup>372</sup>

There was a time, in other words, when freethinkers raged against religion and religious authorities, but that turned into a passing smile. A passing smile, however, became a respect for religious affections. Perhaps more importantly, the quip's author indicated it was the transformation of "a thinking *apikoyres*," a subtle way of distinguishing between reasonable freethinkers and fanatic freethinkers. Many freethinking radicals had long expressed their understanding of religious affections, but the *Forverts'* quip stressed a romanticized respect for religious affections.

Cahan more comprehensively outlined his editorial policies less than a week later.<sup>373</sup> In a piece entitled "Have Respect for Another's Honest Opinions," Cahan spoke directly to readers who did not have "free sensibilities." He rhetorically asked these readers if they were more

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<sup>372</sup> "Eyegene un fremde.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 16, 1902. Irving Howe translates this same quote in *World of Our Fathers*, 528–9. [I have used his translation as the basis of my own, as I find it fairly accurate while also lacking at certain points] Lipsky clearly borrowed this quote from Howe without citing it. See Lipsky, *The Rise of Abraham Cahan*, 85.

<sup>373</sup> Polland, "'May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?'," 379.

inclined to like religious fakers or honest nonbelievers. Answering the query, he wrote, “There can’t be any question you’ll like the more honest *apikoyres* more than the disguised hypocrite.” In his reasoning as to *why*, Cahan did not rely on socialist ideas about tolerance, i.e., “religion is private,” but on the language of acculturation—Immigrant Jews, pious and impious, had adopted America’s tolerant norms. They tolerated sincerely held opinions, not humbuggery. The United States taught the Jewish immigrant “to have respect for every opinion, even when it is against your opinions—if only this ‘strange’ opinion is honestly believed, and thus not like the zeal of the disguised hypocrite.”<sup>374</sup> Similarly, freethinking socialist had, Cahan argued, undergone a maturation—they had become more tolerant by simply growing used to their socialism. For these reasons, the *Forverts* would not be shy about either its freethought or its radicalism, but it would simultaneously mirror the United States’ tolerant ethos. Hopefully, Cahan declared, “whether you’re pious or not, socialist or not, in the *Forverts* you can live well, and have the greatest respect for one another.”<sup>375</sup> Two and a half decades later, Cahan recalled the reasoning behind this editorial policy: “We were not believers and the *Forverts* naturally had an anti-religious character, but a large part of the Jewish working population was religious, and a workers’ paper, I believed, must not be limited to one class of workers, the freethinkers.”<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> “Hot respekt tsu dem anderen’s ehrlikhe meynung,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 21, 1902. A pro-Bundist piece published the same day: A. Lesin, “Di emes’e yidishe shtolts,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 21, 1902.

<sup>375</sup> “Hot respekt tsu dem anderen’s ehrlikhe meynung.” [Here, translation comes from Polland, “May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?,” 380] Polland also cites the following secondary sources on the shift: Rischin, *Promised City*, 126, 160; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 528–91; Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community*, 18; see Polland, ““May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?,” 379 n.11.

<sup>376</sup> Qtd. in Polland, ““May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?,” 381. [Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 4: 279] Also see Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 528.

Others, like Morris Rosenfeld, responded in similar ways. See his attempt to create a quarterly journal called *Der pinkes* (“The Register”). See Yekhezkel Lifshits’ second note on a letter from Morris Rosenfeld to Prof. Leon Wiener, dated Feb. 10, 1900; letter reprinted in *Moris Rozenfelds briv*, ed. Yekhezkel Lifshits (Buenos Aires: YIVO, 1955), 103. According to Lifshits, this quote represented the publication’s “credo,” appearing in *Pinkes* 1 (Apr. 1900); quote trans. Marc Miller, appearing in Miller, “The Poetics of the Immigrant Experience,” 9.

Increasing tolerance even meant tolerating different ideas about tolerance. Work by A. Litvin was a case in point. Litvin, a pseudonym of Shmuel Hurvits (1862-1943), was a socialist with Zionist leanings who arrived on American shores in 1901. In early 1903, he took to the *Forverts* to declare the importance of adopting a milder approach to religion. He began his first article on the topic by saying, “many weakly developed people imagine religion as none other than a heavy, black cloud, a sinister power.” Such “weakly developed people” consider “the first indication of freethought [to be] fighting against religion and believers.” And so, they dive headlong into disdaining religion and the religious. Studying religion “seriously and scientifically,” however, revealed a different, nuanced perspective.<sup>377</sup> A week later, Litvin went further, arguing a freethinker could perform religious rituals if doing so eased someone’s suffering. A freethinking socialist, that is, could say *kaddish* for his deceased father if not doing so would hurt his pious mother. “The proper freethinker,” he declared, “is one who spreads freethought while not causing anyone pain.”<sup>378</sup> Although the *Forverts* was willing to publish Litvin’s piece, a footnote was added: “The editor does not agree with many ideas in this article.”<sup>379</sup>

Changes at the *Forverts* were a sign of the times. Radical periodicals historically more antireligious than the *Forverts* also became more tolerant. The Tsukunft Press Federation, which represented a range of socialist groups, resurrected the *Tsukunft* in January 1902 and supported the Socialist Party. But, unlike the *Tsukunft* of the 1890s, the monthly was no longer a party organ. In an introductory article, penned by Lesin, the Federation revealed how it intended to publish diverse radical perspectives: “[The new journal] will be a free socialist monthly in which

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<sup>377</sup> A. Litvin, “Gloyben un obergloyben,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 24, 1903.

<sup>378</sup> A. Litvin, “Sotsyalizmus un religyon,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 31, 1903.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, see the note marked \*.

all socialist directions, undisturbed and with equal rights, will be able to find their full expression. The editor... will in no way pretend to hold in his hands a monopoly on the socialist truth.”<sup>380</sup> Despite this declaration, the *Tsukunft* would cycle through a series of editors over the next decade, some more restrictive on publishing diverse views (Faygenboym and Milkh) and some more inclusive (Lesin and Morris Vintshevsky).<sup>381</sup> Regardless, the Federation never turned the clock back to the more doctrinaire days of the 1890s.<sup>382</sup> In similar fashion, when Shoel Yanovsky revived the *Fraye arbeter shtime* in 1899, he rejected “propaganda by the deed” (propagandistic violence) and argued against rabidly antireligious agitation.<sup>383</sup> The *Fraye arbeter shtime* was still strongly antireligious. As a case in point, regular contributor Mikhl Kohn called religion “humanity’s greatest curse” and mocked the Socialist Party for its “religion is private” position.<sup>384</sup> And yet, the revived weekly no longer advocated Yom Kippur balls. In 1902, it advised readers, “Don’t have any balls, but don’t suddenly become pious either.” It would be better if anarchists just ignore Yom Kippur altogether. “Ah,” an editor exclaimed, “if only each freethinker would quietly go about his ordinary business... how much closer we would be to our goal.”<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Qtd. in Cassedy, introduction to *Building the Future*, 14. [A. Lesin, “Unzer bevegung un unzer prese,” *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1902): 1–10]

<sup>381</sup> “Montage of photographs of seven editors of ‘Zukunft’ from 1892 through 1909” (1911), YIVO Archives, Photographs of Personalities, RG 121. Editorial turnover caused some confusion, in fact. See “Fun der redaktsyon.,” *Tsukunft* (May 1903): 15.

<sup>382</sup> Cassedy, *Building the Future*, 14–15. Also see the *Tsukunft*’s response to Kishinev in Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 480.

<sup>383</sup> Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 33–5.

<sup>384</sup> Full quote from Kohn, “Let’s strive to purify modern culture of humanity’s greatest curse—religion with its church, its ritual, its popes and priests, its superstition and fanaticism, its bloody inquisitions and fiery hells.” See Mikhl Kohn, “Religyon un visenshaft.,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Oct. 20, 1899. An example of its critique of the “religion is private” stance, see M. Koh., ““Religyon iz a privat zakh’.,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Sep. 20, 1901. Also see “Der yid un zayn religyon,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Oct. 6, 1906.

<sup>385</sup> “Yomimneraim,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Sep. 19, 1902. [Here, translation comes from Tcherikower, *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, 266]

There was evidence outside the Yiddish press, too. As previously stated, the Arbeter Ring permitted religiously inclined Jews to become members, but its early radical culture was uninviting to violations of freethinking norms.<sup>386</sup> The reigning antireligion during this period may not have negatively impacted the organization. “There were,” Yiddish journalist A.Sh. Zaks claimed, “enough outspoken freethinkers, socialists and anarchists, on the Jewish street who served as a reservoir for the Arbeter Ring.”<sup>387</sup> Its leadership eventually sought to expand the Arbeter Ring’s influence, and it reorganized into a national order. Faygenboym, the “100% freethinker,” was its first general secretary, but he recognized the need for tolerance in light of the factional disputes that rocked socialism in the late 1890s.<sup>388</sup> The reorganized Arbeter Ring communicated its call for membership to freethinkers and observant Jews alike (even Christians):

Every member or branch may have whatever religious or philosophical conviction he wants. They may be pious Jews, pious Christians, freethinkers, atheists—as long as they do not wish to make use of the organization for their personal convictions, as long as they respect freedom of thought, and do not endeavor to harm the struggling working class, they are welcome as friends and members.<sup>389</sup>

The call frustrated many founding members, who, again in Zaks’ words, “admittedly frowned upon such ‘compromises’.”<sup>390</sup> But the decision reflected the diverse, decentralized American context. Socialist of all stripes recognized many active socialists had observant friends and family, and sometimes these relationships pressed freethinking socialists into religious activities.

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<sup>386</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 183. Also see Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 213–4; Polland, “‘May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?’,” 394 n.70.

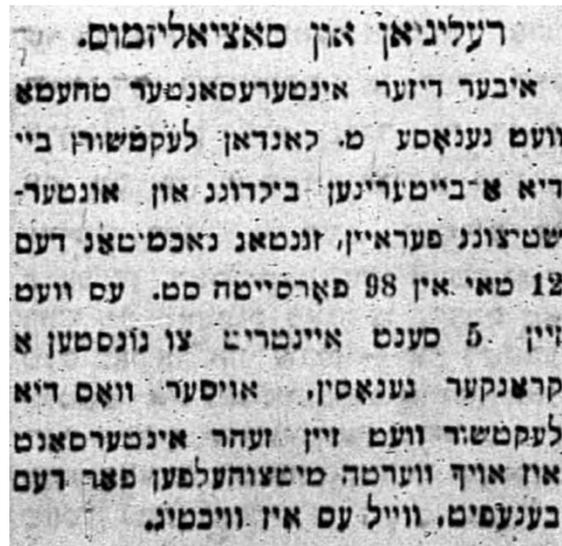
<sup>387</sup> Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 291–2.

<sup>388</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 184. Also see Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 137. On this page, Zaks writes that “the plan of the new organization had to have a broader, more tolerant platform.”

<sup>389</sup> Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 135.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

As a *Tsukunft* contributor said in 1904, “It often happens that we encounter people who are socialistically inclined, and at the same time you may see them attending *slikhus* (prayers for forgiveness), fasting on Yom Kippur, etc.”<sup>391</sup> [Figure 2.1]



[Figure 2.1]

Advertisement: “Religion and Socialism” [*Forverts*, May 12, 1901; public domain]

Note: The socialist Yiddish press constantly advertised lectures on the relationship between religion and socialism, showing how labor leaders and/or everyday Jewish workers found the topic relevant. The lecture advertised here was delivered by Meyer London (1871-1926), a Jewish immigrant from Russia and socialist politician representing the Lower East Side.

<sup>391</sup> Qtd. in Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 60.

### Antisemitism, Jewishness, and Religion after Kishinev (1903)

Events in Europe had a dramatic influence on Jewish immigrant life and its radical intelligentsia. In early April 1903, a pogrom in the Bessarabian city of Kishinev captured global attention and led to mass protests in the United States. It also accelerated immigration to the United States, with almost 80,000 Jews arriving on American shores in 1904. The barbarities, instigated by the local press and involving Russian authorities, shook the confidence of many staunch internationalists and cosmopolitans. While scholars have already detailed Kishinev's impact on Jewish socialists and Jewish anarchists, its impact on discussions surrounding freethought has not been fully addressed.<sup>392</sup> With Kishinev sparking wide-ranging reevaluations of the radicalism-Jewishness nexus, Jewish radicals revisited debates about how they should, as freethinkers, relate to Jewish religious tradition.

Immediately after Kishinev, the *Forverts* was alight with editorials about its implications. Louis Miller argued that Jewish socialists needed to concern themselves with “the advance and progress of the Jewish people,”<sup>393</sup> while Lesin upheld the Bund as a model of Jewish political action *for Jews*.<sup>394</sup> Cahan was consequently forced to defend the *Forverts* (and himself) against staunch internationalists, who accused him and his paper of being “too Jewish.”<sup>395</sup> Cahan argued it was only natural that a Jewish socialist be *particularly* affected by Jewish suffering. The pogromists were, after all, attacking people who had “Jewish blood” and a “Jewish face,” like Cahan himself, his family, his *landslayt*, and his readership. He instead emphasized a contrast

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<sup>392</sup> Nora, “The Influence of the Bund on the Jewish Socialist Movement in America,” 52.

<sup>393</sup> Qtd. Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 477. [M. “Di flikht fun yidishe sotsyalistn in de itstike mehume,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 13, 1903]

<sup>394</sup> Qtd. Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 479. [Lesin, “Di pedler fun klal-yisroel verter,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 9, 1903]

<sup>395</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Gefihl un gefillekhts,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 26, 1903. In English, the title is “Feeling and Filling” (meaning, “Feeling and Stuffiness”). Whether one was “a socialist, anarchist, believer, [or] *apikoyres*,” Kishinev’s pain was unavoidable. Also see idem, “Kishinev! Kishinev!,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 19, 1903; idem, “Yidn-frayndshaft: tsienistische un sotsyalistische,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Aug. 29, 1903.

between two kinds of socialists: the ideal socialist, who mixes principles with feeling, and the “stuffy socialists,” who lacked both “a free mind” and “a warm heart.” Or, as Cahan succinctly summarized, “socialism of feeling alone isn’t useful, but socialism of the head is a thousand times worse.”<sup>396</sup>

In early June 1903, Peskin offered some of the most substantive commentary in the *Forverts*. He declared that Kishinev, among other recent, high-profile instances of antisemitism, “made irrelevant the slogan, which used to appear as a banner at conventions: ‘We are Yiddish-speaking socialists rather than Jewish socialists’.”<sup>397</sup> Yiddish-speaking socialists the world over needed to shift more attention to *Jewish* interests, he thought. Peskin did not consider these particularistic sentiments as exceptional in the wider socialist world. A French socialist is not, after all, called “a French-speaking socialist,” and French socialists imagine their children being raised with a knowledge of French history, French music, and French traditions. So, he asked, “Why then should we, Jewish socialists, always subscribe to our Jewishness [*yidishkeyt*] as only a temporary and passing thing? Why shouldn’t our Jewish belonging [lit. *Yudenthum* (*Yidntum*)] be as dear to us as the Frenchman’s nationality is to him?” Peskin was not advocating a religious

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<sup>396</sup> Cahan, “Gefihl un gefillekhts.” An unfeeling socialist had no place under socialism’s “holy flag,” he declared. He seemed to conclude that feeling a particular Jewish anguish did not contradict feeling a universal anguish. Lesin also defended reactionary responses, reportedly saying, “many socialists say we are too hysterical about Kishinev, since it was not an event that involved class-conscious workers or labor struggle.” He called these socialists “Pharisees” for not recognizing “these are our people, our blood and our pain.” See Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 126.

On Kishinev’s importance, see Dan Laor, “Kishinev Revisited: A Place in Jewish Historical Memory,” *Prooftexts* 25, no. 1–2 (2005): 30–8; Alan Mintz, “Kishinev and the Twentieth Century: Introduction,” *Prooftexts* 25, no. 1–2 (2005): 1–7; Alexandra Wright, “‘On the Slaughter’: Bialik Confronts God After Kishinev, 1903,” *European Judaism* 34, no. 1 (2001): 85–93; Philip Ernest Schoenberg, “The American Reaction to the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1974): 262–83; Monty Noam Penkower, “The Kishinev Pogrom of 1903: A Turning Point in Jewish History,” *Modern Judaism* 24, Iss. 3 (2004): 187–225; Steven J. Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2018).

<sup>397</sup> Sh.P., “Vi fun yidish-shprekhende sotsyalistn,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 9, 1903; also see Sh.P., “Muzen mir zayn yiden, oder mir kenen oykh velen blayben yiden?,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 12, 1903. Also see Estraikh, *Transatlantic Russian Jewishness*, 40; also see Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 478. For Peskin’s earlier writing, see “Di yudn-frage,” *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1897), 14.

turn, but a Jewish distinctiveness amendable to “progressive freethinkers.” His argument, in other words, relied on secular notions of *yidishkeit*.<sup>398</sup>

Other radical periodicals were similarly ablaze with commentary about Kishinev’s implications. The *Tsukunft*, now with Faygenboym and Krants as editors (1903 and 1904 respectively), featured articles by nationalists and veteran cosmopolitans alike.<sup>399</sup> On the one hand, Krants excoriated nationalist trends among once proud Yiddish-speaking socialists. “The ‘Jewish socialists,’” he wrote, “are quite a new species of humanity, which suddenly emerged after the Kishinev massacre.” It was the post-Kishinev Jewish socialists, he continued, who “began to evoke an undefined ‘Jewish feeling,’ began to praise Jewish characteristics as the best and the finest, and began proclaiming that Jewish socialists must be ‘first and foremost,’ Jews.”<sup>400</sup> On the other hand, Frumin, a Bundist writing from Switzerland whose real name was Y. Blumshteyn, declared that the Jewish nation had “the same right to exist as all other nations.” “‘National’ and ‘international’ are not opposites,” he continued, “but two concepts which complement each other.”<sup>401</sup> The *Tsukunft* continued publishing Frumin’s pro-Bundist articles

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<sup>398</sup> Sh.P., “Muzen mir zayn yiden, oder mir kenen oykh velen blayben yiden?”

<sup>399</sup> See Yankev Milkh, “Vos iz tsu tohn?,” *Tsukunft* (Jun. 1903): 5–9; K. Frumin, “Der ‘Bund’ un zayne gegner.,” *Tsukunft* (Jun. 1903): 9–17; “Redaktsyonele notitsen.,” *Tsukunft* (Jun. 1903): 50–1; K. Frumin, “Der ‘Bund’ un zayne gegner.,” *Tsukunft* (Jul. 1903): 13–19; “Yidishe natsyonale frage.,” *Tsukunft* (Sep. 1903): 43–6; K. Frumin, “Der ‘Bund’ un zayne gegner.,” *Tsukunft* (Jun. 1903): 9–17; Dr. Karl Fornberg, “Natsyonalizmus oder sotsyalizmus.” *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1903): 28–37; K. Frumin, “Der ‘Bund’ un zayne gegner.,” *Tsukunft* (Nov. 1903): 12–15; B. Faygenboym, “Tsu der debate iber natsyonalizmus oder sotsyalizmus.,” *Tsukunft* (Nov. 1903): 16–19; “Der Bund un zayne gegner.,” *Tsukunft* (Dec. 1903): 15–21; Aronson, “Nokh a kritiker fun Bund.,” *Tsukunft* (Sep. 1904): 30–5; Aronson, “Nokh a kritiker fun Bund.,” *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1904): 39–46; Ph. Krants, “Kishinev, pogromen, un der ‘Bund’ .,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1904): 2–7; Dr. Karl Fornberg, “Di natsyonale frage.,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1904): 18–21; K. Frumin, “Natsyonal oder natsyonalistish?,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1904): 45–7; Dr. Karl Fornberg, “Natsyonalitet un visenshaft.,” *Tsukunft* (Mar. 1904): 11–14; Yankev Milkh, “A kurtser entfer oyf a langen artikel,” *Tsukunft* (Nov. 1904): 48–50; Dr. M—N., “Shtaat oder nit shtaat.,” *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1905): 23–9; Ph. Krants, “Ikh oder mir.,” *Tsukunft* (Nov. 1905): 25–33; “Di revolutsyon un di pogromen in rusland.,” *Tsukunft* (Dec. 1905): 1; Dr. M—N., “Shtaat un frayhayt,” *Tsukunft* (Dec. 1905): 30–7.

<sup>400</sup> Qtd. in Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 59. [Ph. Krants, “Yidishe natsyonale frage,” *Tsukunft* (Sept. 1903): 45]

<sup>401</sup> K. Frumin, “Natsyonal oder natsyonalistish?,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1904): 46. In true socialist fashion, Frumin also affirmed, “my nation is no better and no worse... than all other nations.” Also see Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 61.

throughout 1903 and 1904. The pogrom even changed some anarchist notables. In his memoirs, anarchist Isidore Kopeloff recalled that after Kishinev “My entire previous cosmopolitanism, internationalism, et cetera vanished with one blow, like a barrel with the bottom suddenly knocked out.”<sup>402</sup> Even the *Fraye arbeter shtime* published articles advocating nationalism by anarchist Hilel Zolotarov.<sup>403</sup> Though many anarchist intellectuals and rank-and-file anarchists did not agree, some key figures in the movement developed a warmer attitude toward Jewish distinctiveness after Kishinev.<sup>404</sup>

In Kishinev’s wake, Libin interrogated assimilationist internationalism through a two-part story published in the *Forverts* in August 1903. Aptly entitled “We are Yiddish-Speaking Socialists,” the piece featured several narrative levels.<sup>405</sup> The narrator speaks in the first person, but the primary action comes via a story relayed to the narrator, which the narrator self-consciously tries to repeat as accurately as possible. The story begins with the narrator sitting at a meeting of Yiddish-speaking socialists when a comrade, simply given the name “Goldberg,” draws the narrator’s attention to a young man seated nearby.<sup>406</sup> The narrator takes stock of the young man Goldberg identified: “I caught sight of a pair of Jewish eyes, black burning eyes, a

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<sup>402</sup> Qtd. in Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 38. [Kopeloff, *Amol in amerike*, 458] Other anarchist leaders were transformed, too. Joseph Barondes, Moyshe Kats, and Hilel Zolotarov even held a rally where, in Barondes’ words, “they all declared themselves Jewish nationalists.”

<sup>403</sup> Qtd. in Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 38. [“Serious Questions,” *FASh* (New York, NY), May 23, 1903, and “Serious Questions,” *FASh* (New York, NY), May 30, 1903] Also see Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 294.

<sup>404</sup> After Kishinev, as Michels summarized, radicals of all stripes “began to wonder if anti-Semitism was more persistent than they had recognized... [and] questioned whether commitment to the workers of the world must contradict loyalty to the Jewish people.” Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 126.

<sup>405</sup> Libin, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist” (Aug. 13). Entin noted “A Yiddish-Speaking Socialist” as a sign of where Libin stood on Yiddish-speaking socialism. See Entin, “Di naye yidishe dertsung,” 160. For a translation, see, Z. Libin, “A Yiddish-Speaking Socialist,” in *Shining and Shadow: An Anthology of Early Yiddish Stories from the Lower East Side*, ed. and trans. Albert Waldinger (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), 70–3. I have used Waldinger’s translation as the basis of my own. While the translation is mostly solid, it appears Waldinger was using a later version of the story—one published in short story collections. Libin slightly altered the later version, but the changes were not nearly as substantial as the differences between Kobrin’s “What is He?” (1899) and “Grievous Questions” (1908).

<sup>406</sup> Libin, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist” (Aug. 13).

challenging gaze and yet fearful. I didn't know why, but his gaze brought to mind a wild animal running away frightened from a hunter, but which suddenly stops in its tracks to attack its enemy." The racial language of "Jewish eyes" fits the essential Jewishness theme, though the majority of "We are Yiddish-Speaking Socialists" focuses on an internal sense of Jewishness. Goldberg explains why he drew the narrator's attention to the man: this man who appears engaged in the meeting's proceedings is actually "a stubborn conservative." Goldberg knows him because both are members of the Harlem Branch of the S.L.A. Revolutionary Educational Union, and as Goldberg understands it, this still-unidentified man attended shul and said *kinnos* (Hebrew dirges) on Tisha B'av.<sup>407</sup> The young man is, in Goldberg's view, a hypocrite for having violated radical norms: an opposition to all things Jewish and religious. Even worse, the young man was part of a committee responsible for organizing a radical Tisha B'av ball and concert. Instead of participating in antireligious revelry on a day of mourning, the young man honored Tisha B'av's solemnity.<sup>408</sup>

The unnamed narrator wants to hear more, and Goldberg introduces them. Goldberg and the man, simply given the name "Levin," engage a short verbal sparring match and nearly come to blows before the narrator intervenes. Goldberg gets the parting verbal shot at Levin. "You're a blasted hypocrite!"<sup>409</sup> he yells. The tense introduction behind them, Levin decides to clear the air with the narrator by explaining what happened on Tisha B'av. Here, the narrator speaks directly to the reader, saying he will assume Levin's perspective when relaying the story, as the narrator believes taking on Levin's point of view will draw out the story's emotion. Or, in the narrator's own words, "I'll tell it to you in the way of the man pouring out his heart."<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid. As previously stated, *kinnos* (Heb., *kinnot*) are elegiac poems recited after Eichah, or Lamentations.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> The wording here comes directly from Waldinger's translation in *Shining and Shadow*, 71.

<sup>410</sup> Libin, "A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist" (Aug. 13).

Levin's tale begins at a meeting of the Harlem Branch of the United Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party, where the members were debating whether to have a Tisha B'av ball and concert. Levin wanted to share his opinion with the other members. Advocating tolerance, he developed an argument against the celebration, calling the members of his radical circle "Jews." Before Levin could truly begin, the chairman of the meeting interrupted him because Levin was out of order. He was out of order because, as the chairman stated, "We aren't Jews!" Levin returned with a question, "What are we then?" to which the chairman sharply responded, "We are Yiddish-speaking socialists!" Accepting the chairman's terminology, Levin returned to his argument. He posited, smartly and somewhat humorously, that since they are Yiddish-speaking socialists, and Yiddish-speaking socialists have Jewish relatives who mourn on Tisha B'av, they shouldn't... But again, the chairman interrupted Levin with criticism, "I believe you yourself know we have little to do with religion."<sup>411</sup> Levin countered, "Tisha B'av isn't a religious holiday. It's just a day of tragic, bitter memories for a terribly victimized nation." The chairman interrupted Levin for a third time, saying, "We are socialists, not nationalists!" Goldberg then appeared in Levin's story, calling a point of order to declare Levin was "not a revolutionary. He isn't even a socialist, in fact." The rest of the branch agreed with Goldberg. Fearing dismissal, Levin felt pressured to serve on the ball and concert committee; committee participation also required Levin attend.<sup>412</sup>

Already, Libin's "We are Yiddish-Speaking Socialists" exhibits features consonant with previously discussed representations of freethinkers. Apart from the style of narration, a story within a story, Levin was expressing a view outside that of the prevailing internationalism and cosmopolitanism, and the leadership and members of his branch summarily dismissed his call for

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid. Also see Waldinger's translation in *Shining and Shadow*, 72.

<sup>412</sup> Libin, "A yidish-shprekender sotsyalist" (Aug. 14).

tolerance. Pressure pushed in the opposite direction, in fact—Levin felt the need to conform and serve on the committee. When Levin accepted the chairman’s terminology, that they are not Jews but Yiddish-speaking socialists, nothing changed regarding his view of the issue. Whether Jewish socialists or Yiddish-speaking socialists, they live in close contact with Jews. Radical revelry on Tisha B’av will upset some of these Jews. Levin also showed nationalist inklings when he argued “Tisha B’av isn’t a religious holiday. It’s just a day of tragic, bitter memories for a terribly victimized nation.” The chairman’s response, “We are socialists, not nationalists,” flatly rejected the idea of a unity between socialist sentiments and nationalist sentiments.<sup>413</sup>

When the evening of Tisha B’av arrived, Levin fully intended to go to the ball and concert. As he walked to the location, he passed Jews on their way to shul to read Eichah (the Book of Lamentations). Levin seemed to hear, “The eternal, unfailing, heart-wrenching Jewish sigh,” but he reminded himself he was a Yiddish-speaking socialist. Still, the narrator relayed from Levin’s perspective, “despite the fact that I’m not a Jew and only a Yiddish-speaking socialist, the sigh rips my heart into pieces.” Levin reflected on, and could not help being moved by, the notion that Jews across the globe will be united in their lament on the same day. Even more, Levin personalized his reflections, recalling how his loved ones will also be in mourning. Once again, the wound afflicting the mourners cut deep into his heart. Returning to his radical senses, he remembered that, being a revolutionary, he should feel elated for the oncoming radical revelry.<sup>414</sup> There are inklings of *dos pintele yid*, i.e., the internal Jewish “spark” or “essence,” in the story, but Levin seemingly suppressed such feelings.

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid. Again see Waldinger’s translation in *Shining and Shadow*, 72.

<sup>414</sup> Libin, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist” (Aug. 14). Once again: Waldinger’s translation in *Shining and Shadow*, 73.

As Levin continued his journey, a rock whizzed by his head. He thought to himself, “Apparently not everybody knew I was no longer a Jew but only a ‘Yiddish-speaking socialist’.” Another rock flew, hitting him in the back. Levin “entirely forgets that [he’s] ‘no longer a Jew’” as he turned to retreat from the assailant or assailants. Levin’s assailant, that is, did not recognize him as a Yiddish-speaking socialist. The assailant did not care about self-definitions; all he saw was a Jew. When attacked *as a Jew*, Levin felt back into *being a Jew*. Not only did Levin have an internal sense of Jewishness longing to break free, but in a moment of crisis, a crisis in which a non-Jew recognized Levin’s Jewishness, declaring himself “not a Jew” was meaningless. When struck by another rock, Levin stopped to face his assailant, an Irishman, and returned fire. The scene also recalls the narrator’s original description of Levin’s visage at the meeting, that of a hunted animal. Initially standing his ground, a band of assailants overtook him, pelting him with stone after stone. As warm blood poured down his face, Levin fled in a desperate search for shelter. Ducking into the hallway of a subdivided residence, he opened a door and he fell inside.<sup>415</sup>

Identifying the assailant as a non-Jew, most likely an immigrant non-Jew, was not unusual for turn-of-the-century depictions of immigrant Gentiles in New York. More importantly, Libin’s depiction of Irishmen should be read in opposition to socialist notions of solidarity between working-class Jews and working-class non-Jews. In 1896, for example, Cahan wrote that socialists “do not see any difference between Jew and Gentile.” In practice, however, Yiddish-speaking socialist intellectuals often maintained ambivalent attitudes about non-Jews. In his study of Jewish depictions of non-Jews in New York, Ribak noted how Jewish immigrant

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<sup>415</sup> Libin, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist” (Aug. 14).

radicals commonly leaned on negative ethnic stereotypes when describing non-Jews.<sup>416</sup> Harlem, where Libin himself resided and where Libin set Levin's tale, had a sizable German and Irish presence around the turn of the century (though with declining numbers of both). It could be a challenging precinct for Jewish residents, with verbal assaults and physical violence against Jews a regular occurrence, particularly at the hands of local Irish toughs.<sup>417</sup> But relations between Jewish immigrants and Irish immigrants in Harlem mirrored tensions between the two across the boroughs. As Ribak summarized, "many immigrant Jews typically identified the Irish as the New World's embodiment of the drunk and violent *muzhik* (Russian peasant)."<sup>418</sup>

Having escaped the Irish ruffians, Levin inadvertently stumbled into a room where a group of Jews were reciting Eichah. Upon seeing the blood, one asked if Levin was beaten up, his questioner explaining that the neighborhood is full of German and Irish antisemites. If they could, the man stated, the antisemites would "stab a Jew to death with great joy." Another man tended to Levin's bloody face and in a mournful voice appropriate for Tisha B'av asked aloud, "What can we do? Aren't we in exile every single day of our lives?"<sup>419</sup> These questions made an impression on Levin and a collective pain overtook his personal pain. As Levin recalled the feeling, these words hurt "more than the blows of the *loyfers*," and tears "began to choke [him]." The men offered for Levin to stay and *daven* with them; it just so happened they needed him to form a *minyan*. And so, Levin recited Eichah with them. Sitting on their level, as per Jewish customs of ritual mourning, but also a possible reference to equality in suffering, Levin "wept

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<sup>416</sup> Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 104. Also see the broader use of ethnic stereotypes beyond radical circles, *ibid.*, 64–70, esp. 54, 63. And, *idem*, "'Beaten to Death by Irish Murderers': The Death of Sadie Dellon (1918) and Jewish Images of the Irish," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 4 (2013): 41–74.

<sup>417</sup> Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 63–4. On Jewish life in Harlem, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Jews of Harlem: The Rise, Decline, and Revival of a Jewish Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>418</sup> Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 66. Ribak summarizes the reasons for conflict on pp. 64–70.

<sup>419</sup> Libin, "A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist" (Aug. 14). Also see Waldinger's translation in *Shining and Shadow*, 74.

like a small child.” By helping them form a *minyán* and reciting Eichah, his personal pain blended into a communal and national pain. Here, the narrator offers final commentary on Levin’s emotional retelling. The narrator notices, “When Levin finished his story, a melancholy, sarcastic smile danced on his lips, but his eyes were clouded with tears.”<sup>420</sup> With this final comment, Levin’s face hides profound sorrow. The experience clearly affected him.

“We are Yiddish-Speaking Socialists” should not be read as promoting observance in any traditional sense. One need only recall that Levin advanced nationalist sentiments about Tisha B’av rather than strictly religious sentiments. The story still centered on Levin’s distance from historically religious traditions. Even if national sentiments undergirded his view of Tisha B’av, his personal experience with antisemitism gave meaning to his recitation of Eichah. Can freethinking, Yiddish-speaking socialists maintain their distance from Jewishness? Can they remain distant from Jewish religious tradition? In light of antisemitism, whether in the United States or Europe, was assimilation into an undifferentiated working-class even possible? Levin experienced almost simultaneous push and pull factors that challenged the notion of remaining only a Yiddish-speaking socialist.<sup>421</sup>

### **Debating Tolerance and Freethought in the Radical Yiddish Press (1904)**

Freethinking socialists were soon discussing the very questions Libin posed in “We are Yiddish-Speaking Socialists.” They discussed them in intellectual journals and popular newspapers. In the *Tsukunft*, for instance, Faygenboym, Milkh, and Krants continued challenging conventional

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<sup>420</sup> Libin, “A yidish-shprekhender sotsyalist” (Aug. 14).

<sup>421</sup> The idea that antisemitism, physical violence especially, transformed freethinkers cropped up elsewhere in American Yiddish popular culture. See, for example, Dr. Sh. Balk, “Tsu a brismile.,” in *Der yidish-amerikaner redner*, ed. Prof. G. Zelikovits (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1907), 35. Libin’s story reflected Cahan’s post-Kishinev sentiments—“socialism of feeling alone isn’t useful, but socialism of the head is a thousand times worse.” Cahan, “Gefihl un gefillekhts.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 26, 1903; also see Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 483.

religious claims with scientific studies [Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3].<sup>422</sup> Faygenboym, who joined the *Forverts*' staff in 1904, published similar, popular-level articles in the socialist daily. In June 1904, he wrote about how Jewish religious tradition, like all religious traditions, was subject to change, i.e., it was not based on eternal, unchanging truths.<sup>423</sup> The following month, he presented readers with a list of contradictions in Jewish religious texts. "The Jewish religion," he wrote, "is not one teaching but the compilation of different thoughts and illusions from thousands of different people in different times and circumstances over the course of 3000 years."<sup>424</sup> Here, Faygenboym was not celebrating Judaism's malleability but highlighting the error of religious essentialism.

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<sup>422</sup> See, for example, B. Faygenboym, "Religyon un merderay, 1.-3." *Tsukunft* (Jul. 1903): 20–6. idem, "Religyon un merderay, 4.-5." *Tsukunft* (Aug. 1903): 5–10; idem, "Religyons meshugas.," *Tsukunft* (Sep. 1903): 7–12; idem, "Yomimneraim," *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1903): 10–17.

<sup>423</sup> B. Faygenboym, "Vi azoy a religyon geht unter.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 25, 1904. Another piece that same month, possibly by Faygenboym, stated, "The largest religions of the world were spread through persecutions or through blood." Using Buddhism for reflections on all religions, the author also wrote: "The dangers and damages of religious fanaticism and religious tyranny take place—as we have said— not only in India, and not only with the Buddhists. They are generally not dependent on any place and any time. They take place in all religions at all times." "Di blut vos religyon hot fergosen.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 29, 1904. Also see B. Faygenboym, "Vegen undergang fun religyon," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 11, 1904.

<sup>424</sup> B. Faygenboym, "Vos lerent di religyon?," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 2, 1904.



[Figure 2.2]

*Tsukunft* Masthead and “Class Struggle” [*Tsukunft*, Jan. 1904: p. 2; public domain]



[Figure 2.3]

Close up of Figure 2.2

Note: The revived *Tsukunft* featured a regular column entitled “Class Struggle.” In the image associated with the column, a brawny laborer fights a fat capitalist. The laborer wields the sword of “socialism” while

the fat capitalist wields a bag of money. At their respective feet lay symbols of the forces buttressing their positions. While the laborer stands above symbols of progress, the fat capitalist stands above the symbol of a cross (Christianity/New Testament) and the Ten Commandments (Judaism/Torah).

Among the freethinking intelligentsia, the revived *Tsukunft* became an increasingly important arena for disagreements about how they should approach religion.<sup>425</sup> In summer 1904, Litvin, apparently by request, penned two articles about the Karaites. At one point, he claimed that “the Jewish religion doesn’t demand a person believe in God,” but instead commands “a person learn and follow the Torah as much as it concerns the life and the happiness of the people.” Faygenboym read Litvin’s articles and penned a critical response. In his view, Litvin had reduced Judaism to a joyful sensibility and asserted only Jews could fashion such a religion. It was essentialism and exceptionalism.<sup>426</sup> Litvin had, therefore, revealed himself to be among the “so-called Jewish ‘patriots.’” These Jewish patriots, Faygenboym claimed, rally to the defense of Jewishness when someone criticizes it; they declare Jewishness to be a “wonderful gem,” and that “there can’t be anything like it in the world.”<sup>427</sup> In rejecting essentialism and exceptionalism, Faygenboym reiterated views he had recently expressed in the *Forverts*: “Jewishness [*yidishkeyt*] isn’t a unified system of thought emerging from one mind, but rather it’s a mixture of ideas from thousands of minds in various times and circumstances over the

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<sup>425</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 292–3.

<sup>426</sup> Faygenboym, “Perlen fun yidishkeyt,” *Tsukunft* (Aug. 1904): 9.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

course of two to three thousand years.”<sup>428</sup> [Once again, Faygenboym was not celebrating Judaism’s malleability.]

Faygenboym continued by placing Litvin’s view in a wider context. Essentialism and exceptionalism emerged from the modern creation of religion as a distinct category of human experience. Because religion was now distinct, freethinking Jews felt they could mine the Jewish past for a “genuine spirit of Jewishness,” a secular spirit that would quell anxieties about their distance from religious observance.<sup>429</sup> There were, Faygenboym admitted, “very valuable pearls of wisdom and goodness” in Jewishness. Jews had, after all, said many things over three thousand years. But, he argued, Jewishness was not exceptional—one could find similarly useful stories in Chinese literature or Native American culture (two counterexamples he marshalled).<sup>430</sup> History and comparative religion likewise showed that all ancient religions and peoples have transmitted usable wisdom. Employing even stronger language, he proclaimed that “The narrow ‘Jewish spirit’ has not produced any value that could not have been created—and created better—by the universal human spirit.”<sup>431</sup> Most importantly, Faygenboym rejected extracting a secular Jewishness from the Jewish past. He wrote: “Jewishness... is the Jewish religion with its special, supernatural, sinister dreams, which have with Jews, just as with other peoples, only sought to make its way through all circumstances as a power of darkness, as an interference to progress and everything that comes from the sober, worldly, healthy human understanding.”<sup>432</sup> A truly secular Jewishness was unnecessary, maybe even impossible.

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 12. [Here, translation comes from Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 481] Also see Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 61. Further, see Yankev Milkh, “De natsyonale pogromn fun Bund,” *Tsukunft* (May 1904): 31.

<sup>432</sup> Faygenboym, “Perlen fun yidishkeyt,” 13.

Litvin took exception and responded. He considered Faygenboym's reading "so superficial, so childish" for blowing what he wrote out of proportion.<sup>433</sup> He also denied holding to the kind of Jewishness Faygenboym described; he had not intended to sing the praises of "religion and 'chosenness'."<sup>434</sup> Rather, Litvin had claimed, and he sensed readers would agree, "the Jewish mother religion is more apt to take in free thought (lit., *fraye gedanken*), more inclined to progress than its daughters—the sectarian movements." Where Faygenboym saw religion as a sinister force and an impediment to progress, Litvin countered that "any schoolboy knows... religion was always and everywhere an important factor in human progress."<sup>435</sup>

Litvin's criticism turned personal. "There was a time," he continued, "when [Faygenboym] really had passed for the highest authority [on divine matters] in radical Jewish circles." But a group of "new radicals," looking at Jewishness and religion with "younger eyes," had taken the reins. The new radicals were basically saying, "Rabbi Faygenboym, you're too old, too old with your sermons!" Litvin sensed Faygenboym had been injured at the hands of religious fanatics, and so responded overzealously. His rules and laws about religion were, therefore, built upon "narrow, subjective feelings."<sup>436</sup> A true student of science had to distinguish historical facts from legends. One could read religious legends and find many virtues for contemporary application.<sup>437</sup> Here, Litvin did assert a pride at least bordering on exceptionalism.<sup>438</sup> He declared, "I'm proud that I don't come from the Hottentots and Chinese, but that I'm a Jew."<sup>439</sup> He did not, however, feel his pride was narrow patriotism. Had not many Jews been foundational to socialism and revolution? Had not Jews promoted an international

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<sup>433</sup> A. Litvin, "Vegen yidishkeyt.," *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1904): 28.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.* 29. [Here, translation comes from Bloom, "Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905," 60]

<sup>436</sup> Litvin, "Vegen yidishkeyt.," 29.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–1.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

spirit? Litvin claimed he could still “hold high the torch of light, the flag of freedom and fight for it, suffer for it” while being a proud Jew. Ridiculing Jewishness, as Faygenboym had, would not lead the Jewish masses toward socialism.

Litvin hoped the debate would continue with a second article on the matter, but the *Tsukunft* Press Federation stepped in. In the next edition (October), the Federation publicly chastised the then-editor (Krants) for publishing Litvin’s article. It did not appreciate “such a tone... against Comrade Faygenboym, against a comrade who has accomplished a lot for the enlightenment of the Jewish reader.”<sup>440</sup> In a way, the debate did continue, though entirely one-sided. Faygenboym did not directly respond to Litvin until February 1905. But in January, he published a scathing *Tsukunft* article about rationalist approaches to religion.<sup>441</sup> Clearly with Litvin’s criticisms in mind, Faygenboym stated a recent lecture about Zoroastrianism prompted the article.<sup>442</sup> The speaker, a very modern-looking Zoroastrian priest, defined Zoroastrianism’s essence in terms of moral teachings. The tradition’s superstitious or ceremonial components only obscured that essence.<sup>443</sup> Such a rationalist approach to religion, Faygenboym noted, had a long history. [He informed readers of rationalist figures in Christian history and Jewish history, most notably the *maskilim*.<sup>444</sup>] Modern, rationalist essentialism was responding particularly to the Enlightenment’s separation of worldly knowledge from sacred knowledge. All religious leaders in modern contexts have, therefore, felt pressured to recapture relevance and authority. An essentialism based on “noble ideas and good teachings about human morality” was a prime

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<sup>440</sup> *Tsukunft* (Nov. 1904): 3.

<sup>441</sup> B. Faygenboym, “A droshe fun a koyen avoyde-zore,” *Tsukunft* (Jan. 1905): 27–34.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid. The final line of the article, on p. 34, hints, I believe, at his dispute with Litvin. Also see B. Faygenboym, “Vegen yidishkeyt,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1905): 48–9.

<sup>443</sup> Faygenboym, “A droshe fun a koyen avoyde-zore,” 27. Fayngboym signaled the tone of the lecture by noting how the speaker spoke in “delicate” English.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid. He offers a history of rationalist approaches to religion on p. 29.

candidate for recapturing relevance and authority. And so, superstitions and ceremonies are explained “in a natural way, or as allegory, as flowery fables, or simply as fairy tales.”<sup>445</sup>

Faygenboym’s disdain for rationalist “tricks” was evident at every turn, but why did he find them so irksome? His angst revolved around what he sensed lay behind religious rationalism: chauvinism and egoism. Religious rationalists, as Faygenboym understood them, asserted the essence of their religious tradition was better than that of others. So, they hid behind the “most disgusting sense of chosenness (*atobekhartonu’izmus*),” becoming “more intolerant, more blinded in his opinion about his and other nations and religions than the darkest fanatics!”<sup>446</sup> Faygenboym recognized there were “more universal rationalists.” They claim, for example, that Christianity and Judaism share a foundation. But even the “universal rationalists” imagined themselves more “civilized” than others. He summarized: “If not for [the Jewish-Christian religion], they say, the world would be submerged in the vulgarity and darkness of idol worshippers and their religions.”<sup>447</sup> Underlying all forms of rationalist religion was, therefore, “that which has no taste and no aroma for human understanding—moldy, barbaric fantasies, which means blind and dark belief...”<sup>448</sup> Rationalist religion was entirely unnecessary—reason alone was sufficient.

The following month, Faygenboym drew a direct connection between Litvin and rationalist approaches to religion.<sup>449</sup> The response was brief, since he did not feel the need to argue with Litvin any further [he explicitly mentioned his prior article on rationalism as support for his view]. It also focused primarily on denying his antireligious fervor came from wounds

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 29. Regarding the “noble ideas and good teachings,” Faygenboym wondered, “Can one say these parts of a religion are the principal aspect of a religion?” Also see p. 33.

<sup>446</sup> The *Tsukunft*’s editor, it should be noted, tempered the supposed fanaticism and intolerance Faygenboym mentioned. See note \* *ibid.*, 30.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>449</sup> Faygenboym, “Vegen yidishkeyt.,” 48–9. He too critiqued the decision to run Litvin’s response.

received in his religious youth. But Faygenboym did comment on two of Litvin's most important claims. First, he reiterated that Litvin and his so-called "new radicals" were not new at all. They were returning to older times—the rationalist stance. They were simply rationalizing antiquated beliefs and superstitions.<sup>450</sup> Second, he asserted that it was rationalists like Litvin, not Faygenboym himself, who have embraced "narrow subjective feelings." Assertions of "chosenness" were, in fact, the product of narrow subjective feelings. Faygenboym instead claimed to be a nonpartisan critic of Jewishness, in the vein of Marx, Engels, Feuerbach, etc. He was "only a tiny little disciple (*talmed*)" in a sea of nonpartisan critics.<sup>451</sup>

The Faygenboym-Litvin debate revealed where new lines were being drawn among freethinking intellectuals, most especially among freethinking socialists. Litvin recognized in Jewish religious tradition a form of Jewishness in which one could take pride *as a freethinking Jew*. Again, Faygenboym did not deny there were "pearls" in Jewish history, but they were rare and unexceptional. Jewishness came with a heavy baggage, too. One need only recall he stated, "Jewishness... is the Jewish religion," "supernatural" and "sinister" aspects included. Why, he wondered, would anyone want to turn toward Jewishness when a revolutionary future lay in front of them? The answer could only be chauvinism and egoism, a step away from the revolutionary future, not toward it. As freethinkers continued diverging in their approaches toward the Jewish religious tradition, they would regularly reflect the framing shown here—was a more positive view of Jewish religious tradition a form of pride (Litvin) or chauvinism (Faygenboym)?

While Faygenboym and Litvin fired their shots in the *Tsukunft*, another debate was raging across the Yiddish radical press, and it involved Faygenboym, too. As noted, during Faygenboym's tenure as General Secretary, the Arbeter Ring openly beckoning the religiously

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<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 49.

inclined to join. As the organization grew, it included more Jews who, if not strictly observant, occasionally attended *shul*. Faygenboym's successor as General Secretary was Leo Rozentsvayg, a fiercely antireligious radical and critic of the Arbeter Ring's tolerance.<sup>452</sup> In 1904, Rozentsvayg expressed his frustration with members who attended *shul* on Rosh Hashanah, railing against these "traitors" in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*.<sup>453</sup> His argument against the Arbeter Ring's tolerance rested on its identity. He said: "If the Arb. Ring is no more than a lodge, if its task is no more than giving sick and death benefits, then the Arb. Ring has no right to exist." For Rozentsvayg, the Arbeter Ring had material goals *and* intellectual goals. It was attached to the "international movement" and "revolutionary movement"; it sought to overthrow capitalism and install a new order "founded on justice and truth." The new order must oppose "lies and falsehood," among which was religion. If a member of these larger movements, then "the Arbeter Ring is against religion." So, a member who went to *shul* was "either a fool or a swindler." The case could be easily proved: "belief says God is true, but it has no proof; free thought (*frayer gedank*) with science say God is a lie and they bring us thousands of proofs for it."

Appearing in a popular venue, Rozentsvayg's article sparked write-in debates in both the *Fraye arbeter shtime* and the *Forverts*. The debates revealed deep divides between rank-and-file radicals. Some saw religion as a fundamental evil while others believed tolerance was the best means for turning the pious into enlightened radicals.<sup>454</sup> Several weeks after Rozentsvayg's original article, and firmly in the thick of the debate, Faygenboym added to the *Forverts*'

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<sup>452</sup> Zaks noted Faygenboym recommended Rozentsvayg, but, at least regarding the Arbeter Ring, Zaks believed "Rozentsvayg went even further than Faygenboym" in militant antireligious sentiments. See Zaks, *Di geshikhthe fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 290–291.

<sup>453</sup> L. Rozentsvayg, "Arbeter ring," *FASh* (New York, NY), Sep. 17, 1904. In October, Rozentsvayg apologized for the harsh language of his first letter, see idem, "Arbeter ring," *FASh* (New York, NY), Oct. 15, 1904. For more work by Rozentsvayg, see idem, *Sotsyalizmus in bes-hamedresh* (n.p., n.d.); idem, *Brismile*. Also see Polland, "'May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?'," 394; and see Reyzen, "Rozentsvayg, Leo," *Leksikon*, vol. 4: 181–2.

<sup>454</sup> Polland, "'May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?'," 397–8.

conversation, strongly reaffirming the tolerant position he took in 1901.<sup>455</sup> “The Arbeter Ring as an order,” he stressed, “was founded on the principle of tolerance—tolerance of pious for impious and impious for pious.” It was for “free discussion about religious questions” (here, *fraye* meant “open”), in which the religious and irreligious could be equally involved. The Arbeter Ring’s freethought meant “demand[ing] freedom for the religious as well as for the nonreligious.”<sup>456</sup> As Faygenboym interpreted Rozentsvayg’s position, it showed “unfree thought” (*unfrayer gedank*)—“an ugly fanaticism, just like the idea that unbelievers must be completely evil.” Rozentsvayg was acting like an irreligious fanatic, hindering enlightenment. Faygenboym instead claimed the working class, irrespective of piety or impiety, could show enough tolerance to find common interests *as workers*.<sup>457</sup> So, if an Arbeter Ring member wanted to go to *shul*, “As long as your mind says you must certainly go, go in health to the *shul*, as long as you keep your ears open to understanding and enlightenment.”<sup>458</sup>

At first glance, Faygenboym’s position in the *Forverts* may not seem to comport with his position in the *Tsukunft*. He was not contradicting himself. While Kishinev shook the internationalism and cosmopolitanism of many radicals, Faygenboym held firmly to his assimilationist politics.<sup>459</sup> In the same way, he remained confident freethought would eventually overpower religion; the Arbeter Ring case was no exception—freethought would overtake religion. If individual lodges did not promote religion, the Arbeter Ring could not ultimately be harmed by religious members. Others were not so confident, however. Two months later, Krants expressed his shaken confidence in the *Tsukunft*, where he was editor. While Faygenboym’s

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<sup>455</sup> “Meg men a gloybigen araynehmen in a fortgeshritenem fereyn?,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Oct. 3, 1904.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid. Faygenboym also reprinted his 1901 invitation here.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid. [Here, translation comes from Polland, “‘May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?’,” 394]

<sup>459</sup> Also see Sh. Peshes [B. Faygenboym], “Di lere fun karl marx un religyon.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 28, 1904.

tolerance appeared to have few limitations, Krants wanted more policing. His commentary began with broader reflections on “religion is private,” reflections revealing a general dissatisfaction with how freethinking socialists approached religion in more tolerant times.<sup>460</sup>

According to Krants, social democrats asserted “religion is private” for two reasons: to not frighten the religious away from socialism, and to not detract from more important goals, like the class struggle. He remained confident socialist propaganda and the passing of time would continue shepherding workers toward “enlightenment and freethought,” but he also sensed “religion is private” had “petrified” socialists into inaction. They turned the mantra into a dogma, a dogma employed to avoid religious matters completely. As he summarized the situation,

Socialism, many socialists say, is an economic teaching, a gastric question (i.e., a material issue), is founded on the class struggle and doesn't have to do with antireligious propaganda. Should the freethinkers struggle with religion, should they criticize the “sacred writings,” should they lead discussions with the clergy—that's their matter, the socialists have other matters to attend to...<sup>461</sup>

Most socialists were undoubtedly freethinkers, but they had divorced themselves from spreading freethinking propaganda. They no longer recognized the fight against religion as important. But religious comrades, Krants argued, “won't at all change the fact that the teaching of socialism is against blind belief, against religion.”<sup>462</sup> Inviting the religious into socialist circles did not mean “we should not weaken by a hair's breadth... the anti-religious and especially the anti-clerical conflict.”<sup>463</sup> Socialism and freethought needed to be in closer alignment. Socialists could still

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<sup>460</sup> Philip Krants, “Iber religyon, sotsializmus, un der Arbeter Ring,” *Tsukunft* (Dec. 1904): 33.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. Also see p. 35, where Krants said, “as a class, the clergy are the worst opponents of socialism.”

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 35. [Here, translation comes from Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 60] Similar discussion, see “Religyon—a privat zakh.,” *Morgn tsaytung* (New York, NY), Feb. 22, 1906. For an interesting, related argument—that the socialists were more tolerant freethinkers than non-socialist freethinkers, see “Eynige taynus gegen sotsyalizmus (shlus.),” *Arbeter* (New York, NY), Apr. 29, 1905.

hold “religion is private,” but they also needed to, “with every opportunity, spread free ideas and criticize religious teachings.”<sup>464</sup> Krants also did not have in mind mocking religion, as “the past *apikorsim*” did. What propaganda did he want? He argued that the history of religion’s origins and development, like Milkh’s recent *Tsukunft* articles about Herbert Spencer, remained the most effective propaganda against religion. While Krants admitted historical analysis may not turn the religious into freethinkers, they may still be better received than “something by a *maskil* who scoffs at religion.”<sup>465</sup> Reiterating his main point, he wrote, “what I want all freethinking socialists to take to heart is that they should also struggle as freethinkers, as much as they should acknowledge as correct that religion is a private matter.”

Krants finally arrived at the Arbeter Ring controversy. The whole affair, he thought, revealed the strength of religion’s roots. Religion’s roots were “so firm even Jews who consider themselves socialists are still connected to the ceremonies of the Jewish religion.” It showed how “one still has to struggle to pound free ideas into [socialists’] heads.” Krants did not affirm Rozentsvayg’s antireligious rhetoric, but he agreed with the General Secretary’s sentiments. Based on the letters written to the *Shtime* and *Forverts*, it was clear many Arbeter Ring members were connected to religious life in some way, and the organization could not permit religious interests to prevail over its progressive identity.<sup>466</sup> Faygenboym’s position was too open, too optimistic. The religious could still be welcomed, but they should not compose any lodge’s majority. “The majority of the ‘Arbeter Ring,’” he stressed, “must always remain progressive and of a free sensibility.” Some membership policing would protect the Arbeter Ring against the “great danger” of losing its identity.<sup>467</sup> In the end, Krants’ recommendation appears to have

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<sup>464</sup> Krants, “Iber religyon, sotsializmus, un der arbeter ring,” 36.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, 39; also see 38.

fallen on deaf ears. Rozentsvayg resigned his post in December 1904, and his successor, Yekhiel Veyntroyb, maintained the Arbeter Ring's more inviting, tolerant position. By 1910, membership had ballooned past 31,000.<sup>468</sup>

The debates of 1904, which extended into early 1905, revealed new trends in Jewish radicalism. There were radical intellectuals pushing new, freethinking approaches to religion. Influenced by Kishinev and nationalist paradigms, a group of freethinking Jewish radicals, whether new arrivals or transformed veterans, were advocating a distinction between Jewishness as religion and a cultural or national sense of Jewishness. Freethinkers like Faygenboym detested these trends, but even he had to wrestle with the increasing number and increasing influence of freethinking “patriots,” as he called them. While freethinkers of Faygenboym's ilk had long recognized and opposed freethinking nationalists, the post-Kishinev years would reveal expanding options for what a “freethinker” meant.

## **Conclusion**

*Could the assimilationist brand of internationalism offer anything close to the flavor and aroma of one's pious past?* Radical Yiddish journalists posed this question with greater frequency in the late 1890s. They were freethinkers. Returning to the past was undesirable, even impossible. Moving forward, however, made some anxious. In only a few years, internal and external pressures—dislocation, fractures within radical politics, acculturation, nascent nationalist paradigms, and violence in Europe—reshaped debates about the freethinker's relationship with religion. Intellectuals like Litvin, Faygenboym, Krants, and Rozentsvayg asserted their complex, varied opinions on how radicals should approach Jewishness, and with it sacred matters. Kobrin and Libin entered the fray with fictional depictions of freethinkers, depictions drawing upon the

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<sup>468</sup> In Zaks' estimation, it was Veyntroyb who truly fostered “a new tone, a new tune (*nign*).” Zaks, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring*, vol. 1: 293. Also see Polland, ““May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?”” 400.

uncertainties circulating around them. The stage was set for further changes in radical Jewish politics as a new group of radicals arrived on American shores.

## **PART TWO: 1905-1914**

## CHAPTER THREE: Freethought, Religion, and Jewishness in American Yiddish Literature (1905-1914)

### Introduction

In 1908, the *Kibetses*, the previously discussed Yiddish humor magazine, ran a fake advertisement poking fun at the “courage” of the antireligious.<sup>469</sup> Addressed “to all anarchists and freethinkers of New York,” it mimicked real advertisements publicizing antireligious gatherings on Yom Kippur [Figure 3.1]. The fake advertisement declared that the get-together would, like Yom Kippur balls years prior, represent a united front against “superstition” and “the plague of religion.” But how would these freethinkers show their courage? Would they return to hosting Yom Kippur balls? Would they eat ham sandwiches outside a synagogue? No, their “courage” meant holding a Yom Kippur picnic a whopping thirty-five miles outside New York!<sup>470</sup> This tongue-in-cheek advertisement reflected a reality by 1908—ardently antireligious freethinkers were on the defensive. While ritual observance among immigrant Jews remained more haphazard and inconsistent than rabbis preferred, the immigrants clearly valued Jewish religious tradition. Whether they worked on the Sabbath or failed to fast on Yom Kippur, they adapted religious sensibilities to a New-World context.<sup>471</sup> Trends were pushing in directions unanticipated a decade, even half-decade prior—more freethinkers were embracing Jewish distinctiveness, including rituals historically associated with an observant Jewish life.

This chapter focuses on the literary representation of freethinkers between 1905 and 1914. Right on the heels of the violence at Kishinev, the failed Russian Revolution of 1905 and another series of pogroms brought another new wave of immigrants to the United States. Over

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<sup>469</sup> “Yomkiperdiges,” *Kibetses* (New York, NY), Oct. 15, 1908.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>471</sup> Polland, “Working for the Sabbath,” 33–56, esp. p. 37; *idem*, “‘The Sacredness of the Family,’” 1–23, 270–4.

125,000 arrived the year after the failed revolution (1906).<sup>472</sup> Among them was a crop of Jewish revolutionaries. Encapsulating how the newly arriving Jewish socialists differed from their established counterparts in New York, historian Gil Ribak summarized: “Unlike most socialists of the 1880s and 1890s, the nationally oriented socialists who arrived (mainly after 1905) in New York believed that Jews constituted a nation; though deeply divided over what the national program should be, Bundists, socialist Zionists, and territorialists alike were equally convinced that Jews should retain their distinctiveness.”<sup>473</sup> Between 1905 and 1914, this chapter argues, the depiction of fictional freethinkers followed a broader intellectual and cultural trend—more freethinkers were championing traditions historically associated with religious observance.

This chapter and the following chapter touch on the theme of acculturation. As Jewish immigrants acculturated to America’s tolerant ethos, they inched toward a middle ground. The rough edges separating Jewish immigrant subcommunities softened. Disparate subcommunities remained distinct—many radicals were still broadly antireligious, and the conservative Yiddish press criticized freethinkers, but they developed a more tolerant barometer for inclusion in the Jewish community. This chapter starts by discussing how the post-1905 revolutionaries influenced radical Jewish politics in the United States. As radicals took a different tone toward Jewishness, they also took a different tone toward traditions once associated with an observant

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<sup>472</sup> Nora, “The Influence of the Bund on the Jewish Socialist Movement in America,” 52. Almost 80,000 arrived the year after Kishinev (1904).

<sup>473</sup> Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 108. C. Bezalel Sherman similarly wrote: “Despite violent conflicts between Bundists and Paole Zionists regarding basic problems of Jewish national existence, they had a common denominator in the affirmative evaluation of the part secular Jewish culture played in contemporary Jewish life.” See Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 359.

On the transnational connections between these radical immigrants, see Pierre Anctil, “Yiddish Writers in the Americas After the 1905 Russian Insurrection,” *Contemporary Jewry* 41 (2021): 873–86. Also Arthur W. Thompson, “The Reception of Russian Revolutionary Leaders in America, 1904-1906,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1966): 452–76. On Zionism during this time, see Melvin I. Urofsky, “Zionism: An American Experience,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1974), 220–1; Naomi Cohen, *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897-1948* (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2003), Ch. 1 and Ch. 3; Goldstein, “The Great Wave,” 72, 84, 88.

Jewish lifestyle. The next section focuses on how Yiddish fiction depicted freethinkers between 1905 and 1914. Fictional freethinkers reflected changing times—the pressures to acculturate had grown stronger. This section once again turns to the work of Leon Kobrin and Zalmon Libin to illustrate how depictions changed. The final section considers freethinker depictions in the conservative Yiddish press between 1905 and 1914. Beginning with several editorials, it shows how journalists for conservative newspapers grew warmer toward, or at least more ambivalent about, freethinking Jewish nationalists. Turning to fiction, it examines the oeuvre of Tashrak—an immensely popular Yiddish humorist who was moderately conservative. Tashrak wrote often about freethinking Jews, and his depictions were ambivalent and complex, not far from Kobrin’s and Libin’s portrayals.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> Tashrak, “Maysch’lekh fun der un yener velt,” *Minikes’* (Apr. 1, 1906): 9–12; reprinted in *Minikes’* (Apr. 1, 1927), 59; idem, “A bisel ongeklibene gal: der groyser yidisher khurbn,” *YT* (New York, NY), Aug. 31, 1906; idem, “A baltshuve oyf tsu-lehakhes,” *Minikes’* (Oct. 2, 1910): 5–7. This story was reprinted in his collection: Yisroel Y. Zevin, “Der ‘baltshuve’,” in *Tashrak’s beste ertsehlungen* (New York: Ferlag Tashrak 1910), vol. 4: 61–7; idem, “‘Against Your Will You’re a Jew’ (1909),” trans., Gil Ribak, *East European Jewish Affairs* 50, no. 1-2 (2020): 75–7; Gil Ribak, “Reportage from Blotetown: Yisroel-Yoysef Zevin (Tashrak) and the Shtetlization of New York City,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 50, no. 1-2 (2020): 57–74. For similar stories see, Yisroel Y. Zevin [Tashrak], “Der tsehnter tsum minyen,” in *Tashrak’s beste ertsehlungen* (1910), 183–8. Tashrak, “Fun nyuyorker leben: Es iz do a got oyf der velt,” *Minikes’* (Apr. 1, 1917): 11.

גור צוויי טעג איז געבליעבען צום גרויסען פריידענקער

**פיקניק**

וועלכער וועט שטאטפירען

**מאנטאג, יום כפור, 5טען אקטאבער**

א גרויסער יוניאן אַרקעסטער וועט שפיעלען א גאנצען מאָן.  
טיקעטס, 25 סענט.

אראנזשירט פון די „אנאר כיסטישע פעדעראציען“.

דירעקשאַנס: פון נייעם בריק נעהמט בוש וויק עוועניו קאר און טרענספערט פאר  
רידזשוואר די יעקט צום פארק.

**וויכטיג פיר באסטאן!**

פריידענקער אויפמערקזאם!

**א האנצערט און לעקטשור**

ייעט שטאטפירען

מאנטאג (יום כפור) דען 5טען אקטאבער  
אין דיקאן האלל, 1651 וואשינגטאן סטריט, באסטאן  
גענאָסע ה. ווינדערסאָן אויס ניו יאָרק, וועט לעקטשורן איבער די טהעמא:  
„רעליגיע און וויסענשאַפט“.

אויך וועלען מיטוויקען די בעסטע סאלאנטען פון באסטאן: זון אומגענער  
איינמריט, 15 סענט.

אנפאנג, 10 מאָרנענס. ענדע, 6 אבערנס.  
אראנזשירט פון גרופפע „אנארכיע“ און צאָסטאָן.

[Figure 3.1]

Advertisements: “Picnic” and “A Concert and Lecture” *Fraye arbeter shtime* [Oct. 3, 1908; public domain].

Note: The above are advertisements for Yom Kippur gatherings in New York and Boston.

Advertised for freethinkers in general, both were organized by anarchist groups. The second gathering listed features a lecture on religion and science.

### **New Arrivals, Nationalism, and the Poetry of the Past**

While I have separated the periods 1897-1904 and 1905-1914, dizzying transformations meant the boundaries were far fuzzier for historical actors on the ground. The reaction to events in 1905, namely the failed Russian Revolution, followed the path Kishinev carved. Similarly, radicals with Bundist and socialist-Zionist ties, like Lesin and Litvin, had been arriving in the United States since the 1890s. Regardless, the importance of 1905 was not lost on later commentators. In 1919, when Jacob Milch reviewed the Jewish labor movement's almost forty-year history, he wrote "the year 1905 can rightly be considered the start of a new period in Jewish life in America" (*new*, not better, in his view).<sup>475</sup> Some contemporary historians, too, noted 1905's importance. Jonathan Frankel stated that events in 1905 and 1906 caused "an even stronger swing than in 1903 (i.e., Kishinev) toward nationalism, toward a positive evaluation of the Jewish past and even of the Jewish religion."<sup>476</sup> Irving Howe likewise claimed that by 1910 debates between old-guard cosmopolitans and nationalist-oriented radicals were basically settled, and "decisively in favor of the 'more Jewish' Jewish radicals." Why?—the arrival of a new generation of Jewish revolutionaries after 1905.<sup>477</sup>

Like the Russian-Colony radicals two decades prior, many newly arriving Jewish revolutionaries initially felt adrift in the United States. They found the revolutionary atmosphere and decentralized labor movement lacking. Though amenable to Jewish distinctiveness, they were also antireligious, and newness and impiety occasionally converged to make them targets for violence. On Yom Kippur 1905, for example, Yiddish newspapers reported that "Jewish

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<sup>475</sup> Milch, "Reaktsyonere shtremungen," 3.

<sup>476</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 495.

<sup>477</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 292. Also see pp. 289–95; and Sherman, "Nationalism, Secularism, and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement," 359; Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 41–2; Bloom, "Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905," 68; Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," 344–5.

good-for-nothings broke the windows of a club where several Bundists had privately assembled behind closed doors and draped windows.”<sup>478</sup> Yom Kippur 1906 saw similar attacks. *The New York Tribune* reported that, when New York’s Bundist headquarters announced sandwiches and drinks for “all Hebrews who would apply” (a violation of *halakhic*), a group of Jews, likely passersby, smashed the headquarters’ windows, sparking several days of fistfights. The reporter stressed the offenders’ Bundism, “because the majority of the Socialist Bund are men who have been in this country only a short time.” In truth, clashes between the pious and impious persisted apart from Bundist presence or the involvement of other newly arriving radicals—newness made them a convenient scapegoat.<sup>479</sup>

Kishinev’s effects and the arrival of new radicals reshaped the radical Yiddish press in the United States. Veteran socialist Louis Miller established his socialist daily, the *Varhayt*, in late 1905. It was partly the product of Miller and Cahan’s clashing egos, but the events of 1903 and 1905 had also made Miller more sympathetic to Jewish nationalism. [Cahan still formally rejected the idea of a Jewish nation.<sup>480</sup>] Thus, the *Varhayt* was, in one writer’s words, “halb-radikale, halb-natsyonale” (half-radical, half-national).<sup>481</sup> Miller and his daily would end up

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<sup>478</sup> “Yomkipper beler un yomkipper pogromen,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Apr. 7, 1906; also see Marshall to Hermalin, Apr. 2, 1906, Louis Marshall Papers, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, MS-359 (hereafter LM Papers), box 1575, f. 5.

“Riots on East Side,” *New-York Tribune* (New York, NY), Sep. 30, 1906; also see “Jews Resent Slight on Yom Kippur Rites,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep. 30, 1906.

<sup>479</sup> “Riots on East Side.” The radical Yiddish press came to the Bundists’ defense on some occasions. Reflecting on the 1905 dustup, a writer for the *Varhayt* confessed that a Yom Kippur ball is “a demonstration against the beliefs and feelings of religious Jews,” and “for that reason, it’s foolish and shameful,” but no “Jewish ‘mob’” had the right “to shatter windows and crack the heads of unbelievers on Yom Kippur.” See “Yomkipper beler un yomkipper pogromen.”

<sup>480</sup> Miller remained ambivalent about Zionism, but he showed a general warmth toward nationalist sentiments. This made Miller, in Ehud Manor’s estimation, “one of the most significant and influential harbingers of Zionism in America.” See Manor, *Louis Miller and Di Warheit (“The Truth”): Yiddishism, Zionism and Socialism in New York, 1905-1915* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>481</sup> Reyzen, *Leksikon* (1914), 386. As a case in point, approximately ten days after the *Varhayt* began, one of the paper’s most popular journalists, D.M. Hermalin, wrote “The Jews are a nation united by traditional practices of the past and unending sufferings up to the present.” Longer quote from that piece: “If Christians would be truly tolerant, if they would show that Christianity is actually a religion of love and humanity, then Jews would be assimilated. But since the Christians don’t, we remain Jews even when religion generally plays no role for us.” H., [D.M. Hermalin],

taking eclectic stances on communal issues, for which Yiddish journalists sometimes mocked it [Figure 3.2]. Disagreements with Miller aside, Cahan's *Forverts* transformed, too. With the rise of nationalist sentiments, and socialist, nationalist competitors, like the *Varhayt*, the *Forverts* was suddenly placed in the position of being internationalism's primary flagbearer. And yet, the vitality of the newly arrived radicals pumped new life into the Jewish labor movement. Cahan was soon publishing prominent Bundist journalists while opposing Bundist efforts to remake America's socialist infrastructure in their image.<sup>482</sup>



[Figure 3.2]

Cartoon: Untitled [*Kundes*, Nov. 15, 1909; public domain]

“Varum yiden zaynen a natsyon.,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Nov. 20, 1905. Similar, see idem, “Yidishkeit far amerika,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Nov. 16, 1912; idem, “Di goyim,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Mar. 28, 1914. Also see idem, *Zhurnalistiche shriften* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), 113–5.

<sup>482</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 484; also Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 56; Gennady Estraiikh, “The Bund and Ab. Cahan,” *Yiddish* 15, no. 3 (2008): 97–100.

Caption: L. Miller:—What kind of kapote should I throw on now?...

Note: The cartoon features Miller standing before a series of outfits as he decides what to wear. The outfits represent varying ideological commitments: “Klal-yisroelism” (the Jewish community as a whole), socialism, “Orthodoxism,” and “S.R.A.-ism.” The caption, written as if in Miller’s own voice, highlights his apparent willingness to “throw on” whatever perspective or position suits him in the moment.

Another nationalist radical, Khayim Zhitlovsky, had a recognizable impact on the veteran intelligentsia. Having spent his formative years in Vitebsk, Zhitlovsky had once gravitated toward assimilationist revolutionary politics, even adopting the name “Yefim” to symbolize his totalizing embrace of Russian culture.<sup>483</sup> In 1883, after time spent in a more Jewish environment and reading Zionist writings, the young revolutionary turned from an assimilationist stance.<sup>484</sup> Within a couple years, he attempted to form a specific Jewish section of the Narodnaia Volia, but the movement’s fierce internationalism foreclosed any success.<sup>485</sup> Over the next decade, Zhitlovsky teased out his blend of Jewish nationality and radical politics, what he would call “progressive Jewish nationalism.”<sup>486</sup> His program, as Tony Michels noted, relied on redefining

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<sup>483</sup> Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 13. Also see Zhitlovsky, *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn*, vol. 1: 236–7. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, “Zhitlovsky and American Jewry,” in *Never Say Die! A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 291–6; idem, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); idem, “Yiddishism and Judaism,” *Judaism* 38, no. 4 (1989): 527–36.

<sup>484</sup> On his life, see Reyzen, “Zhitlovsky, Kh.,” *Leksikon*, vol. 1: 1118–36. On his earliest writings, see Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 164–6.

<sup>485</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 265–6.

<sup>486</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 128.

internationalism and cosmopolitanism. To Zhitlovsky, cosmopolitanism was not neutral, but “mandates the assimilation of small, weak national groups into larger, more powerful ones.”<sup>487</sup> Internationalism, however, did not necessitate assimilation—it could mean self-determined nations living in peaceful coexistence. With a “shared historical experience,” based on “language, religion, literature, folkways, feelings of group solidarity, collective psychology,” etc., Jews were a nation.<sup>488</sup> According to Zhitlovsky, Jews needed a cultural revival, and he envisioned *yidische kultur*—the cultivation of Yiddish—as the binding agent for this revival.<sup>489</sup>

Some Yiddish-speaking radicals knew about Zhitlovsky before he first landed in New York in 1904, but, arriving on the heels of Kishinev, he found a receptive audience among prominent socialist and anarchist intellectuals. Naturally, he conflicted with veteran internationalists and was soon debating the merits of progressive Jewish nationalism with radical notables, like Yankev Gordin and Abe Cahan.<sup>490</sup> Despite *yidische kultur* seeming farfetched in the American context, radical Yiddish poets, dramatists, and novelists, Avrom Lesin and Leon Kobrin among them, were especially attracted to Zhitlovsky’s elevation of Yiddish.<sup>491</sup> In his memoirs, Kobrin recalled how the newly-arrived philosopher converted “former internationalists, who under the influence of the Kishinev pogrom felt ‘*dos pintelev yid*’.”<sup>492</sup> Under Zhitlovsky’s tutelage, they discovered that “a good Jewish socialist can be, and needs to

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 129. Also see Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 359–61; Winer, “The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism,” 82–3.

<sup>490</sup> Zhitlovsky’s impact on some Jewish anarchists was especially noteworthy. See Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 39–40; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 140.

<sup>491</sup> Gordin had doubts about its viability, as did Cahan. See Yankev Gordin, “Natsyonalizmus un asimilatsyon.,” *Tsukunft* (Oct. 1905): 7–11; idem, “Natsyonalizmus un asimilatsyon. (shlus.),” *Tsukunft* (Nov. 1905): 15–19; Jacobson, *Special Sorrows*, 101; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 142.

<sup>492</sup> Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 258. Kobrin had known of Zhitlovsky long before the latter espoused progressive Jewish nationalism. Both from Vitebsk, Kobrin intersected his circles (they never met formally in Vitebsk) when Khayim had put on the Russified name “Yefim.” See pp. 243–56. For an example of Kobrin’s writing in response to pogroms, see “The Eternal Jew” (1906): “*Der oybiger yid*” in *Gezamelte shriften*, 621–4.

be, a good Jew as well.”<sup>493</sup> Kobrin relished the debates with Gordin and Cahan, and he became inclined toward nationalism and *yidische kultur*.<sup>494</sup> In 1904, Kobrin joined Lesin in forming the Yidisher Literatur Fareyn (Yiddish Literary Association), a society for promoting *yidische kultur*.<sup>495</sup>

Zhitlovsky was a freethinker, and he regularly discussed freethought and religion in his monthly journal, *Dos naye leben*.<sup>496</sup> As a freethinking Jewish nationalist, he rejected framing Jewishness simply as a religious identity. He labelled this framing assimilationist because it fit a bourgeois, Western European model of Jewishness—it demanded Jews relinquish national sentiments, and national sentiments were foundational to Jewishness.<sup>497</sup> In Zhitlovsky’s words from 1910, “the Jewish religion did not create the Jewish people, but the Jewish people created

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<sup>493</sup> Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 258. Also see Kh. Zhitlovsky, *Fun asimilatsye biz Poale Tsyunizm* (New York: Poale Zion Verlag, 1919); idem, *Der sotsyalizm un di natsyonale frage* (New York: A.M. Evalenko, 1908); idem, *Di filosofie* (New York: Maks N. Mayzel, 1910).

<sup>494</sup> Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), 260–1.

<sup>495</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 140.

<sup>496</sup> One well-known discussion, called “The Crucifix Question” (“di tseylem frage”) centered on how progressive Jews should related to Christianity: L. Shapiro, “Der tseylem,” *Naye leben* (May 1909): 15–30; Dr. Kh. Zhitlovsky, “Redaktsyonele notits vegen L. Shapiro’s ‘Der tseylem’,” *Naye leben* (May 1909): 58–9; idem, “Sholem Asch’s ‘In a karnaval nakht’ un L. Shapiro’s ‘Der tseylem’,” *Naye leben* (Jun. 1909): 37–46; idem, “Sholem Asch’s ‘In a karnaval nakht’ un L. Shapiro’s ‘Der tseylem’,” *Naye leben* (Jul. 1909): 36–45; S. Ansky, “Di tseylem frage,” *Naye leben* (Sep. 1909): 50–7; Dr. Kh. Zhitlovsky, “Di kristenthum-shayle far gebildete yiden,” *Naye leben* (Oct. 1909): 1–11; S. Ansky, “Di tseylem frage,” *Naye leben* (Oct. 1909): 45–51; Dr. Kh. Zhitlovsky, “Di kristenthum shayle far gebildete yiden,” *Naye leben* (Nov. 1909): 48–65; Dr. I. Ginzburg, “Tsu der tseylem frage, 1.,” *Naye leben* (Jan. 1910): 25–34; Mendel, “A brief fun a fraynd vegen der ‘tseylem’-frage,” *Naye leben* (Jan. 1910): 35–6; Dr. I. Ginzburg, “Tsu der tseylem frage, 2.,” *Naye leben* (Feb. 1910): 31–9. Also on “the tseylem frage,” see Matthew B. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 123–38; Avraham Novershtern, “Di pogrom tematik in di verk fun Lamed Shapiro,” *Di goldene keyt* 106 (1981): 121–50; Leah Garrett, “Dazed and Confused: Lamed Shapiro’s American Stories,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 30 (2011): 47–59; “Der tseylem” figures prominently in Robert Harvey Wolf’s dissertation, see Wolf, “A Yiddish Manichaeism: The Dualistic Fiction of Lamed Shapiro” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1994); David Lyle Jeffrey, “Meditation and Atonement in the Art of Marc Chagall,” *Religion and the Arts* 16 (2012): 211–30; Hannah Berliner Fischthal, “Sholem Asch and the shift in his reputation: ‘The Nazarene’ as culprit or victim?” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1994), 43–4, 56–9; David Biale, “Historical Heresies and Modern Jewish Identity,” *Jewish Social Studies* 8, no. 2/3 (2002): 118; Dasgupta, “Crucified with the Brother from Galilee,” 6–7. Finally, see Leah Garrett’s excellent translation of the story and her introduction to Lamed Shapiro’s life and work in Lamed Shapiro, *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*, trans. Leah Garrett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). On *Dos naye leben* in general, see Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 140–51.

<sup>497</sup> Khayim Zhitlovsky, “Religyon un natsyon,” *Naye leben* (Oct. 1910): 2. Another interesting piece about religion, with some similar ideas, see idem, “Historishe ideen un ferbindungen,” *Naye leben* (Apr. 1909): 23–9.

the Jewish religion.” He did not, in fact, think religion was a force for good. He argued that “The dominant folk religion, whether with Jews or the rest of humanity, is... not a religion at all, but a false science, a bad morality, and an ill-formed philosophy.”<sup>498</sup> But, like other Jewish radicals, Zhitlovsky claimed religion had some valuable features moderns could retain, if they felt so inclined. “True religion,” as he called it, was compatible with science and modern philosophy, but it also maintained the “essence” of religious belief, namely feelings of “sacredness” and “infinitude” (Zhitlovsky’s words).<sup>499</sup> Whether encountered in so-called “true religion” or “folk religion,” sacredness and infinitude were universal, having developed over the course of human evolution. In his summary, “the feeling of sacredness lives through every religious nature, the Jew as well as the Christian, the believing person as well as the social-democratic freethinker.”<sup>500</sup>

Since sacredness was universal, sacred feelings could be cultivated for “a national-poetic rebirth of the Jewish religion.” By rebirth, Zhitlovsky meant applying scientific lenses to “all old Jewish sacred things.” Jewish traditions enveloped in “supernatural craziness” or “chauvinistic malice” would be discarded, but his program would “purify those that still have a human essence... more clearly extracting their human value and their national meaning.”<sup>501</sup> Purified traditions and rituals could function as “the foundation of a free-religious life for every Jew who wants to be in solidarity with the fate and needs, suffering and hopes of his people.”<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Zhitlovsky, “Religyon un natsyon,” 8.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 7. Also see Khayim Zhitlovsky, “Di natsyonal-poetishe viedergeburt fun der yidisher religye,” *Naye leben* (Sep. 1911), 1–11.

<sup>500</sup> Zhitlovsky, “Di natsyonal-poetishe viedergeburt fun der yidisher religye,” 1. He cited E.B. Tylor and Max Müller for proof. On p. 6, Zhitlovsky also wrote that even the “the most dark-minded religion... teaches the human soul to feel sacredness and infinitude.” The evolutionary origins of religion’s essence did not change its contemporary meaningfulness. Thus, “only an obstinate fool, marinated in the vinegar of the ‘shitty radicalism’ (*radikalekhts*)” would try “to uproot the highest feelings of sacredness and infinitude from the soul because their origins are not aristocratic.” He also asserted, “There is nothing in humanity that was not born in the blood and filth of the savage life (*vilden leben*).”

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 7; also see 9.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 7.

Characters from the Hebrew Bible and the Aggadah were prime candidates for inclusion, as “even the soul of a Jewish atheist can be roused by them.”<sup>503</sup> Jewish holidays were candidates, too. For example, Zhitlovsky considered Passover both particular (Jewish) and universal (a celebration of spring). It recalled a moment in Israel’s development (national) and reflected the human struggle for freedom (universal). At almost every occasion where Zhitlovsky outlined “rebirth,” he painted lofty, sentimental depictions of Jewish heroes, Jewish rituals, and Jewish holidays.<sup>504</sup>

Zhitlovsky’s poetic rebirth reflected a growing positivity toward the Jewish past among radicals, a trend also influencing the popular, radical Yiddish press. At the nationalist *Varhayt*, Yoyel Entin, a native of the Minsk region who left for the United States in 1891, penned numerous articles about the national poetry of Jewish holidays.<sup>505</sup> Entin would, in fact, aid in developing the curriculum for Poale Zion’s National Radical Schools in the 1910s. As scholar Naomi Praver Kadar described them, the National Radical Schools considered religion “the historical and cultural wellspring from which Jewish ethical and spiritual values were derived.”<sup>506</sup> Or, in the words of a speech delivered at the first gathering of the National Radical

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 8–11. More on Zhitlovsky and religion, see Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 364; Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 282.

<sup>505</sup> See, for example, Y. Entin, “Di poesy un religyon fun simchas beys hashoeiva,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Oct. 15, 1908; idem, “Di poesy fun yomkipper,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Sep. 30, 1911; idem, “Der shehner symbol fun sukes,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Oct. 8, 1911; also see idem, “Peysekh far apikorsim,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Apr. 4, 1912; idem, “In der sukes-vokh,” *Minikes’* (New York, NY), Oct. 1, 1917.

<sup>506</sup> Naomi Praver Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews: Yiddish Schools and Their Periodicals for American Children, 1917-1950* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2016), 3. In her history of secular Yiddish schools, Praver Kadar found that Zhitlovsky speech at the Poale Zion’s 1910 conference in Montreal helped spark the founding of the National Radical Schools. The Bundists soon created similar schools. The two school systems differed in their approach to religion. The Poale Zion schools saw religion as “the historical and cultural wellspring from which Jewish ethical and spiritual values were derived,” while the Bundists “saw their Jewishness as far removed from religion and encompassing only its broader cultural aspects.” A 1914 compromise and merger led Poale Zion and the Bund to downplay differences (which also revolved around Hebrew education). National Radical Schools’ curriculum included “Jewish history, Jewish literature, Hebrew literature, the Bible (approached as the ‘wellspring of Jewish culture’), as well as some exposure to Talmudic and rabbinic literature, Jewish folklore, and the history of Jewish religion, presented ‘not as believers,’ but as an element of cultural history.” The Sholem Aleichem Schools, which were “apolitical,” began around the same time—“their primary goal was to establish a framework for Jewish

Schools in April 1914: “The National-Radical education needs to develop in the children a healthy view of the Jewish religion, considering it from a cultural-historical standpoint. The teachers need to strive to bring out for the children the national-ethical and poetic sides of the Jewish religion.”<sup>507</sup> Other *Varhayt* journalists showed similar tendencies. For example, Hermalin wrote in January 1909, “The whole poetry of the Jewish religion has a national core... The major Jewish holidays, like Passover, Shavus, and Sukkot, are national.”<sup>508</sup>

Between 1905 and 1914, the *Forverts* turned evermore toward “Forvertsism,” what Gennady Estraikh defined as “an idiosyncratic outlook... which combined commitment to both Socialism and Jewishness and often applied an ethnocentric yardstick to American and international events.”<sup>509</sup> Forvertsism soon included an embrace of “folk customs” (*folks-minhogim*), namely rituals and ceremonies stemming from originally religious contexts. One notable example occurred in a 1908 advice column about whether “enlightened people” could embrace folk customs.<sup>510</sup> Religious origins, an editor at the *Forverts* claimed, were not enough to disqualify freethinkers from embracing folk customs. First, if a freethinker was consistent, they would have to throw away much more than folk customs—“Nearly all, important customs of civilized people started as religious customs.”<sup>511</sup> Second, since the masses enjoyed folk customs, tearing them away from the masses would create a vacuum, opening the door to conversion or

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secular education for the ‘freethinking’ community.” Not all progressive Yiddish schools were as warm toward religion as Poale Zion, but most still repurposed religious tradition for modern, secular life. See *ibid.*, 1, 3–4. Also see Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 362–3; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 203–4; Winer, “The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism,” 81; Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” 364, 376, 378.

<sup>507</sup> H. Lieberman, *Di yidische religyon un der natsyonal-radikaler ertsihung* (New York: Maks N. Mayzel, 1915), 32.

<sup>508</sup> D.M. Hermalin, “Der iker un poesye fun der yidisher religyon,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Jan. 9, 1909; *idem*, “Yidishkeyt far amerika.”

<sup>509</sup> Estraikh particularly notes the Mendel Beilis case (1913) and the Leo Frank case (1913) for furthering the *Forverts*’ “Forvertsism.” See Estraikh, *Transatlantic Russian Jewishness*, 40.

<sup>510</sup> “Darfen folks-minhogim zayn treyfe bay oyfgeklerte menshen [Darfn folks-minhogim zayn treyfe bay oyfgeklerte mentshn]?” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 28, 1908. For a similar conversation in the *Varhayt*, albeit later, see “Der yidisher mineg fun kadesh zogen,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Mar. 20, 1915.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.* The writer specifically identified “painting and sculpture... music, poetry, [and] dance.”

fanaticism. Religious leaders had clearly adapted conventional religion to fit the demands of modern life, emphasizing what is “pleasant, beautiful, lovely, and dear.” Freethought without folk customs, what the writer called “the poetry of life,” left only “a bare, dry, tedious life.” Dry freethought gave Christian clergy a chance to provide “everything that’s interesting and enjoyable.” If not conversion, dry freethought left folk customs in the hands of “fanatics,” fanatics who will, “through these customs, bind the people to their fanaticism.” Freethinkers undoubtedly could not embrace everything—there were “sinister customs that can’t have any other meaning than stupidity and superstition.” It as a “very sacred task” to uproot these. “Innocent” customs, on the other hand, offered a path for freethinkers to be “in unity with the people.” As a case in point, the author identified Passover—“not the Haggadah, but the kneidlach”—as abounding with innocent folk customs.<sup>512</sup>

Not everyone appreciated these changes. Veteran radicals with cosmopolitan tendencies, whether socialist or anarchists, condemned them, as a contributor to the *Fraye arbeter shtime* exemplified in 1909. “‘Jewishness’ is in fashion again,” they wrote, “let’s hope for a very short time.” Furthermore, the writer could not help but note the trend had given new life to “the withering of religion among Jews”—there are now “Sabbath observant freethinkers who teach their children Yiddish so they can say kaddish for them when they die.”<sup>513</sup> Though this writer may not have appreciated Jewishness being “in fashion,” they could not deny it was, and it had seemed to have religious implications. Faygenboym fought an uphill battle against freethinking Jewish nationalists. In 1912, for example, he opposed a group of Jewish socialists who were attempting to establish a separate, specifically Jewish socialist party in the United States. In a scathing article in the *Tsukunft*, where he was on the editorial board, Faygenboym expressed

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> D.B., “Bikher. tsaytshriften, un literarishe naves,” *FASH* (New York, NY), Jul. 24, 1909.

confusion over what Jewishness these Jewish socialists demanded in a specifically Jewish socialist party.<sup>514</sup> Had not Jewish socialists been publishing newspapers and books in Yiddish for about thirty years? Did they not have Jewish-dominant sections of the SP and labor organizations, like the United Hebrew Trades?<sup>515</sup> All that remained, he argued, was religious observance, and yet “among those today who are shouting that they want a more Jewish socialism, there is not one such believing Jew to be found.”<sup>516</sup> So, he caustically summarized, “Absolutely everything Jewish they could wish, everything that has any substance, has been done in the Jewish socialist movement in America for the last thirty years. They’ve done everything but the nationalist ‘fox-trot’.”<sup>517</sup> He, at least, was not ready to take the nationalist leap.

That same year, Faygenboym doubled down on the assimilationist model of radical politics. He wrote in another *Tsukunft* article: “[the Jew] and his non-Jewish socialist comrades both assimilate equally into a new conception of the world, into a new world-culture, into new aspirations and hopes.”<sup>518</sup> Internationalists and cosmopolitans should not be, he continued, ashamed of their origins or forget the fate of their “Jewish brothers.”<sup>519</sup> Still, he implored, “Let the natural assimilation process do its work! It brings the greatest blessing for all people, especially for Jews!”<sup>520</sup> In an era of mass immigration, Faygenboym would not fault any immigrant for sympathetic feelings toward their old homes. But such sympathies would be “one little dot in the inner part of their heart”; they would be a “private matter,” “just like their

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<sup>514</sup> Faygenboym, “Jewishness and the Socialist Movement in America (1912),” 215.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, also p. 215.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>518</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Alts heyst asimilatsyon!,” *Tsukunft* (Jul. 1912): 444–5. Bourgeois assimilationists, Faygenboym noted, were also chauvinistic nationalists.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

religion.” Whatever “homey customs” they maintained, they, too, would be like religious customs—private concerns.<sup>521</sup> This “private-nationalism” was, in Faygenboym’s view, far from the “mysterious national-soul” and “collective-egoism” some Jewish socialists flaunted.<sup>522</sup>

Faygenboym likewise continued commenting on one of his favorite subjects during these years—Jewishness is the Jewish religion. As a case in point, in his 1914 book *Religion and the Worker*, Faygenboym argued that while non-Jewish patriots have all the usual, secular trappings of nationalism available to them, e.g., land, military, etc., Jewish patriots “concentrate their patriotism on the old religious books.” Indeed, the Jewish patriots he had in mind “don’t believe in them like believers,” but they still use them to strengthen Jewish exceptionalism. Nobody but Jews, Faygenboym’s Jewish patriots supposedly claimed, could have penned the “fine, beautiful, wise, honorable things found in the old religious books.”<sup>523</sup> If the principles of scientific socialism were correct, and Faygenboym believed they were, then freethinking Jewish patriots were basically religious. That is, they posited “a great miracle”—“Jews were so exceptional that the natural laws effecting all peoples didn’t affect them.”<sup>524</sup>

The growth of nationalist paradigms among Jewish radicals did not mean, to quote Frankel again, that “the out-and-out ‘cosmopolitan’ ideology had withered away.” But apart from a select few, like Faygenboym, “the outspoken militancy displayed by the ‘orthodox’ Marxists in 1898 and 1903 had now given way to an almost total silence.”<sup>525</sup> The conversation and its tone

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<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 451, also p. 446.

<sup>523</sup> B. Faygenboym, *Di religyon un di arbeter* (New York: author, 1914), 13. Faygenboym remained more consistent, and more concerned about consistency, than many radical Yiddish journalists.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>525</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 484. Also see Bloom, “Yiddish-Speaking Socialists in America: 1892-1905,” 56; Gorin, “Tradition and Change,” 49–51; Levin, “The Influence of the Bund on the Jewish Socialist Movement in America,” 54. On this page, Levin specifically states, “[Zionism and Bundism] injected the problem of Jewish nationalism into the internationalist assumptions of Jewish socialists, raising ideological ferment and personal identity problems where none had existed before.”

changed, in other words, and part of the changing conversation and tone centered on religion.

Cahan highlighted these changes when, years later, he recalled, “We Socialist, freethinking Jews were just as fanatical in our apostasy as our parents and grandparents were in their religious lives... Later, with the development of Zionism and the popularization of the Labor Movement under the Bund’s leadership, intellectual Jews slowly developed a wider, more realistic perspective.”<sup>526</sup>

### **Fictional Freethinkers at the Intersection of Nation and Religion**

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<sup>526</sup> Cahan, “My First Pesach In America—in 1883.” Original, see idem, “Mayn ershter peysekh in amerike”; here, Cahan is talking about his article from 1911, entitled “In Honor of Pesach and in Honor of America” [“Lekoved peysekh un lekoved amerika”], *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 13, 1911. Regarding the importance of 1905-1914: it should also be no surprise that 1905-1914 witnessed the start of secular, nationalist schools. The years between 1905 and 1914 likewise saw a flourishing of literary pieces about freethinkers and freethought, and it reflected broader trends. Theater historian Joel Berkowitz found that during these years “the ‘yid’ play,” i.e., Yiddish plays with “nationalistic titles,” flourished. See Berkowitz, “This is Not Europe, You Know: The Counter-Maskilic Impulse of American Yiddish Drama,” in *Yiddish in America*, 147. On radical, nationalist schools, see Praver Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 2; Dylan Kaufman-Obstler, “Language for a Revolution: Yiddish Schools in the United States and the Making of Jewish Proletarian Culture” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2021). It was also a period when concerns regarding assimilation gained steam. See L. Elbe, “Asimilatsyon fun amerikaner yiden,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Dec. 27, 1906; “Asimilatsyon un teritorializmus,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Apr. 21, 1907; “Gemishte khosenes un kristishe yidn,” *YT* (New York, NY), Aug. 3, 1907; “Mish-khosene tragedye,” *YT* (New York, NY), Oct. 22, 1907; “Di kultur-natsyonalisten un di mase,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Feb. 15, 1908; “Milyonen, asimilatsyon un shmad,” *YT* (New York, NY), Jun. 3, 1908; “Der bankrot fun asimilatsyon,” *YT* (New York, NY), Mar. 31, 1909; Dr. N. Syrkin, “Asimilatsyon un peysekh’dige kneydlekh, 1.,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Jul. 22, 1911; idem, “Asimilatsyon un peysekh’dige kneydlekh, 2.,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Jul. 29, 1911; “Natsyonalizmus un asimilatsyon,” *Yidische arbeter velt* (Chicago, IL), Aug. 16, 1912; “Natsyonale kultur un asimilatsyon,” *Yidische arbeter velt* (Chicago, IL), Aug. 15, 1913; Also see Dr. Shmaryahu Levin, “Tsurik fun dem ‘koysl-maarovi’ fun der asimilatsyon,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Jul. 13, 1915. Manor, *Louis Miller and Di Warheit*, 6–8. More on the assimilation issue: Zionist leader Max Nordau told Alexander Harkavy “America saves the man, not the Jew.” But still, “Under present conditions, however, it is fortunate that that country is open to our people.” He also said: “Jewish immigrants in that country should Americanize themselves, and in such a manner that their ideals should remain besides their Americanism.” Nordau was, it should be mentioned, cautioning immigrant Jews about the dangers of living alongside too many Jews. See “Diary Of A Visit To Europe In The Interests of Jewish Emigration, 1906-1907” p. 7, P-50, box 1, f. 9, Alexander Harkavy Papers, AJHS. Bringing together a fear of assimilation and some appreciation, albeit minor, of the post-1905 immigrant radicals, famed playwright and territorialist Israel Zangwill told Harkavy: “America is the euthanasia of the Jew and Judaism. The stronger force always absorbs the weaker. The Jewish force has been the stronger in the past only when persecuted. In the social anti-Semitism of America lies the Jew’s only hope. The Jewish masses who are now pouring into America are the most civilized element in the whole immigration. Not only do they represent an ancient highly moralized civilization, but their acquaintances with Hebrew and Yiddish literature puts them on a far higher scale of literateness than the bulk of the immigration.” Still, he reportedly concluded: “It is a great pity that the highly complex culture of the Russian Jew must be swallowed up in Americanism and produce no distinctive fruits. If I had my way, not a single Russian Jew should enter America.” See “Diary Of A Visit To Europe In The Interests of Jewish Emigration, 1906-1907” p. 16, P-50, box 1, f. 9, Alexander Harkavy Papers, AJHS.

Some Yiddish writers, Leon Kobrin among them, found Zhitlovsky's ideas compelling, but their depiction of freethinkers did not necessarily promote a Zhitlovsky-ian nationalism. The most poignant example can be observed in how Kobrin reworked the 1899 version of "What is He?," republished in 1908 as "Grievous Questions" and appearing in *Dos folk*, a short-lived monthly published by the Jewish Socialist Territorialist Labor Party of America.<sup>527</sup> He made a notable change to the 1908 version. Firstly, Kobrin turned the diarist, while still an *ibergangs-mensch*, into a man. So, whereas the socialist mother considers discussing her thoughts and questions with her husband in the 1899 version, the male diarist in the 1908 version considers discussing his doubts and questions with his friend, Pashinsky, also described as an atheist and fierce internationalist. Pashinky, who calls the narrator "Reb Khayim," offers the same imagined answer as the husband in the 1899 version—the diarist has a lingering "taste" for the past. The diarist likewise doubts Pashinsky would be satisfied this answer since "he knows me too well and knows I'm as free of all these foolish religious things as he is" (same line as the 1899 version).<sup>528</sup> Also akin to the 1899 version, disparities between dream and reality center on the diarist's son. In the 1908 version, however, the son is named "Nikolay" after Nikolay Chernyshevsky, rather than "Ferdinand" after Ferdinand Lassalle.<sup>529</sup> Like Lassalle, the reference to Chernyshevsky would have hit home with some Jewish immigrant socialists, as he was a beloved radical too.<sup>530</sup> Just as Jews and non-Jews revile the son of the socialist mother, who knows nothing of Jewishness, little Nikolay is similarly reviled and distant from Jewishness.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Kobrin, "Ongevehtogte fragen" (1908), 34–7. Also see Kobrin, *Mayne fuftsik yor in amerike* (1966), note on the bottom of p. 190.

<sup>528</sup> Kobrin, "Ongevehtogte fragen" (1908), 34–5; also see idem, "Vos iz er?" (1910), 614.

<sup>529</sup> Kobrin, "Ongevehtogte fragen" (1908), 35; also see idem, "Vos iz er?" (1910), 615.

<sup>530</sup> Nikolay Chernyshevsky was known for his utopian novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863). In Steven Cassedy's reading, "Almost every Russian Jewish intellectual who wrote memoirs mentions Chernyshevsky as a primary source of inspiration for a career in revolutionary politics." See Cassedy, *Building the Future*, 4. The second volume of *Tsukunft* also featured an illustration of Nikolay Chernyshevsky on its opening page, see *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1892).

<sup>531</sup> Kobrin, "Ongevehtogte fragen" (1908), 35; also see idem, "Vos iz er?" (1910), 614–5.

Like the 1899 version, the boy comes running to his parent when Christmas and Passover arrive, and the father gives the same answer: they are not Christians, and they are not Jews. The boy again cries and asks if they are “sheenys” and have any holidays. Here, the two versions diverge. In the 1899 version, the boy’s father enters the discussion to tell little Ferdinand about how socialists will have a holiday in the future. In the 1908 version, the father is perplexed by the boy’s questions, and no one steps-in to answer. He can only say to himself, “What could I have answered? That we are freethinkers? That we are socialists? That our holidays are in the future?” The 1908 version continues with further questions from the father, sentiment questions centering on Nikolay’s future. The central question is “Where is the poetry of my Nikolay’s childhood?” After all, the 1908 father reasons, the joys of childhood leave “deep impressions on the human soul,” impressions lasting a lifetime. The other children will have Christmas and Passover to provide childhood poetry. What will Nikolay have? These questions extend the child’s displacement beyond the 1899 version. The questions are emotional, but they also draw on popular scientific discourses about childhood. The father’s fear hints at the idea, apparently rooted in by psychology, that Nikolay’s lack of poetry may have a damaging impact.<sup>532</sup>

Opposite Nikolay, the 1908 father notes how all *ibergangs-menshen* had childhoods, and can recall their “happy minutes,” none more than the Sabbath lights. The diarist then reviews the Jewish holidays—Hannukah, Purim, and Passover, etc. At every mention of a holiday, he waxes nostalgically with detail and pathos. He even describes Tisha B’av as having a “fearful, poetic power.” The father concludes his review of the Jewish holidays with “How many sweet memories! How many happy minutes!” and his reflections return to Nikolay: “Where is my child’s poetry?” The father cannot foresee any such poetry for his son. Nikolay only has “a

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<sup>532</sup> Kobrin, “Ongevehtogte fragen” (1908), 37; also see, idem, “Vos iz er?” (1910), 614–5.

mishmash seemingly without juice (i.e., flavor or substance) and without life, without light and without warmth.”<sup>533</sup> Kobrin’s detailed description of Jewish holidays and rituals in the 1908 version gave specificity to what was being lost. It heightened the emotional connection between the diarist and Jewish distinctiveness. Sentimentality was prominent in the *Abend blat*’s “What is He?,” but it still pales in comparison to the longer 1908 version.

At this point in the diarist’s 1908 reflections, Kobrin clearly blended the second 1899 diary entry, the “Second Page,” with “What is He?,” adding extra commentary too. Like the socialist mother in her second entry, the father openly connects Nikolay’s lack of Jewishness to his own distance from Jewishness. He writes, “I can’t go back to the past with my little Nikolay because I’m severed from it, like a branch from a tree...” He had tried to raise Nikolay “as a freethinker, as a socialist, as a child of the international humanity,” but it does not seem to be enough, “Even as a child of the international humanity, he must still have his childhood too, the joys, the poetry of childhood!” These reflections drive toward a question not posed in the 1899 version: “Why don’t the socialists and freethinkers of other people groups take their national holidays away from their children?!” In other words, why does it seem internationalism only robs Jews of their national holidays while it does not rob non-Jews of theirs? Like the socialist mother in 1899, the father doubts he can raise Nikolay “as freethinker, as a socialist, as a child of the international humanity.” Also reflecting the original “Second Page,” the 1908 father has explored the “social question” and recognizes the power of context. The environment may have a greater influence on the child than the parent—“the street, in school, the Catholic children, the Protestant children, the Jewish children of pious parents, the piety of the Jewish neighbors.” The

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<sup>533</sup> Kobrin, “Ongevehtogte fragen” (1908), 35–6; also see, idem, “Vos iz er?” (1910), 614–5.

1908 father concluded by repeating the title question, as the socialist mother did in 1899: “What is he? What is he?!”<sup>534</sup>

The 1908 version of “What is He?” asserted a greater contrast between Jewishness and the parent’s mix of internationalism, socialism, and freethought. There are direct references to freethought in this version, and there is no vague discussion about socialism as religion. The 1908 version was less about how socialism, as a religion, fails to satisfy. It did not even pretend the once-prevailing socialist internationalism could function as a religion when compared to Jewishness. The 1899 version reflected the language radicals like Faygenbaum regularly employed while the later version mirrored language prominent in 1900s-1910s—“a positive evaluation of the Jewish past and even of the Jewish religion.”<sup>535</sup> The most powerful question the father posed is, therefore, “Why don’t the socialists and freethinkers of other people groups take their national holidays away from their children?!” The sense of loss and displacement in 1899 was forceful (readers recognized its force!), but the ideas expressed were embryonic. It was generally quieter than the more developed, 1908 version. Measured by how radical politics rapidly progressed in a single decade, the later version may have well been published a century afterwards.

Libin also continued writing sketches about freethinkers, with some tales having little direct connection to Jewishness.<sup>536</sup> But many reflected changes in radical politics. As a case in point, Libin published a short, freethinker-story in the *Forverts* for Passover 1909. Entitled “The *Khomets’ dike* Parents and the *Peysekh’ dike* Children,” the title indicated the parents were unobservant, or *khomets’ dike*, literally “prohibited during Passover,” and the children were

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<sup>534</sup> Koblin, “Ongevehtogte fragen” (1908), 36; also see, idem, “Vos iz er?” (1910), 614–5.

<sup>535</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 495.

<sup>536</sup> Z. Libin, “A frage.,” in the section “Fershiedenes,” in *Geklibene shriften: 100 ertsehlungen* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1910), 31–5.

observant, or *peysekhdike*, literally “fitting for Passover.”<sup>537</sup> But, the freethinking parents reflected the common gender stereotypes noted above. The father was undoubtedly a freethinker, but the mother was “a typical woman,” meaning “she was not pious, although deep in her heart she believes in God and was particularly afraid of ghosts, demons, and witchcraft.”<sup>538</sup> Libin portrayed her, in other words, as a nominal freethinker. She held fast to beliefs freethinking radicals assumed “superstition.” She *believed* herself a freethinker “because her husband’s such an *apikoyres*.”<sup>539</sup>

As Libin depicted her, the mother inhabited a context where freethinker consistency was challenging. She found herself drawn to the commercial fervor of the Jewish holidays. Libin wrote that, on “such a *yontef* like Passover, her womanly soul can’t stay at peace,” and so, “her heart is swept away with the general tide.” When shopping for the Jewish holidays, the commercial drive was so strong she “forgets entirely that she’s a freethinker and is just as busy as all wives.” Particularly before Passover, the freethinking mother mirrored the habits of the observant mothers around her, buying new dress clothes for her children and new kitchenware.<sup>540</sup> Scholars who study Jewish immigrants in early twentieth century have long noted how the United States’ commercial culture turned shopping for the Jewish holidays into sacred or semisacred activity. A strong consumer ethos strengthened the authority of Jewish immigrant women over family life and ritual observance, as purchasing power strongly determined how the rest of the family would observe Jewish traditions.<sup>541</sup> Commercial hubbub was a constant feature

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<sup>537</sup> Z. Libin, “Di khomets’dike eltern un di peysekhdike kinderlekh” (1909); idem, “Di khomets’dike eltern un di peysekhdike kinderlekh,” in *Geklibene shriften* (1912), vol. 2: 22–6. For another work from Libin featuring an *apikoyres*, see idem, “Kadesh nokh’n foter,” in *Gezamelte verk* (1915), vol. 2: 227–36.

<sup>538</sup> Libin, “Di khomets’dike eltern un di peysekhdike kinderlekh” (1909).

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid. Libin writes, “she too is a fine customer (*kostomerin*) at the hardware stores (*hardver-stors*)” right before Passover.

<sup>541</sup> Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Jewish Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 68–85; Polland, “The sacredness of the

of both the conservative and radical Yiddish press when Jewish holidays were on the horizon.<sup>542</sup> These same holiday norms overwhelmed Libin's freethinking mother. And so, her home felt like a "*mish-mash*." "Everything appears *yontevdike*," as if they observed Passover without a Haggadah and still ate leavened bread.

The couple had two children, a boy and a girl, and the children sensed the home's chaos.<sup>543</sup> Once again, wider context played a role—their chaotic mishmash stands out because they lived alongside other Jews. The children witness how the observant celebrate Passover. So, these "shaken little souls" asked their parents four questions, a direct reference to the four questions posed during the Passover seder. As Libin constructed the dialogue, the children showed their Americanization by speaking English, written phonetically in Yiddish. Eight-year-old Dorele, the oldest child, began the conversation with "Papa, is today a holiday?" While during the seder the first Passover question asks, "*Why* is this night different from all the other nights?" Dorele posed a prior question, "*Is* this night different from all the other nights?" The freethinking father responded in English, "No darling." Five-year-old Heshele followed, also in English, "We are no Christians... ain't we?" The father, now in Yiddish, answered in the negative. After the mother explained what Passover and *yontef* are, Dorele asked further, "We are Jews, ain't we?" The father, again in Yiddish, answers, "No, dear children, we are not Jews, and we are not Christians." His response prompted Dorele's natural follow-up—"What then?" The father responded, this time in English, "Nothing." Apparently thinking a fuller explanation was required, the freethinking mother added in Yiddish, with some English sprinkled in, "We're

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family," 102, 126–34, 146–7. Also see Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

<sup>542</sup> Polland, "The sacredness of the family," 160.

<sup>543</sup> Libin, "Di khomets'dike eltern un di peysekhdike kinderlekh" (1909). As Libin described their confusion, "their young little minds apparently can't comprehend what's going on with papa and mama."

people, dear children, *dat's oll...* it's only morons, only '*fulish pipel*' who say they're Jews or Christians."<sup>544</sup>

The children seemed unconvinced. Heshela then said aloud, "Mama don't know what she is talking about," and told his older sister they should ask the next-door neighbors, pious Jews. The mother sternly warned the children not to tell the neighbors they eat bread, which would indicate they do not observe Passover in a traditional fashion. When Dorele asked why, her mother responded, "Because I told you not to." The father contradicted his wife, "Yes, let her... who cares?" But she answered, "Are you crazy?... We don't want the neighbors to gab more about us." The mother, a freethinker, was clearly concerned a lack of piety might impact their social standing. Dorele still did not understand the need to lie, and "in her childish little soul, she began revolting against her parents a bit." Dorele's search for answers also began at this point. She asked more "about Jews, about Christians... about the half-Passover her parents observed," etc. The father finally sat his children down to explain, and in a humorous depiction of a freethinking ideologue, Libin's father bumbled his way through a "scientific lecture" about their freethought. Not only did the children not understand, but he hardly understood himself. The father did far more to obscure matters than enlighten them. And so, "some sense of uncertainty presses on their childish little hearts." In the end, Dorele and Heshela "want to feel completely *yontevdik*, completely *pesakhdik*," just like the children next-door, but their desire was unrealized. Instead, "their half-*khometsdike* parents hinder their happiness, hinder their illusions of *yontef*..."<sup>545</sup>

Befitting the times, Libin's "The *Khomets'dike* Parents and the *Peysekh'dike* Children" was about a freethinking family influenced by the world around them. Libin's freethinking

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

mother mirrored typical gender stereotypes of the period and represented an “inauthentic” freethinker—she convinced herself she’s a freethinker while believing in so-called “superstitions.” The commercial culture associated with the Jewish holidays also influenced her. She unknowingly performed signs of piety in the American context—purchasing and consuming. The children too were influenced by the piety around them. Like Kobrin’s Nikolay, they resided in a context where they saw the observance of Christians and Jews, and it prompted questions about belonging. And, although the main action did not center on the *khomets’dike* father, he played a vital role. First, the freethinking father provided some comic relief—he gave his children an irrelevant lecture. Second, he strengthened an emerging generational gap between himself and his children. While generational gaps in Jewish immigrant popular culture usually portrayed pious parents and impious children, Libin’s “The *Khomets’dike* Parents and the *Peysekh’dike* Children” featured religiously inclined children and irreligious parents. It was not a father’s rigid desire to maintain past norms that pries open the generational gap, but a father’s desire to eschew Jewish tradition entirely. The irrelevance of his confused, scientific lecture symbolized a freethought entirely devoid of Jewishness. The children were pragmatic, honest innocents whose “parents hinder their happiness.”

Libin narrated similar transformations on other occasions. In a short story entitled “It Begins to Bother Them,” first published in the *Tsukunft* in 1913, Libin described how a devoted young anarchist, simply called “Levin,” met his eventual wife, Aniute.<sup>546</sup> Like the inconsistent, freethinking mother in “The *Khomets’dike* Parents and the *Peysekh’dike* Children,” Aniute “wasn’t really much of an anarchist”—she attended anarchist meetings to find a spouse. Once she fell in love with Levin, she mimicked his devotion to anarchism. He held unconventional

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<sup>546</sup> Libin, “Es hoybt zey on tsu ferdrisen” (1913), 152–5; idem, “Es hoybt zi on tsu ferdrisen,” in *Gezamelte verk* (1915), vol. 4: 259–66.

ideas about romantic relationships and building a family, and so their “wedding” meant simply moving into an apartment together and purchasing furniture. No ceremony, no city hall. Levin was proud of the arrangement, “just as much as a deeply observant Jew is when he fulfills a great mitzvah.” The same could not be said for Aniute. She was not, “deep in her heart,” satisfied with how they were wed. In explaining why Aniute felt dissatisfied, Libin posed a rhetorical question: “What young woman doesn’t dream about her wedding, about the most important event in her life? And these sweet dreams are always fantastical, glorious, and triumphant—rich in noise and color!” It was, he wrote further, “the most important, most poetic, most interesting moment of [a young woman’s] life.” Aniute had grand dreams for her wedding, and not having those dreams satisfied meant “something was missing.” She loved Levin, regardless, and “considered him a much more elevated being than herself. “Suppress[ing] the longings of her heart,” she gave the impression they were of one accord. It was an omen.<sup>547</sup>

The couple had relatives in the city who, when visiting their apartment, criticized their arrangement and its underlying philosophy. Levin responded, “true love doesn’t need the authorization of rabbis, Christian clergy, or even city hall.” As Libin described the exchange between Levin and the relatives, Aniute was not involved. Instead, she “entrust[ed] arguments to the guests and her husband.” In the meantime, she labored to prepare food and serve the guests. Radical as their arrangement might have been, it appears Levin and Aniute reflected the husband-wife roles assigned by bourgeoisie society. The exchange between Levin and the relatives also concluded with foreshadowing when a relative cautioned, “America is a free country... People can do what they want. But remember, little ones, you’ll regret it. You won’t live your entire lives according to your current foolishness.” Another relative also ominously

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<sup>547</sup> Libin, “Es hoybt zey on tsu ferdrisen” (1913), 152.

warned that if the couple has children, their children will be considered illegitimate. With these warnings, unexpressed doubts crept into Aniute's mind, but she suppressed them.<sup>548</sup>

Levin and Aniute's arrangement reflected conceptions of love, sex, and family commonly associated with "free love," a social movement seeking to remove the state from matters sexual and romantic. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and their children arrived in the United States at a time when the country's sexual culture was transitioning away from Victorian morality. Emboldened by an atmosphere of changing sexual relations, partly in flux because of immigration's disruptions, some Jewish immigrant radicals advocated free love, which certain non-Jews in the United States were advancing as well. Free love tended to be associated with anarchism, a connection scholar Jessica Kirzane succinctly encapsulated: "In its political dimensions, free love is a cultural component of anarchism, motivated by a desire to separate the state and other forms of social authority and control from sexual matters."<sup>549</sup> Famed anarchist Emma Goldman advocated free love, but she simultaneously "recognized women's potential vulnerability within a free love value system." For Goldman, free love needed true equality, and "true equality requires systemic economic and social reform."<sup>550</sup> At this point in the story, there were clear hints Libin would be critiquing free love. He had, by 1913, already been criticizing free love for over a decade, criticisms shared by most socialists in the United States, as socialists were generally not as radical as anarchists on matters of love, sex, and family.<sup>551</sup>

Levin and Aniute had to revisit conversations about Jewishness and family life when they had their first child, a boy, to whom Libin jokingly referred as "a genuine, true baby anarchist."

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>549</sup> Jessica Kirzane, "Introduction," in Miriam Karpilove, *Diary of a Lonely Girl, or The Battle against Free Love*, trans. Jessica Kirzane (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020), 20 n.37.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., 9. For some of Goldman's ideas on free love and the present socioeconomic system, Kirzane cites Emma Goldman's *Marriage and Love* (New York: Mother Earth, 1911), 7, 15.

<sup>551</sup> Another example of his early writing about freethinkers and love, see Libin, "Shmertsluke gedanken" (1902), 5; idem, "Shmertsluke gedanken," in *Gezamelte verk*, vol. 4: 145–9.

The relatives again visited their home and implored the couple to have a *bris*. Levin, utterly opposed to the idea, recycled popular discourses surrounding “fanatics” and “superstitions.” He informed the relatives that he does not support such “wild, barbaric ceremonies like the Jewish *bris*.” The relatives argued against Levin’s position with a scientific argument about circumcision, saying “the greatest doctors now declare that an operation like that required by the Jewish *bris* is completely healthy for a child.” Levin offered his rebuttal and another instance of foreshadowing emerged. One relative stated that Levin’s choice could have implications for the child; by not circumcising him, Levin had assumed his son will never identify as a Jew, but who knows how the boy will ultimately choose to live his life? Another response in the chamber, Levin shot back, “When my son grows up, he can be what he wants. I, however, am not obliged to impose a seal of Jewishness on my child.” Aniute again did not add her voice to the discussion. Beyond a reluctance to quarrel with the relatives, she also realized that “even if she wanted to go against her husband’s will, she wouldn’t have any success.” An underlying question emerges: How free is the freethinking Aniute? If Aniute were so free, would she not speak her mind? Regardless, the relatives interpreted the couple’s stance as personal repudiation and left offended. When the Levins had another boy a year later, no one visited. Years pass with the freethinking Levins estranged from their relatives.<sup>552</sup>

When the story picks back up, the radical environment around Levin and Aniute had changed. Levin had been a freethinking anarchist who spent time with other freethinking anarchists, but Levin’s freethinking friends eventually felt the pressure to provide for their families and climb the socioeconomic ladder. Or, as Libin narrated the new scene: “The rush to make a living had tossed them here and there, scattering them!” Levin therefore came to a grim

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<sup>552</sup> Libin, “Es hoybt zey on tsu ferdrisen” (1913), 153–4.

realization—“there’s no one!” His once ardent, freethinking anarchist friends began identifying as Jews and promoting Jewishness in family life. Even Levin, now older, had lost some of his radical fire. Such a notion existed in the Yiddish press. For example, when advising a religious *Morgn-zhurnal* reader who married a freethinker, conservative journalist Khayim Malits, summarized that “The time comes when the same fiery freethinkers become cooled... and look at the world completely differently.”<sup>553</sup>

In an odd move, Libin haltingly introduced the idea that, deep down, Levin may not have been such an ardent freethinker after all. Levin, he wrote, “thought up his free ideas more with his heart than with clear understanding,” meaning he was never “an excessively enlightened anarchist.”<sup>554</sup> When he was a firm anarchist, Levin had trod all the well-worn internationalist paths. He used to say, “there are no Christians and no Jews” and “all are people,” but Levin had, deep-down, apparently felt apprehensive about his internationalism. Tapping into nostalgic freethinker dreams, when Levin would tell people he wasn’t a Jew, he would see his pious parents, his *shtetl*, and “his Jewish upbringing with thousands of different sweet, lovely, warm memories.” Inner apprehensions never reared their head during the days of his fierce internationalism. The environment around him, his friends and mentors, rejected Jewishness. Levin had simply followed the trend. Nobody cared anymore when Levin declared he wasn’t a Jew. There was no one to help suppress the inner voice of Jewishness. There were, however, the voices of non-Jews who recognized Levin *as a Jew*. The “Christians” Levin once considered his comrades eventually rejected him because of his Jewish background. Antisemitism, it seems, could not be avoided.<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Malits, “Di heym un di froy: muters un kinder”; idem, *Di heym un di froy*, 73.

<sup>554</sup> Libin, “Es hoybt zey on tsu ferdrisen” (1913), 154–5.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

Levin's own children faced antisemitism when non-Jewish children mocked them for being Jews. This last instance—the antisemitism his children experienced—was Levin's tipping point. The former anarchist internationalist finally told his children they should respond by affirming Jewishness. When called "yids," they should respond, "Yes, we are 'yids' and we're proud of it." After telling his children to affirm Jewishness, Levin became a Jewish nationalist. Levin and Aniute even hired a tutor to teach their children Hebrew, Jewish history, and Jewish folkways, but something was still missing. Said more accurately, something was still there—their boys lacked "the stamp of Jewishness," i.e., they were uncircumcised. Levin was further bothered by the way he "married" Aniute (not legally). Over the years, Levin improved his financial standing and his family's prospects, but their lack of legal union was not resolved. Levin and Aniute, as Libin described them, did not know what to do about either situation.<sup>556</sup>

Like other freethinker depictions, the story was not about Levin and Aniute becoming traditionally observant. It is unclear exactly what Jewishness looks like after their transformation (it is certainly nationalist). As in Libin's other stories, the forces shaping their embrace of Jewishness are internal and external. Levin's radical circle collapses in the face of the social and economic realities of American life, both its stresses and opportunities. At the start, Levin resides in a youthful, confident freethinking context. As time passes, his context changes. Radical friends disappear. Libin introduces the notion Levin is not such a convinced freethinking anarchist after all. He too had doubts about internationalism and felt a twinge of pain when he told people he was not a Jew. Inklings of *dos pintele yid* burst forth further. Further displacing him is the antisemitism of other radicals. They recognize Levin as a Jew even when he says he is not. Levin's children also encounter antisemitism. Embracing Jewishness, the family discovers

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<sup>556</sup> Ibid., 155.

their place among other Jews. There is, however, one final feature of the story. Levin and Aniute are now firmly entrenched in a Jewish milieu, but they are still not legally married, and their boys are uncircumcised. The transformation feels incomplete. This final point recalls the prophetic voice of one of the relatives: “You won’t live your entire lives according to your current foolishness.” It could be read as a caution to readers. Unwise decisions made in youth may haunt you in your maturity.

There were other depictions, too. Leon Elbe, the nom de plume of Leon Bassein, offers another case in point. His father was an assistant *hazan* at the Great Synagogue of Minsk, where he received a traditional education along with some secular education. Drawn to revolutionary politics, he helped establish a Labor Zionist group in Minsk before leaving for the United States in 1904. In New York, he contributed to Miller’s *Varhayt*, was an assistant editor at *Dos folk*, and a teacher at the National Radical Schools.<sup>557</sup> He developed a reputation as a skilled satirist under the pen name “Leon Elbe.”<sup>558</sup> He published several pieces featuring freethinkers, his most poignant appearing in his “Barney the Melamed” series.<sup>559</sup> In 1910, Elbe began publishing humorous *Varhayt* sketches about an immigrant *melamed* known as “Barney.”<sup>560</sup> Many Jewish community leaders maligned *melamdim*—traditional religious teachers of children—for pedagogical incompetence and deplorable schoolroom conditions. Elbe’s hapless *melamed* was, therefore, rife for comedy as he struggled to make sense of the New World and educate his Americanizing students.

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<sup>557</sup> Reyzen, “Baseyn, Leyb,” *Leksikon*, 207–10.

<sup>558</sup> Praver Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 7, 59–61, 83–7, 97, 179, 187, 200, 265–6. For more on Baseyn, see Miriam Udel, *Honey on the Page: A Treasury of Yiddish Children’s Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 188–9. Elbe had a well-received column in the *Amerikaner* in the late 1910s. See Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 80–2 and 275 n.72.

<sup>559</sup> Leon Elbe, *Barni der melamed* (New York: Ferlag “Humor,” 1914), 84–5. In 1913, he published a sketch in the *Varhayt* that was like Libin’s “The Mother’s Yahrzeit” of twelve prior—a dream collapses the distance between freethinkers and sacred matters. See Leon Elbe, “Tshuve,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Oct. 10, 1913.

<sup>560</sup> Elbe, *Barni der melamed*, 5.

In one particular sketch, entitled “How a Freethinker Does *Hamotzi*,” Barney informed the narrator that he recently received an offer to teach in Texas, where he would “fatten up the Jewish loafers with Torah and Jewishness” (the story is mainly narrated in the past tense). Barney rejected the offer because business was booming in New York. Business was good not because his pious clientele had increased, but because his impious clientele had increased. In the narrator’s words, “Anarchists, socialists, freethinkers, and *apikorsim* of all sorts took eagerly to kugel, kneidlach, [and] blintzes, and are sending their children to *heder* to study Torah.” Barney, apparently standing in his *heder* with the narrator, pointed out several children from freethinking families. One boy, a young “Karl Marx,” is the son of a “fiery socialist.” Despite having circumcised Karl as a baby, the father had sought to raise the child devoid of Jewishness, “a true freethinker, with a Christmas tree on Christmas and painted eggs on Easter.”<sup>561</sup> Karl’s father had recently changed his ways. Now, instead of a Christmas tree, the family has latkes on Hannukah. Instead of dolled-up eggs on Easter, they have matzah on Passover. “[The father] became a regular Jew,” Barney summarized, “and he absolutely beams when his Karl Marx says *brokhe*.”<sup>562</sup> It should be mentioned that Elbe’s use of Christmas and Easter likely did not signal conversion to Christianity but complete assimilation to American cultural norms. Some Jewish freethinkers, in fact, recognized that certain American cultural norms were strongly influenced by Christianity, and yet, they argued that holidays like Christmas and Easter were general, public holidays. They could, in other words, entirely divorce Christmas and Easter from Christianness. Elbe, however, used the Christian-inflected features of Christmas and Easter to signal one’s relinquishing of Jewish distinctiveness.

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 85.

Barney identified another child from a freethinking household, a certain “Robert Ingelson.” “Ingelson,” the narrator interjected with a note for readers, was Barney’s humorous misunderstanding of “Ingersoll.” Though named for the famed American freethinker, Robert’s father, like Karl’s, eventually found “kneidlach and blintzes” too enticing. So, the man placed little Robert under Barney’s tutelage. But there were stipulations. Barney should teach the boy everything a Jew needs to know, but God shouldn’t be mentioned.<sup>563</sup> The *melamed* seemingly did as requested. As proof, he called Robert over and had him say “*hamotzi*”—a blessing upon God for providing bread. Instead of saying “*Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech ha’olam hamotzi lechem min ha’aretz*,” the boy only said, “*Baruch ata hamotzi lechem min ha’aretz*.” This changed the blessing from “Blessed are you, *Lord our God, ruler of the universe* who brings forth bread from the earth,” to simply “Blessed are you who brings forth bread from the earth.” Barney did not let the “you” in this godless version remain nebulous. He posed a follow up question for the boy: “To whom are you saying the *thank you* (thank you)?” The boy responded: “The farmer!” Turning back to the narrator, Barney wondered, “Tell me, am I a bad freethinking *melamed*?” The narrator responded encouragingly, in transliterated English, “First class!”

Elbe’s humorous sketch was doing more than poking fun at hapless immigrant *melamdim*; it was also poking fun at freethinkers. In 1909, Elbe himself noted how the turn toward Jewishness was creating odd religious attachments among radicals. He specifically laughed at what he identified as the latest generation of “romantic *apikorsim*”—freethinking fathers who do *tshuve* (repentance) on account of their children.<sup>564</sup> “How a Freethinker Does *Hamotzi*” had a more negative undertone than the piece by Kobrin and Libin, but it similarly

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>564</sup> Leon Elbe, “Fraydenkende tates vos thuen tshuve tsulieb kinder,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Sep. 3, 1909. Other interesting cases, see *Etikete*, compiled by Tashrak (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1912), 117; and “Fregt eytsus bay’n folk.,” *Morgn tsaytung* (New York, NY), March 14, 1906.

depicted a world in which the pressures surrounding freethinkers turned them toward affirmations of Judaism. It was largely a secularization of Judaism, but it was a reappraisal of religion useful to the characters they constructed. It was part of a broader turn toward Jewish distinctiveness, but one which could not be entirely divorced from the piety of the past.<sup>565</sup>

### **The Conservative Yiddish Press and Jewish Freethinkers After 1905**

As previously described, Sarasohn considered the *Gazeten* and *Tageblat* to be *klal-yisroel* newspapers, i.e., publications serving the Jewish people as a whole, and they communicated an inclusive understanding of *klal-yisroel*.<sup>566</sup> The longtime exception to the daily's inclusivity had been the freethinking radicals who asserted internationalism and cosmopolitanism. But, the popular conservative Yiddish press, particularly after 1905, expressed greater appreciation for freethinkers, particularly freethinking Jewish nationalists. The freethinker, therefore, played a role in how journalists in the conservative Yiddish press framed Jewish belonging. Just as notable, freethinking journalists acculturated to American norms, becoming more tolerant of religion and the religious, so too did journalists in the conservative Yiddish press argue for a broader vision of unity.

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<sup>565</sup> Popular Yiddish writer Moyshe Shmeulzon penned a similar story as well. Shmeulzon, who received a *heder* education in smalltown Podolia, exhibited literary talent in Hebrew around age thirteen, but he turned to Yiddish around age seventeen. Arriving in the United States at twenty-two (ca. 1893), his career in the Yiddish press began about a decade later. In "Avrom the Stubborn," his protagonist, known as Avrom Moyshe Dovid in the Old World and as Avrom Dubovsky in the New World, is a stubborn contrarian in "spiritual matters." And he is a contrarian in both Eastern Europe and the United States, but how he shows his contrarian nature depends on the context. In the Old World, Avrom ran around as an open *apikoyres*. On Passover, for instance, he brazenly violated religious and social norms and mocked the pious. Avrom's stubbornness changes in America. Confronted by freethinkers and socialists who "ridicule the most minute Passover custom[s]," he asserts that, "according to socialism and freethought (*fray denken*)," Passover must be observed, down to the smallest detail. Avrom does not scoff at the Passover tumult any longer—he helps prepare for Passover and treats each rite as if it's "the foundation of the entirety of Jewishness." I have not included this story in the body of this chapter because I have not yet determined where and when it was published. It likely appeared in print sometime between 1903 and 1917, however. For the story itself, see M. Shmeulson, "Avrom der akshn," in *Velten un tsayten* (New York: Maks N. Mayzel, 1918), 129–32. On Shmeulson, see Reyzen, "Shmeulson, Moyshe," *Leksikon*, vol. 4: 739–41.

<sup>566</sup> Ribak, "The *Yidishes Tageblat*," 821.

Conservative Yiddish newspapers in the United States hired a range of skilled journalists, and the *Tageblat* was likely the most diverse. As chief editors, for example, Kasriel Sarasohn and his son Ezekiel hired impious sensationalist Yoyne Paley, broadly liberal Getsil Zelikovits, and Labor Zionist Leon Zolotkof.<sup>567</sup> Yankev Magidov, Jewish labor leader and longtime city editor of the *Morgn-zhurnal*, recalled that Ezekiel Sarasohn, though “conservative in his religious and political convictions,” was actual “a very liberal person with modern views,” the best evidence for which was that he has often employed radicals, socialists, and even freethinkers at his newspaper.”<sup>568</sup> Similarly, when Elyahu-Khayim ben Shloyme-Zalmen Sheps, better known by his pen name A. Almi, first arrived in New York (1913) and took a position at the *Tageblat*, he discovered that the staff of this seemingly “orthodox” newspaper were mostly nonobservant.<sup>569</sup> Diverse staff and contributors did not foreclose criticisms of freethinkers in the conservative Yiddish press, most especially criticisms of cosmopolitan, antireligious radicals, but tolerant trends were noticeable. In 1906, for example, a *Tageblat* editorial claimed “*frume yiden*”—here, traditionally pious Jews—were staunch defenders of the Jewishness of Jewish freethinkers. For the editorialist, and supposedly for the average pious Jew, Jewishness was defined by race, not religion. In their own words, “pious Jews reject no one from *klal-yisroel* because of his ideas. For pious Jews, all those who descend from Jews are Jews.”<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid. Zolotkof also had connections to Peter Wiernik of the *Morgn-zhurnal*. In 1890, they became partners with *The Jewish Courier*, a Yiddish weekly in Chicago. See *Jewish Courier* agreement, February 3, 1890, Peter Wiernik and Bertha Wiernik Collection, Subgroup II: Peter Wiernik Papers, 1888-1936, box 11, f. 2, Yeshiva University Libraries.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid., 171–2. As further proof, Magidov told a story about a writer who “felt a much freer person” when he left a socialist paper for the *Tageblat*. The man reportedly had to censure himself while at the socialist paper, as he was expected to align with the expectations of his boss.

<sup>569</sup> A. Almi, *Heshbn un sakhkl* (Buenos Aires: G. Kaplanski, 1959), 76. On the conservative press, see Khaykin, *Yidische bleter in Amerike*, 53–8, 107–11, 127–37, 297–309. On the complexity of conservative politics and the Yiddish press, see Arthur A. Goren, “The Conservative Politics of the Orthodox Press,” in *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 100–9.

<sup>570</sup> “Iber land un layt,” *YT* (New York, NY), Feb. 9, 1906; I found this piece referenced in Ribak, “The *Yidishes Tageblat*,” 799. I used Ribak’s translation as a launchpad for my own, as Ribak does not include the article’s commentary on freethinkers.

A more positive tone toward freethinkers and freethought was especially noticeable in commentary on freethinking Jewish nationalists. Gedalya Bublik (1875-1948), prominent journalist and eventual editor of the *Tageblat* (1915-1928), wrote positive pieces about freethinking nationalists during these years. Originally from Grodno, Bublik arrived on American shores in 1904 by way of Argentina. It was possible he was not strictly observant when he first arrived, but in the mid-1910s, he cofounded the Orthodox-Zionist Mizrachi movement in the United States—a movement advocating the inseparability of Judaism and Jewish nationalism.<sup>571</sup> He showed such tendencies even earlier, as in 1908, when he jointly criticized “shul-Jews” (observant Jews) and “Jewish-national freethinkers” for failing to understand each other.<sup>572</sup> Observant Jews had convinced themselves their religious “fortress” could not crumble, that religion alone “will save the Jewish people from disappearing.” Had not Jewish life in France and Italy proved the opposite? The fortresses that survived “the fires of the Inquisition... disappeared in the fire of the greatest, most fearful enemy—assimilation!” Traditional *shuls* in France and Italy eventually became Reform temples, then declared, “the Jewish nation is dead,” setting the stage for complete assimilation. “For religion to be the right

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In later years, the further professionalization of the American Yiddish press would create new connections between diversely situated Jewish journalists. As a case in point, see Publication Documents, 1926, “Copyright registration, corrected proofs, copy of agreement with the International Jewish Press Agency,” YIVO Archives, Papers of Tashrak, RG 1502, box 1, f. 4. This agreement of the International Jewish Press Agency was signed by Jacob Fishman, Jacob Rombro (Philip Krants), Israel J. Zevin (Tashrak), Jacob de Haas (British-born journalist and Zionist leader), and several others. The folder is dated 1926, but the agreement was not written and signed in 1926. Also see “List of Proposed Members to the Jewish Press Club” and “Committee on Formation of the Jewish Press Club,” May 21, 1909, Peter Wiernik and Bertha Wiernik Collection, Subgroup II: Peter Wiernik Papers, 1888-1936, box 11, f. 10, Yeshiva University Libraries. Finally, see the array of names included in the Yiddish Writers Club: Letter from Avrom Shomer (Vice President of the Yiddish Writers Club) to S. Judson, December 24, 1912, YIVO Archives, S. Judson Collection, RG 579, box 1. The S. Judson Collection includes other materials related to Solomon Judson’s membership in the Yiddish Writers Club and Yiddish Writers Union.

<sup>571</sup> Ribak, “The *Yidishes Tageblat*,” 819–20.

<sup>572</sup> Gedalya Bublik, “Di shul un di natsyon,” *YT* (New York, NY), Feb. 9, 1908. For another instance when the *Tageblat* criticized socialists and rabbis, see “Vos felht di yiden in amerika?,” *YT* (New York, NY), Jul. 7, 1912. Bublik, as an important community figure, enjoyed the company of many intellectuals. For example, see “Gedalya Bublik, Reuben Brainin, William Edlin and Jacob Fischman aboard a ship going to London” (1920); YIVO Archives; Photographs of Personalities; RG 121.

weapon against the disappearance of the Jewish people,” Bublik told readers, “it must be united with the Jewish flag.” But nationalist freethinkers must also realize “If not for the great Jewish *religious* fighters who carried the Jewish national flag for two thousand years, you couldn’t be freethinking nationalists today.”<sup>573</sup>

*Tageblat* contributor Y.L. Dalidansky (1873-1935), a well-regarded Hebrew and Yiddish writer who arrived on American shores in 1906, made similar claims as Bublik. In 1909, Dalidansky argued that “the true pious Jews, the orthodox rabbis” were, in fact, quite tolerant.<sup>574</sup> “They recognize,” he wrote, “all Jews as Jews, apart from those who openly relinquished Jewishness.” From his point of view, even the most observant rabbis knew Zionism’s leading figures, like Theodore Herzl, were not observant, and yet these same rabbis joined the cause. Dalidansky’s understanding of Jewishness, it must be mentioned, included the possibility of distinguishing religion and nationality. “The truth is,” he claimed, “that Jewishness isn’t a religion alone; it’s a thing that’s composed of two distinct feelings: belief and nationality. With one Jew, his feeling of religion can be stronger, and with the second Jew, the national feeling can be the main thing that keeps him tied to his people.” So, “any Jew who’s loyal to his people and wants to help them in every way he can—he’s a good Jew.” But, religion and nation could not be *completely* divorced either. “Just a short time ago,” Dalidansky continued, “we all worshiped a theory that religion is entirely superfluous. At that time, it was said that the idea of nationality must occupy religion’s place. That was false, but no more correct is the present idea that wants to cure everything through religion alone.”<sup>575</sup>

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<sup>573</sup> Bublik, “Di shul un di natsyon.” He also wrote, “Should the entire people throw away religion, Jewish nationalism will be wiped off the face of the earth.”

<sup>574</sup> Y.L. Dalidansky, “Lomir zey nit fershtoyesen!,” *YT* (New York, NY), Aug. 24, 1909.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*

Journalists at the conservative *Morgn-zhurnal* showed a similar acceptance of freethinking nationalists. Begun in 1901 and edited by Peter Wiernik, the *Morgn-zhurnal* was a popular daily supporting orthodox institutions, Zionism, and immigrant Americanization. Efroyim Kaplan (1879-1943) became one of the paper's most prominent journalists when he joined its staff in 1907. Kaplan, the son of a Vilna rabbi, arrived on American shores in 1904 and was soon among the "most distinguished agents of Orthodox Judaism," as one later commentator described him. He was particularly active in defending observant Jews against claims they were intolerant fanatics.<sup>576</sup> Surely, he wrote in 1912, "where [the pious] catch wind of something that smells of secular agitation, they become fearfully principled, stubborn people, and will sooner sacrifice themselves than yield to the agitator." But even then, they were "tolerant and very patient, much more patient than the 'pious' freethinkers."<sup>577</sup> When it came to freethinking Jewish nationalists, Kaplan doubted that, sans religion, they and their children could resist the siren song of assimilation.<sup>578</sup> He declared at one point, "their national Jewishness gives them nothing—nothing in this world (*oylem-haze*) and nothing in the world to come (*oylem-habe*)."<sup>579</sup> But, compared to total assimilation, Kaplan could not deny freethinking Jewish nationalism was preferable.<sup>580</sup> Nationalism had "preserved for the Jewish collective those Jews who have discarded religion's yoke and who have no heart for faith." It also permitted secular Jews to appreciate Jewish piety's "charm, poetic inspiration, lofty feelings, and warmhearted virtues."

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<sup>576</sup> *Leksikon fun der nayer yidische literatur* (New York: Marstin Press, 1956), vol. 1: 90. Reyzen, "Kaplan, Efroyim," *Leksikon*, vol. 3: 493–4. See, for example, Efroyim Kaplan, "Di 'oyfklerungs'-arbayt fun der radikaler prese," *MZ* (New York, NY), Jul. 14, 1910.

<sup>577</sup> Efroyim Kaplan, "Der fanatizmus iz fershvunden," *MZ* (New York, NY), Aug. 11, 1912. Also see Efroyim Kaplan, "Dos orthodoxe yudentum," *MZ* (New York, NY), May 9, 1912.

<sup>578</sup> E. Kaplan, "Di moyre far asimilatsyon," *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Dec. 2, 1906.

<sup>579</sup> Efroyim Kaplan, "Religyon un natsyonalizmus. 1," *MZ* (New York, NY), Jul. 21, 1909. Only "coldness, icy coldness," he claimed, will come from "impresario Jewishness."

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, and Efroyim Kaplan, "Religyon un natsyonalizmus. 2," *MZ* (New York, NY), Jul. 22, 1909. Kaplan also wondered if an increase in antisemitism in the United States would forcibly bind Jewish children to Jewishness, but he wrote, "woe is the Jewish community (lit., *Yudentum*) that needs to turn to pogroms and antisemitism for help!"

Weren't freethinking Jewish nationalists adapting historically religious rituals to fit their secular lives? Don't they "celebrate those days that remind [them] of the important, historic events of our people"? "Nationalism," in Kaplan's view, "longs for religion and it has included many traditions and put its stamp on them."<sup>581</sup>

Another staple of the conservative Yiddish press, the humorist Yisroel-Yoysef Zevin, revealed an ambivalence toward freethinkers in his short stories. Born to a well-to-do Hasidic family in 1872, Zevin studied in traditional religious settings in his youth and immigrated to the United States in 1889, at about age seventeen. He published his first short story in the *Tageblat* in 1893, and the paper quickly added him to its staff. Zevin published widely under several pseudonyms, but his most-established literary persona was "Tashrak," a play on the last letters of the Hebrew/Yiddish alphabet.<sup>582</sup> He remained wedded to the *Tageblat* throughout his life, and the marriage proved fruitful—Sarasohn's moderate conservatism fostered a welcome environment for Tashrak's own moderate conservatism.<sup>583</sup> As Ribak summarized, "unquestionably, the most important thread that runs through Tashrak's journalistic and literary work is his strong criticism, both comically and in earnest, of what he saw as American Jewish assimilators and Jews who were disdainful towards traditional Judaism."<sup>584</sup>

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<sup>581</sup> Kaplan, "Religyon un natsyonalizmus. 2." For similar commentary on these issues, see idem, "Ale felker zaynen ato bekhartonu'kes," *MZ* (New York, NY), Apr. 20, 1909; also see idem, "A blik in 'Dos yidishe folk'," *MZ* (New York, NY), Apr. 19, 1909.

<sup>582</sup> Ribak, "Reportage from Blotetown," 58–9; also see Reyzen, "Tashrak," *Leksikon*, vol. 4: 909–12.

<sup>583</sup> Sarasohn's "combined modernity and traditionalism," as Ribak stated, fostered an environment where Tashrak could mature "his brand of moderate and ironic conservatism." See Ribak, "Reportage from Blotetown," 61. Also see Y.Y. Yudkovitch [Y.Y. Zevin], "Kalte yiden," *Yidische velt* (New York, NY), Oct. 31, 1904.

<sup>584</sup> Ribak, "Reportage from Blotetown," 65; also see pp. 66–7; also see idem, "The *Yidishes Tageblat*," 818–9; YIVO Archives; Papers of Tashrak; RG 1502; boxes 1-4. These boxes and folders include some of Tashrak's manuscripts and correspondence between himself and Jewish and non-Jewish notables, including Sholem Aleichem, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Helena Frank. Tashrak also found some success in the Anglo-American press. See, for example, Letter from Julian Harris to Mr. Israel J. Zevin, May 28, 1914; Letter from Julian Harris to Mr. Israel J. Zevin, June 27, 1914; Letter from Julian Harris to Mr. Israel J. Zevin, December 11, 1914; YIVO Archives, Papers of Tashrak, RG 1502, box 1, f. 1. Concerning how Zevin was appreciated, it is worth noting that Bernard G. Richards, respected Jewish immigrant journalist, largely with the Anglo-American Jewish press, wrote to the Zevin Dinner Committee (ca. 1924): "The best science is that which can extract a bit of sunshine out of a cloudy day and

Strong as Tashrak's criticism were, he was sometimes nuanced regarding freethinkers. Two pieces published in 1906 show his nuance.<sup>585</sup> In one, "The Great Jewish Destruction," Tashrak railed against freethinkers for stripping young followers of belief and hope, thereby destroying (*khurbm*) Jewish family life. Even further, he accused freethinkers of offering no moral anchor to replace what had been lost. It should be noted that by "freethinker," Tashrak really had in mind strict materialists, those whose notions of material progress, he claimed, reduced humans to cattle.<sup>586</sup> But, in a short story published the same year, Tashrak's protagonist, an *apikoyres* who seems to reside in a *shtetl*, exhibits a "Jewish heart." In other words, despite having the markings typical of freethinkers, like not fasting on Yom Kippur and denying the afterlife, God, and the Torah, the *apikoyres* shows compassion on the sick and poor, which even endears him to pious Jews.<sup>587</sup> Tashrak used the *apikoyres*' "Jewish heart" to comment on all Jewish hearts. "A Jewish heart," he wrote, "even if it lies in filth, is still a Jewish heart—it's like gold." After the unrepentant *apikoyres* dies, he awakens to find himself in *ganeydn*, or the good afterlife. It's an ironic twist since *apikorsim* are, by definition, not supposed to have a share in *ganeydn*. Tashrak's now repentant, apologetic *apikoyres* discusses his presence in *ganeydn* with Moses and the Almighty. It turns out he isn't responsible for his impiety—the *apikoyres* was not exposed to true faith but corrupted religion. In fact, despite denying the Almighty's existence,

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the greatest art is that which can paint a smile upon a darkened frown. Israel Zevin is a great practitioner of this science and a master of this art." See Letter to the Zevin Dinner Committee from Bernard G. Richards, undated, YIVO Archives, Papers of Tashrak, RG 1502, box 1, f. 1. See similar letters in this box and folders.

<sup>585</sup> Tashrak, "A bisel ongeklibene gal: der groyser yidisher khurbn," *YT* (New York, NY), Aug. 31, 1906; idem, "Mayseh'lekh fun der un yener velt" (Apr. 1, 1906): 9–12. The story was also reprinted in *Minikes'* on April 1, 1927, p. 59. Another piece, see idem, "Di tsvey shkheynim iber'n hoyf," in the section "Oyf der zayt yam," in *Tashrak's beste ertsehlungen*, fourth edition, one volume (New York: Ferlag Tashrak, 1919), 29–31.

<sup>586</sup> Tashrak, "A bisel ongeklibene gal." The main trouble with the freethinker's idea of progress is that the human heart and mind cannot be satisfied simply by a full stomach. The heart and mind "remain as hungry as ever."

<sup>587</sup> Tashrak, "Mayseh'lekh fun der un yener velt." The *apikoyres* often argues with members of the community that Moses never existed, David did not compose the Psalms, and God did not create the world. His "mitzvah" was enlightenment. With his "Jewish heart," the *apikoyres* could not stand witnessing other people's suffering. Human suffering, in fact, turned the man into an *apikoyres*. "He'd often say," Tashrak wrote, "he might believe in God were it not for seeing how pious, good people suffer misfortune and hunger."

the *apikoyres* performed piety. The Almighty tells him, “Your entire life you were my messenger on the earth to help my poor children... I need the heart, and your heart was always with me.”<sup>588</sup> In true *pintele yid* fashion, Tashrak’s *apikoyres* showed a level of faithful action exceeding that of religious authorities.

Tashrak touched on *dos pintele yid* elsewhere, the most notable instance appearing in a short story entitled “Against Your Will You’re a Jew” (1909).<sup>589</sup> The story is set in and around Bokvil, a fictional, *shtetl*-like town of about twenty thousand in New Jersey. The town’s inhabitants are overwhelmingly Jewish and generally observant. “There are,” Tashrak wrote, “countless large synagogues, small synagogues, and prayer circles... [and] enough rabbis, *melamdim*, and ritual slaughterers here to satisfy the needs of a Jewish community that is six times larger than the one in Bokvil.” There is a marginal group of freethinkers in the town, and the narrative follows two of them, humorously named Mr. Goulash and Mr. Latke, as they avoid Bokvil’s High-Holiday fervor.<sup>590</sup> The two men choose to “survive” (quotation marks in the original) the High Holidays in Tsiegvil (Goatsville), a town about ten miles away. They even stay at a non-Jewish hotel in Tsiegvil, so they can do “as they please.” Popular mainly with summer tourists, Tsiegvil is presently empty, and the two freethinkers grow bored sitting on the hotel veranda. Mr. Latke starts humming part of “*Unesanneh Tokef*,” a *piyyut* recited during the High Holidays. When Mr. Goulash realizes what his companion is humming, he does not criticize Mr. Latke for humming a *piyyut* but criticizes his fellow freethinker’s rendition of the tune. Mr. Goulash offers his own version, sung “really movingly” and without a trace of mockery. At this, Mr. Latke joins Mr. Goulash in song.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Tashrak, “‘Against Your Will You’re a Jew,’” 75–7. I will be using Ribak’s recent translation.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid., 76. Also see n.1 on p. 77.

In his analysis of Tashrak's oeuvre, Gil Ribak found that the conservative humorist often used non-Jewish characters to "help assimilated Jews return to their roots"; "Against Your Will You're a Jew" is no different.<sup>592</sup> As the two men sing together, a third voice, that of Mr. Smith, the non-Jewish hotel owner, interjects in order to criticize Mr. Latke and Mr. Goulash's joint rendition of the *piyyut*. He then shocks the two freethinkers by offering his own version, explaining that he learned it when the Jews of Tsiegvil used his dancehall for services. He even serenades the freethinkers with Kol Nidre. As they listen to Mr. Smith's version of Kol Nidre, something stirs within them. In Tashrak's words, "the two freethinkers warmed up. Something began to draw them somewhere—they didn't know where to themselves."<sup>593</sup> After Mr. Smith departs, the freethinkers start wandering around town. Everything is closed and the streets are silent. They suddenly arrive, however, at a synagogue open for High Holiday services. The implication is that a magnetic force deep inside Mr. Latke and Mr. Goulash has drawn them to the synagogue's door. Strangely enough, since the congregation is named "Sons of Faith of the Holy Community of Bokvil," they have wandered a fair distance—the force pulled the two freethinkers back to the town from which they fled. They fabricate an excuse to enter the synagogue without contradicting their freethought, as Mr. Latke says to Mr. Goulash, "I'm curious to go inside and see what the non-enlightened are doing there."<sup>594</sup>

Upon entering, it becomes clear the congregation has a problem. "Something is wrong with the shofar," Tashrak writes, "eight of the strongest Jews in Bokvil tried to blow it, but it didn't work out." The freethinkers could not have arrived at a more opportune time. Mr. Latke offers to blow the shofar, traditionally considered an honor, and he does so successfully, much to

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<sup>592</sup> Ribak, "Reportage from Blotetown," 66.

<sup>593</sup> Tashrak, "'Against Your Will You're a Jew,'" 76.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

the delight of the congregation. Just as singing the *piyyut* became a competition for the freethinkers, Mr. Goulash believes he can best his likeminded companion at blowing the shofar. Indeed, he is similarly successful. The honor of blowing the shofar offers the two freethinkers an excuse to stay for the entire service. “It was inappropriate to leave after the great honor they received there,” Tashrak summarized. The two freethinkers even return to the synagogue the next day, thereby signaling their return to Jewishness. But they also have no excuse now. Mr. Latke concludes to Mr. Goulash, “It’s all in vain. You cannot escape Jewishness. Whether you want to or not—you must remain a Jew!”<sup>595</sup>

Again, the theme of *dos pintele yid* appears long before Mr. Latke says, “You cannot escape Jewishness.” Something awakes inside the two freethinkers, prompted, ironically, by hearing the non-Jewish hotel owner’s rendition of Kol Nidre. The force propels them to the synagogue in Bokvil, where they become involved in the service and to which they then return the following day. Here, Tashrak’s notion of Jewishness figured as an all-encompassing sensibility, including some attachment to Jewish religious life. This is not to say the two freethinkers suddenly become strictly observant, as Tashrak gave readers no indication this was the case. Rather, “Against Your Will You’re a Jew” centered on a different point—the boundaries between religious Jews and antireligious Jews, as constructed by Mr. Latke and Mr. Goulash, evaporate when facing the inner compulsion to “remain a Jew.” It is against their will, after all.<sup>596</sup> Tashrak’s story about freethinkers on the High Holidays, published during the High Holiday season, had its humorous elements, but it also spoke quite sincerely to the moderate conservatism his readers expected.

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<sup>595</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid., 77.

Tashrak used freethinkers more regularly than other conservative fiction writers in the Yiddish press, but there were others. A.D. Oguz, another popular, conservative writer, “profiled” the Jewish immigrant community’s *apikorsim* in a regular series of humorous portraits published in the *Morgn-zhurnal* in 1914. “It seems dumb and foolish,” he began, “for a person to boast he’s an *apikoyres*, a libertine and a lawless youth. Yet, these sorts of braggers exist too, and even a considerable few.” But Oguz ultimately doubted the *apikoyres*’ impious swagger. These braggadocious freethinkers fool the people around them into thinking “they don’t keep any mitzvah [or] religious ceremonies and have no relationship to Jewishness.” Deep down, “they’re Jewish people who fear sinning and keep Jewishness down to the last detail.” They were simply “hidden Jews,” Oguz argued. Were one to encounter these freethinkers on Yom Kippur, they might deny doing anything related to the holiday, but in truth, they fasted in secret and attended *shul*. Oguz’s profile was tongue-in-cheek, but it surely reflected the rhetoric of *dos pintele yid*.<sup>597</sup>

Tashrak also used freethinkers to comment on Jewish immigrant religious norms. He thoroughly addressed this topic in a short story entitled “The *Baal Teshuvah*,” a *baal teshuvah* being an irreligious Jew who becomes observant. The story, first published in *Minikes’ yontef bleter* in 1910, begins in a *shtetl*. Here, the protagonist, Bentshe Kaptim, starts his freethinking journey. By the time the reader meets Bentshe, he has not only relinquished privately keeping traditional religious observance, but he has also publicly declared his heresy.<sup>598</sup> Despite growing bolder and bolder with his freethought, Bentshe must still be careful in the *shtetl* context. On the Sabbath, for instance, he had to smoke cigarettes in secret, “as he couldn’t be entirely sure it was

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<sup>597</sup> Oguz, “Khevrach berimers: Apikorsim,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Jun. 6, 1914. Also see idem, “Tsurik tsu yidishkeit,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Oct. 3, 1910; idem, “Dekorativirte shane tove karten,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Sep. 21, 1908.

<sup>598</sup> Tashrak, “A baltshuve oyf tsu-lehakhes,” *Minikes’* (Oct. 1910): 5–7. This story was reprinted in his collection: Yisroel Y. Zevin, “Der ‘baltshuve’,” in *Tashrak’s beste ertsehlungen* (New York: Ferlag Tashrak, 1910), vol. 4: 61–7.

a safe thing to do.” Sometimes he is not so careful, and public impiety proves literally painful. One Tisha B’av, he received a beating for running around town “showing everyone his berry-darkened tongue” (he ate blueberries to prove he was not fasting).<sup>599</sup>

Bentshe’s material circumstances change, causing him to leave the Old World for the New. He held “bright and beautiful” images of the United States as a “free land,” a place where “a person can say whatever they want... and do whatever they want.” There, or so Bentshe thought, “he can finally be an *apikoyres*... an open, free heretic, unafraid of beatings or some other form of retribution.” The United States will permit, even defend, the public performance of impiety. Bentshe departs with high hopes and arrives on American shores, where he stays with a relative. A chance to show off his freethought appears almost upon arrival. His relative prepares a meal and the two eat together. After finishing, Bentshe “dropped the bomb.” “You should know... I don’t pray after eating,” he tells him. Bentshe’s “bomb” never explodes. The relative is not only unconcerned, but says nobody prays after eating here: “Who has the time? In America, it’s enough that a person gets time to finish a meal.” The scene immediately changes to the next morning, when Bentshe sees a young man walking toward him with “a sack for a *tallis* under his arm.” Mockingly calling the young man “Reb Jew,” Bentshe tries to shock him, “Listen to this! I don’t daven. I haven’t davened in fifteen years.” The young man’s answer instead shocks Bentshe: “I don’t daven either... but the bitter struggle to make ends meet forces me to. I say kaddish and observe *yahrzeits* for those who themselves can’t or don’t want to observe kaddish traditions for their parents. Don’t judge me.” The young man, in other words, prays for pay.<sup>600</sup>

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<sup>599</sup> Tashrak, “A baltshuve oyf tsu-lehakhes” (*Minikes*’ 1910), 5. The Jews of the *shtetl* blame Bentshe’s knowledge for his heretical views, saying that he “knows more than an ordinary Jew should.”

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

Later, Bentshe discusses the matter with his relative, who offers apt advice for Bentshe's Americanization:

“What are you marveling at?” ... “You think you're some sort of hero just because you go around teasing Jews? We scoff at such 'heroes' in America. There's a saying here, '*Maynd yur own biznes*' ['mind your own business']. You can do whatever you want to your own person; people will keep their traps shut. But, if you want to do something to someone else, it's a different matter entirely—they'll take you to court.”

So far, Bentshe has violated the rule of “mind your own business,” proving how unacculturated he is to American norms. The relative's advice apparently has little effect, and a series of failed attempts at shock-and-awe impiety ensue. The next Sabbath, Bentshe notices a man sitting on a park bench wearing a *kapote* (a long black coat worn by Hasidic men). He decides to sit next to the man and blow cigarette smoke in his direction. The man wearing the *kapote*, calm as can be, ends up asking Bentshe for a spare cigarette. A couple days later, Bentshe eats lunch at a treyf restaurant. Stationing himself right outside the door, toothpick in mouth. A *landsman* passes by and asks Bentshe what he is doing at the restaurant. Unfazed by the impious act, the *landsman* mocks him for not eating at a properly treyf restaurant. The man even offers to educate Bentshe on real treyf dining, saying, “You ate in this wretched place? You greenhorn. If you want to eat treyf food, come, I'll show you a better place, a place where the treyf is a little more treyf-ie and where honest-to-goodness non-Jews go. This place is for bums and tramps.”<sup>601</sup>

New opportunities to prove impiety arise with the High Holidays fast approaching, and two instances stand out. Bentshe finds a chance to prove himself to the Jewish coworkers at the shop

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<sup>601</sup> Ibid., 6. Instead of Bentshe shocking his landsman, his landsman has reversed the situation, shocking Bentshe. After all, “It didn't bother him at all that Bentshe eats treyf food; what bothered him was why Bentshe doesn't eat better treyf food.”

where he works. While reading a radical newspaper, he sees an announcement for a picnic on Yom Kippur, hosted by the “Rusko-Yevreyski-Americaniki-Internationalni-Radikalni-Progressivni Society”—Tashrak’s humorous take on the names of radical, Russian-Jewish societies in the United States. Bentshe shows his coworkers the advertisement and tells them he will be going. Again, he only proves how little he knows. A bearded coworker informs him that “their picnics are frauds,” with overpriced sandwiches and foamy beer. Because the picnic is on Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, the coworker laughs that the cost forces fasting. “You *have to* fast at that picnic,” he says, “whether you want to or not. If I want to fast, I can just sit at home and fast.” Another coworker adds, “If you want to enjoy Yom Kippur and not be hungry as a dog, then stay home and eat chicken fried in butter.” The lack of concern shown by his coworkers further frustrates Bentshe. He arrives back at his relative’s place and overhears him talking with his wife about what *shul* they plan to attend for High Holiday services. Another chance! Bentshe lets them know he does not go to *shul*—“I don’t believe in it.” Here, Tashrak keys in on the word believe, as the relative responds, “Who cares? ... You think I go to *shul* for piety’s sake? It’s only because I want to please my wife’s family.” Bentshe assumed a direct correspondence between personal religious sentiment and religious observance. For his relative, religious sentiment has little to do with attending High Holiday services.<sup>602</sup>

Bentshe starts to tailspin. On *erev* Rosh Hashanah, the freethinker runs around “like a mad man,” unable to find sufficient proof of his impiety. Here, Tashrak clarified that Bentshe wants to prove he is *an Old-World freethinker*, “not an *apikoyres* freshly minted in America.”<sup>603</sup> According to Bentshe, freethought is cheap in the United States—a person can put it on or take it off like a hat. As Tashrak narrates it, “[Bentshe] had thought that in a free land he’d have a

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<sup>602</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid., 6.

chance to show off his lack of religious observance. Turns out it's so free it's basically lawless. Nobody is bothered by what anyone else is doing. Nobody cares. If a person is pious or impious, if they pray all year round or they don't even pray on Yom Kippur—simply said, anything goes!" Struggling with America's diverse religious environment, Bentshe longs for rigid boundaries between the sacred and secular. Desires unrealized, he wanders the Jewish streets with "bitter thoughts." Eventually, he encounters two men selling High Holiday *shul* tickets, one with a beard and one cleanly shaven. Bentshe gives brazen impiety one last chance. He informs the men he will not be attending *shul* but passing the time with a woman. The bearded man makes a salacious comment and Bentshe leaves enraged.<sup>604</sup>

Bentshe's rage does not burn against the pious, but those he calls "the free freethinkers." In his *shtetl*, he had poured his soul into freethought and faced "all kinds of persecutions." But here, Bentshe laments, "they took a beautiful ideal and sullied it with their unclean hands. They destroyed my hope, my ambition, my entire being." And so, he decides to enact revenge with piety. He buys a set of High Holiday prayer books at a pushcart, ensuring they contain all the traditional *piyyutim* and prayers. The vendor even guarantees the set's traditionalism by saying "it's from a Vilna press," another sign Bentshe remains entrenched in the past. After his purchase, he runs to buy a ticket to a Rosh Hashanah service, muttering to himself, "I'll show them, those scoundrels!" It is only the beginning of Bentshe's transformation: "He davened with great fervor on both days of Rosh Hashanah, not missing a single *piyyut*. Over those two days, he finished reciting the entirety of the Psalms. On Yom Kippur, he fasted the entire twenty-four hours. He moved out of his cousin's place and took up residence in a house where all the laws of kosher eating were strictly observed." He has, therefore, become "a passionate *baal teshuvah*."<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>604</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid., 7.

The main point of “The *Baal Teshuvah*” is Bentshe’s inability to Americanize. A born and bred freethinker in Eastern Europe, he believes the United States will offer the proper environment for expressing heresy. Bentshe does find opposition, but it is not the opposition he wants. The opposition Bentshe finds comes in the form of mockery—he’s a greenhorn who doesn’t grasp how the United States has reshaped religious observance. If one wants to be a radical freethinker, they can certainly find ways to express radical freethought, but America’s tolerant ethos means nobody cares. “Mind your own business” rules the day. Bentshe, however, cannot accept this rule. He is a man given to extremes. He must perform his radical antireligion and craves recognition. When recognition does not arrive, he swings to the opposite extreme—extreme piety. His turn is, once again, not a sign of acculturation. He remains on the fringes of American life.

Tashrak’s fictional work resembled the nonfiction of Bublik, Dalidansky, and Kaplan. It was complex, often ambivalent, and showed a willingness to see freethinkers as part of the larger Jewish community. These writers for the conservative Yiddish press remained critical of freethinkers and freethought—just as the radical Yiddish press remained critical of religion and the religious, but they too were moving across the aisle. Acculturating to America’s tolerant ethos required the religious to temper their criticism as well.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the depiction of freethinkers dialogued with trends toward an affirmation of Jewishness. This Jewishness was in close dialogue with traditions associated with Jewish piety. The depictions mapped by Kobrin, Libin, Elbe, and Tashrak emphasized how freethinkers were facing considerable internal and external pressures to embrace Jewishness in some form. Tashrak was undoubtedly more conservative, and his pieces stressed observance

more than others. Regardless, they shared the view that freethinkers were beset by forces assailing the consistency they desired. As these writers depicted, freethinkers seemed to be failures at being freethinkers, at least by the standards characters themselves presumed.

Journalists in the radical and conservative press used the freethinker to work out the tensions the freethinker historically represented—a clear divorce with Jewish norms. Just as the radical Yiddish press found ways of embracing religion, so too did the conservative Yiddish press find ways of embracing freethinkers, namely freethinking Jewish nationalists. The next chapter centers on the same period, 1905 to 1914, and it strengthens the case that depictions of freethinkers and debates about freethought abounded during these years. The next chapter, however, turns its attention toward nonfiction.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Debating Freethought and Religion in the American Yiddish Press (1905-1914)

### Introduction

In 1913, Abe Cahan began publishing a serialized novel, “The Autobiography of An American Jew: The Rise of David Levinsky,” in *McClure’s Magazine*. The expanded, book version, simply entitled *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), became Cahan’s English-language magnum opus. As fictional autobiographies, both versions narrate the transformation of David, an impoverished, observant Jew who emigrates from Russia to the United States, into an unobservant, wealthy businessman. Immigration did not account for all of David’s changes. His departure from religious tradition, for example, actually began in Russia, but the New-World context undoubtedly accelerated his changes. Within a year or two after arriving, David had rejected religious observance entirely. He was no radical, but he identified as a freethinker—an avid acolyte of Herbert Spencer. David still found himself drawn into religious contexts and regularly used sacred language to frame his New-World passions as religion, e.g., education, romantic love, etc. Although David rocketed through the social strata, he never made sense of his past piety in his new environment.

Near the end of Cahan’s 1913 version, David recalls falling in love with Anna, the daughter of a once-renowned Hebrew poet named Tevkin. Tevkin, who also immigrated to New York, was a freethinking Zionist, and David befriended him while drawing near Anna. Tevkin’s immediate family was a diverse bunch of freethinkers. In David’s words, “each of its members worshipped at the shrine of some ‘ism’.” The freethinking Tevkin began embracing secularized versions of Jewish traditions as he aged. But did Tevkin have another motive, perhaps unknown even to himself? Anna, a freethinking territorialist in the vein of Israel Zangwill, doubted her

father's impiety. Immediately before an ostensibly secular Passover seder, which David attended, Anna told David what she thought of her father's freethought: "You need not take it all literally, at the bottom of his heart he is far more religious than he would have one believe." As David remembered the seder, "Tevkin tried to put a Zionist construction upon it, as if he were celebrating the liberation not in a religious sense but merely as a nationalistic holiday." Tevkin, secular sensibility in tow, informed everyone Passover is "our Fourth of July," at which point Anna glanced at David and winked, hinting at her doubts about her father's lack of faith.<sup>606</sup>

Cahan's 1917 version expanded on the "-isms" of Tevkin's other family members, including some children altogether absent in the 1913 version. One was Tevkin's son Moissey, an "uncompromising atheist and Internationalist" who rejected the secular seder because of the seder's religious connotations.<sup>607</sup> Later elaborations aside, Cahan's 1913 version is still interesting. Both Anna and Tevkin embraced ideologies attuned to Jewish collectivity, but Tevkin's fondness for Jewish ritual sparked her doubts. Was Tevkin religious, perhaps without knowing it or without admitting it? Cahan did not give the reader a clear answer in either version. David ultimately failed to woo Anna, and his disappointment turned into disassociating from the entire family. Without an answer, Anna's doubts existed side-by-side with Tevkin's own framing of the seder. But the scene is interesting for another reason. Two years prior, *Forverts* contributors fiercely debated the exact question underlying it: Could a freethinking radical celebrate Passover in an irreligious manner? Cahan, and some companions, answered "Yes!" Others: "No!" Even others: "Maybe, but why?" Contributors wondered, like Anna, whether a secular Passover would slide into pious intentionality. Cahan's David intersects the

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<sup>606</sup> Abraham Cahan, "The Autobiography of An American Jew: The Rise of David Levinsky," *McClure's Magazine* (Jul. 1913): 122.

<sup>607</sup> Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 494.

1911 Passover debate in another way. Just as David used sacred language to frame his New-World passions *as religion*, the Passover debate turned on another question: Had freethinking socialists made freethought a religion? If so, was this a problem? The word “religion” was at play in this debate.

This chapter focuses on several instances where the word “religion” was at play and where relations between freethinkers and religion were contested. Between 1905 and 1914, the American Yiddish press was abuzz with commentary on freethinkers and freethought: How tolerant should a freethinker be toward observant family, observant coworkers, observant neighbors, etc.? Had a new generation of tolerant freethinkers gained a hegemony over a generation of less tolerant freethinkers? Underlying these and similar questions was a deeper question Jewish freethinkers had long posed: How should a *true* freethinker behave? Between 1905 and 1914, discussions and debates showed how “old guard” freethinkers were increasingly on the defensive.

Discussion begins with an examination of the advice columns and human-interest stories of D.M. Hermalin, one of the most popular Yiddish journalists of his day. Hermalin commented on freethought before 1905, but it was during his time at Louis Miller’s *Varhayt*, from approximately 1905 to 1914, that he reached the height of his journalistic prowess. Relations between freethinkers and the religious were regularly part of his repertoire. The chapter continues with an analysis of several editorials by Yankev Pfeffer, a popular journalist with a radical background who was editing a conservative weekly. The editorials, published in 1908, applied the word “religion” to *apikorses* (heresy) and socialism. Conversation then turns to book reviews of Benyomen Faygenboym’s *Kosher and treyf* (1909), what the veteran socialist called

an examination of “religion from a cultural-historical standpoint.”<sup>608</sup> Was Faygenboym’s book antiquated propaganda or objective science? Reviewers of all sorts weighed in, but the reviews I consider came mainly from the socialist Yiddish press. The chapter concludes with the *Forverts*’ Passover debate (1911), which occurred after Cahan advocated freethinkers celebrate the seder.

In *Authentic Fakes*, a study of religion and popular culture in the United States (see introduction), David Chidester remarked that “the meaning of the term *religion* is determined by usage,” and its usage has often been “as a highly charged marker of difference.” Chidester continued: “Whatever the word might have meant in ancient Greco-Roman discourse, the term *religio* was consistently used to refer to an authentic human activity in opposition to *superstitio*, an inauthentic, alien, or even less than fully human activity that was allegedly based on ignorance, fear, or fraud.” “Religion” as a marker of difference has continued in modern times, often in contradistinction to “superstition” or “cult.” “In these cases,” Chidester noted, “*religion* was used as an instrument of denial.” But in other cases, people have identified certain activities and cultural products, e.g., radical politics, corporations, etc., as “religion” in order to “raise the stakes in the cultural contest.” Here, “religion” has functioned as an instrument of elevation: to make people aware of a “mundane” activity or object’s serious work.<sup>609</sup>

The contested, flexible employ of “religion” has been a theme throughout this study. Chapter one, for example, showed how Jewish radicals used “religion” to describe their political vision and revolutionary passions. Freethinking Jewish radicals were no different from any other radicals in this regard. This chapter, however, more comprehensively reveals how the discourses surrounding freethought intersected the flexible use of “religion.” It considers the complex work

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<sup>608</sup> See the title page of Benyomen Faygenboym, *Kosher un treyf* (New York: The Free Thought Publishing Company, 1909).

<sup>609</sup> Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 17–18.

“religion” performed as radicals argued over approaches to freethought. With the growing connections between nationalist paradigms and radical politics, especially after 1905, the stakes in defining the true freethinker were heightened, and “religion” became an effective tool employed in the conversation.

### **Tensions and Tolerance: D.M. Hermalin and the *Varhayt***

Advice columns and human-interest stories, influenced heavily by Anglo-American press, were popular among everyday readers of the American Yiddish press.<sup>610</sup> Scholars have regarded the *Forverts*’ “Bintel Brief” (Bundle of Letters), which made its debut in 1906, as the exemplary case of a popular and impactful Yiddish advice column. But, the “Bintel Brief” did not have an exclusive corner the advice-literature market.<sup>611</sup> Advice literature, centering on an anecdote, e.g., hearsay, a personal conversation, or a letter (letters were most typical), was common in the American Yiddish press. D.M. Hermalin perfected advice columns and human-interest stories during his tenure at Louis Miller’s *Varhayt*.<sup>612</sup>

The *Varhayt*’s liberalism, nationalism, and eclecticism suited Hermalin. Born in Vaslui, Romania in 1865, he received a traditional religious education as a child but switched to secular studies with a private tutor. He relocated to Bucharest in 1881, and by 1885 he was on his way to the United States. His career in American Yiddish journalism began in 1886 with the

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<sup>610</sup> Regarding the form in general, Ayelet Brinn has summarized, “the modern advice column was a product of the 1880s and 1890s and reflected newspapers’ transformations from political into commercial institutions... encourag[ing] readers to share private, intimate details about their lives, and to view newspapers as advisors to turn to for support and guidance.” See Brinn, “*Miss Amerike*,” 96. On select advice manuals, see Eli Lederhendler, “Guides for the Perplexed: Sex, Manners, and Mores for the Yiddish Reader in America,” *Modern Judaism* 11, no. 3 (1991): 321–41.

<sup>611</sup> For examples of work on the “Bintel Brief,” see *A Bintel Brief*, ed. Metzker; Cassedy, “A *Bintel brief*”; Bressler, “Selected Family Patterns in W.I. Thomas’ Unfinished Study of the *Bintl Brief*”; Wolfe, “The ‘Bintel Brief’”; Jessica Kirzane, “Ambivalent Attitudes toward Intermarriage in the *Forverts*, 1905-1920,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 8, no. 1 (2015): 23–47; Hong Cai, “The Dear Diane Letters and the Bintel Brief: The Experiences of Chinese and Jewish Immigrant Women in Encountering America,” *Ethnic Studies Review* 34, no. 1 (2011): 69–88.

<sup>612</sup> For an example of letters collected by a Yiddish newspaper, see YIVO Archives, Day-Morning Journal (“*Der Tog*”) 1922-1972 Papers, RG 639, boxes 36-42, f. 343-438. I found this reference in Brinn, “*Miss Amerike*,” 114 n.235 and confirmed the contents myself.

*Folkstsaytung* and continued with notable stints at Getsil Zelikovits' *Folksadvokat* and the *Teglikher herald*.<sup>613</sup> Hermalin was prolific, publishing popular philosophy, translations of world literature, serialized novels, essays, and short fiction [Figure 4.1].<sup>614</sup> Though unconventional in his religious views, he was quite comfortable in the conservative press. Before arriving at the *Varhayt*, he was editor of the daily *Yidische velt*, the product of the combined efforts of “downtown” and “uptown” Jews.<sup>615</sup> When the *Yidische velt* was sold to Ezekiel Sarasohn, Hermalin refused to stay, apparently out of disdain for Sarasohn's style of journalism.<sup>616</sup> Sometime in 1905, Hermalin found a post at Miller's *Varhayt*.

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<sup>613</sup> Reyzen, “Hermalin, Dovid-Moyshe,” *Leksikon*, vol. 1: 866–70.

<sup>614</sup> Examples of his journalistic writings, see Hermalin, *Zhurnalistiche shriften*; philosophical writing, idem, *Di gottheyt* (New York: Chinsky, 1901); novel on radicalism and love, idem, *Fraye liebe* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.); religious biography, idem, *Yeyshu-hanoysri*, reprint (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1931).

<sup>615</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz noted that the paper “assembled an oddly assorted staff of writers—socialists, anarchists, Hebraists, Zionists, popularizers and poets.” See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “Louis Marshall's Yiddish Newspaper, ‘The Jewish World’: A Study in Contrasts,” *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 2 (1963): 105. Also see M.M. Silver, *Louis Marshall and the Rise of Jewish Ethnicity in America: A Biography* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 59–70; David G. Dalin, “Louis Marshall, The Jewish Vote, and the Republican Party,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (1992): 55–84.

<sup>616</sup> Marshall to Hermalin, May 28, 1904, LM Papers, box 1573, f. 6; Hermalin to Marshall, May 31, 1904, LM Papers, box 12, f. 1. These correspondences show Marshall tried to ensure Hermalin would be able to remain at the paper when Sarasohn purchased it.



[Figure 4.1]

Cartoon: “Hermalin—(‘H’) The Women’s Editor of the ‘Varhayt’”

[Kundes, Dec. 10, 1909]

Page title: In the World of Miracles, Latkes, and Wives

Caption: A group of “broken hearts” and “wounded souls” drink in

Torah, wisdom, and words of comfort from their great rebe’n and guide.

Note: Highbrow Yiddish literary critics panned Hermalin as a writer who appealed to women. In truth, Hermalin was constantly

responding to women and men who wrote the *Varhayt* looking for solace and guidance.

The *Varhayt*, like the *Forverts*, advocated tolerance and chastised both the pious and impious when conflicts caught public attention. Reflecting upon recent confrontations, the *Varhayt* confessed in 1906 that, while a Yom Kippur ball is “foolish and shameful,” the observant also had no right “to shatter windows and crack the heads of unbelievers on Yom Kippur.”<sup>617</sup> Hermalin added to the conversation. A year later (1907), he screamed at the pious and impious to “Be Tolerant!” (his editorial’s headline) on the upcoming Yom Kippur.<sup>618</sup> Reiterating “religion is private,” he reminded readers that “rivers of blood were spilt to give everyone the freedom to believe in and pray to his god as he feels, as it suits him.”<sup>619</sup> Hermalin turned to prominent European and American freethinkers to prove his point—Danton, Robespierre, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson could be counted among those who had sacrificed themselves on freedom’s altar. These freethinkers, and by implication other tolerant freethinkers, “deserve the deepest respect of all religious people.” Hermalin similarly insisted Jewish tradition proved the need for tolerance.<sup>620</sup> “True Judaism,” as Hermalin defined it, rested on “tolerance and forbearance to all ideas... The Jew who wants to become God’s advocate, who wants to stick up for God, is not a Jew.” Why was tolerance so vital? The gaze of non-Jews could lead to political backlash. “It is not merely for our sake alone,” he implored, “but also for the sake of brothers and sisters overseas who look at this country as their future home. Their fate

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<sup>617</sup> “Yomkiper beler un yomkiper pogromen.”

<sup>618</sup> H., “Zayt tolerant!,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Sep. 17, 1907.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid. Humanity reached “true progress,” he suggested, when a synagogue, a church, and a mosque can peacefully coexist on the same street.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid. For one, Jews “suffered more than anyone else, and thus need to be thankful for such noble spirits who fought for their freedom—to serve and praise God as religious Jewish sensibility dictates.”

hangs very much on our conduct.” Non-Jews must see the Jew “as a peaceful and descent citizen... who doesn’t bring intolerance with him... one of the dirtiest and most dishonorable traits.”<sup>621</sup>

Proceeding to Hermalin’s advice columns and human-interest stories, one must recognize that he may have, to varying degree, edited or fabricated material. George Wolfe, in his 1933 analysis of the *Forverts*’ “Bintel Brief,” found that editors sometimes transformed reader submissions, whether intending to improve writing style or construct a more compelling narrative. The dearth of archival evidence for advice columns means it is impossible to know whether specific journalists employed precisely the same practices, but Hermalin likely shaped details with an eye toward reader interest and themes he wanted to address.<sup>622</sup>

Apart from tolerance, what Hermalin called “the secret of true civilization and human happiness,” there were other principles undergirding his writing.<sup>623</sup> Two stand out. The first, as stated in an August 1912 piece, was that freethinkers and the religious constitute “two classes,” and so, “if it’s possible that these two classes don’t encounter each other, it’s a very good thing.”<sup>624</sup> The second, expressed in a 1914 advice column, was that “a fat, happy youth can’t be a freethinker.” This principle, in fact, was a reworked quote from the Gemara, which states “a fat, happy youth can’t be completely pious.” The quote meant the piety of an untested youth cannot be assumed. When circumstances change, the youth’s religious sentiments may change. Hermalin reversed the aphorism and applied it to freethinkers. When circumstances change, the youth’s freethought may change.<sup>625</sup> Though Hermalin explicitly stated these two principles at a

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<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> Wolfe, “The ‘Bintel Brief.’”

<sup>623</sup> H., “A fanatiser fraydenker,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Aug. 15, 1911.

<sup>624</sup> H., “Tsvey unpasende menshen,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Aug. 31, 1912.

<sup>625</sup> H., “Fraydenker’,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Feb. 6, 1914.

late date during his *Varhayt* tenure, 1912 and 1914 respectively, his earlier work for the daily showed similar ideas—close relations between the pious and impious created challenges, and freethinkers may change when circumstances change.

An obvious difficulty in pious-impious relations lay in generational gaps. Impious youths struggling to tolerate pious elders figured as part of Hermalin's repertoire. To promote peace in the home, Hermalin's brand of tolerance meant possibly pacifying pious elders. As a case in point, in a 1907 advice column entitled "Pious Parents and Free Children," Hermalin responded to the case of a freethinking husband and wife who shared a living space with the wife's observant father. According to the letter, the father was especially aggressive in pressing piety on the rest of the family.<sup>626</sup> Hermalin rejected the older man's aggressive stance, but he also advised, if conscience permitted, the freethinking couple consider accommodating the older man in some capacity. Freethinkers need not capitulate to extremes, like demands to wear a *kapote* or *sheytel*, but these demands were likely rare. If demands extended beyond what an individual could handle, and no resolution was in sight, he suggested freethinking children rent a separate apartment for pious parents. Just as tolerance on the Jewish street was desirable, tolerance should prevail in private relations.<sup>627</sup>

Romantic relations created specific tensions too.<sup>628</sup> Life circumstances, e.g., tragedies, successes, births, deaths, acculturation, etc., might change how the pious and impious interacted with their partner. He presented a stark case of relational volatility in an advice column entitled, "He's Frum, She Isn't." The letter came from a woman, "Mrs. M.M." Because her pious parents did not have a son and believed she would marry a rabbi, they gave her a traditional religious

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<sup>626</sup> H., "Frume eltern un fraye kinder." For two other early works by Hermalin, see idem, "Fraydenker," *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Apr. 30, 1906; idem, "Der apikoyres," *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Jul. 14, 1906.

<sup>627</sup> H., "Frume eltern un fraye kinder."

<sup>628</sup> H., "Tsvey unpasende menshen." For similar, but from the *Morgn-zhurnal*, see Malits, *Di heym un di froy*, 221.

education, but she also studied some Russian, German, and French. After becoming caught up in revolutionary activity, she left her childhood home and fell in love with another revolutionary. Having fled Russia for the United States, both Mr. and Mrs. M.M. were “free from religion” and established “an entirely secular house.” Suddenly, when the last Passover rolled around, her husband wanted matzah. Believing it a joke, she purchased some. Then, on Yom Kippur, Mr. M.M. went to shul. Now that Passover was again upcoming, he wanted “everything to be *peysekhdik*,” i.e., appropriate and kosher for Passover. His newfound religiosity reportedly brought them into conflict for the first time, and so Mrs. M.M. petitioned the *Varhayt* for advice.<sup>629</sup>

Drawing on gender stereotypes, namely that women are “nearly always the conservative ones,” Hermalin responded by explaining why he thought Mr. M.M., and not Mrs. M.M., had embraced religion. As he presented Eastern European Jewish life, young men were usually given rigorous religious education and forced to observe religious ceremonies. If they rejected religion, it came “not out of conviction,” but because “they can’t forgive those who robbed them of the freedom of childhood,” religious parents and teachers, that is.<sup>630</sup> Hermalin assumed Mr. M.M.’s parents likely did not press a religious education on him. When Mr. M.M. joined the revolutionary cause, his fight for freedom came not out of a rejection of religion but purely political consciousness. The American context further shaped Mr. M.M.’s piety—America’s diverse, democratizing environment proved “he can be a good political warrior and sympathetic to religion.” Hermalin advised Mrs. M.M. to accept her husband’s piety and try to live in an

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<sup>629</sup> H., “Er iz frum, zi nit,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Apr. 2, 1910.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid. With these sentiments, Hermalin expressed what had been his longstanding view regarding the differences between Jewish education in the United States and Europe. Jewish education in the United States may be less robust or thorough than in Europe, he thought, but the strictness of traditional religious education in Europe negatively impacted the religious imagination.

accommodating fashion. Nobody, after all, had “a right to hinder his joy and freedom in this regard.” Why not accommodate, after all? Mr. M.M. was not demanding his wife believe, which would be out of bounds. Hermalin’s advice, concluding with a call for tolerance—“People, enlightened people above all, be tolerant!” prodded Mrs. M.M. to think of her freethought as freeing her to accommodate his pious desires.<sup>631</sup>

In the case of pious-impious marriages, couples often had to negotiate sacred matters *in potentia*, like how they would raise their children and relate to pious family. The Yiddish press was long aware of such issues, and it was the case for Lola and Henry Lapidus of Boston.<sup>632</sup> Lola was a freethinker active in the worker’s movement who met her eventual husband, Henry, while tutoring him in English.<sup>633</sup> The two fell in love, though she was entirely secular and cosmopolitan, and he was a religious Zionist. Before agreeing to be married, they established amenable conditions for a life together. The most important condition was “If we have boys, they won’t be circumcised.” Right before their second child, a son, was born (their first child was a girl), Henry’s pious mother arrived from Eastern Europe. After the birth, Lola required a lengthy hospitalization, and Henry allowed his mother to shift family dynamics. Still feeling the effects of her illness, Lola returned home to find her son had been circumcised and the house had been adapted to accommodate religious observance. Her mother-in-law would also light the Sabbath candles and compel Lola to do the same. Henry begged Lola not to protest, and she agreed to some extent, but she lamented her home had been “transformed into a true Jewish house, with all religious customs.” Pregnant once again, she was worried the child, if a boy, would be

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<sup>631</sup> Ibid. For similar commentary from Hermalin, see *idem*, *Zhurnalistiche shriften*, 127–31.

<sup>632</sup> H., “Tsvey unpasende menshen.” For similar concern about freethinkers married to more observant Jews, and more, see Tashrak, *Etikete*, 222–8; and later Malits, “Di heym un di froy: muters un kinder”; *idem*, *Di heym un di froy*, 71–5.

<sup>633</sup> H., “Tsvey unpasende menshen.” They were apparently looking for a “judgment” (*psak*) on who was in the right and who was in the wrong.

circumcised.<sup>634</sup> Hermalin sided with Lola—Henry was violating the agreement they made before the wedding. But Hermalin also recognized a deeper problem. Somewhat ill, Lola was not well-positioned to wield influence over household matters. With poor health requiring extended assistance, leaving was not realistic, so she should remain and capitulate. Hermalin used Lola and Henry’s case as a cautionary tale, and Henry was only partly to blame. He reasoned that “[Lola] made the same error as many other freethinkers, namely that she could have an effect [on her husband] after the wedding.” In reality, “Her husband’s beliefs were not open to persuasion. He believes and will believe without evidence.” Their “mixed-marriage” revealed the trouble potentially awaiting interrelations.<sup>635</sup>

Freethinkers could end up stuck in other ways. This was the case for Emma Lifshits, wife of ardent freethinker Elmar.<sup>636</sup> Emma was, in Hermalin’s gendered language, “one of those half-baked women—half-enlightened, half not.” Emma’s “half-enlightenment” mirrored the primary male influences in her life. Her husband was a freethinker and her father, a shochet, was “a huge fanatic and terrible zealot.” Emma’s freethought had also not been tested by hardship. Thus, “as long as she was free from unhappiness,” she aligned with her husband’s freethought. Everything soon changed. Elmar and Emma eventually had a son who remained uncircumcised.<sup>637</sup> Emma’s father, meanwhile, prayed “God would remove his *goyish* grandson from the face of the earth” (i.e., let the boy die). By sheer coincidence, since Hermalin did not believe in supernatural curses, the child became ill and died.<sup>638</sup> While Elmar felt no personal guilt for his son’s death, his wife reasoned that, had she circumcised the boy, “her father wouldn’t have damned the child and

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<sup>634</sup> Ibid.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

<sup>636</sup> H., “Nit konsekvente fraydenker,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Oct. 28, 1911.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid. As Hermalin represented their choice, it did not come from Emma’s personal conviction but from her husband’s.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid. Hermalin tried to ensure readers that God would not listen to the prayers of “idiotic fools,” reminding them instead that “blind fate often finds its way to the dark fanatics.”

God wouldn't have brought the child to a premature end." After trying to contact the soul of her deceased child, Emma wound up in an insane asylum.<sup>639</sup> Hermalin placed considerable blame on Emma's "fanatical" father, but again the freethinker deserved some blame—Elmar should have curbed his wife's superstition regarding the dead. But, even more important, he should have recognized that even before their son's birth, Emma would face pressures to circumcise the child. Elmar should have anticipated how lacking this "sign of Jewishness" might impact his wife and family relations. "A freethinking husband," Hermalin summarized, "should always consider the other side." Elmar had incorrectly drawn the limits of tolerance.<sup>640</sup>

Hermalin also constructed and lambasted a particularly contemptable character—the "fanatic freethinker." In 1909, for example, Hermalin published an advice-column entitled "A Fanatic Freethinker."<sup>641</sup> He began by outlining the central theme: religious fanatics and freethinking fanatic are fundamentally the same. In his words, "If someone is a fanatic, it makes no difference if his fanaticism is about a belief or an idea." The observant, "if liberal," can be "much, much more elevated than a fanatical freethinker." These comments centered on a specific case, that of a young Jewish woman who recently arrived in the United States and whose husband, after arrival, died. The widow decided to return to Russia. Because, she reasoned, certain religious norms still prevailed in Russia, she sought to do *halizah*, a ceremony releasing a Jewish male from the obligation of marrying his brother's childless widow (levirate marriage, or *yibbum*). If she did not do *halizah*, she would be considered an *agunah*, a woman still bound to her husband by Jewish law. Performing *halizah* would allow her to remarry without fear of being

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<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> H., "'Fraydenker'." Apart from inconsistency, some freethinkers were simply liars. They put on and took off the mantle of freethought to accomplish their goals.

<sup>641</sup> H., "A fanatisher fraydenker," *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Dec. 30, 1909; and H., "A fanatisher fraydenker" (Aug. 1911).

considered an adulterer.<sup>642</sup> Unfortunately for the widow, the brother of her deceased husband, who lived in the United States, was a “fanatic freethinker,” in Hermalin’s words. He refused to do *halizah* because he did not believe in “such foolish things.” By refusing, the brother-in-law was forcing her into the position of an *agunah*.

Hermalin was no supporter of *halizah*. He believed levirate marriage’s original intent was honorable because it ensured protections for widows, but it had fallen out of favor even in rabbinic times. It was obviously out of step with modern sensibilities—“the entire ceremony is, therefore, entirely superfluous and the rabbis needed to abolish it long ago and not bring many young Jewish women into pointless distress.” Yet, Hermalin recognized *halizah* remained relevant to many pious Jews in modern times. Qualms with *halizah* aside, a tolerant freethinker would perform the ritual, releasing the widow to go her own way. *Halizah* presented no existential threat to the freethinker; the man was simply being a stubborn contrarian to “prove” the “silliness” of Jewish law. According to Hermalin, critiquing *halizah* had its place in tolerant discourse, but refusing to show compassion to a widow was heartless fanaticism.<sup>643</sup>

In 1911, Hermalin wrote another advice column entitled “A Fanatic Freethinker,” prompted by the case of Hannah L.<sup>644</sup> Hannah was a young, observant Jewish woman whose husband, in Hermalin’s words, was “a so-called freethinker.” When Hannah and her eventual husband, Maier, first met, they had different social, political, and religious views. She was a religiously inclined Zionist while he despised religion and nationalism. Maier made a compromise permitting them to marry. He will remain a freethinker and permit any male children to be circumcised, though he would not be present at the *bris*. She could also keep a

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<sup>642</sup> H., “A fanatisher fraydenker” (Dec. 1909).

<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

<sup>644</sup> H., “A fanatisher fraydenker” (Aug. 1911).

kosher home, provided the food was good. After marrying, however, Maier neglected the agreement, demanding his wife prepare treyf dishes. He was sometimes “so insistent, so brutal, that Hannah, simply out of fear, had to give in.” When their second child was born, a boy, Maier refused to let the boy be circumcised. Maier assumed, Hermalin thought, that Hannah would relinquish her pious lifestyle once they were married. Since Hannah did not change, he was trying to compel her toward impiety.<sup>645</sup>

Hermalin chastised the freethinking Maier for breaking his promise. Hannah never forced her piety on Maier, so he was the “sinister and brutal fanatic.” Hermalin used the case to universalize fanatics and fanaticism—“Fanaticism is fanaticism in religion, nationalism, free sensibilities, and even in atheism. We can find fanatics everywhere.” But just as fanaticism was universal, so too “religions can be made even from free sensibilities and atheism.” Further, a fanatic “religion” based on freethought or atheism could be “just as hideous and irritating—also just as dangerous—as the Russian Catholic Church (Russian Orthodox?) or any other intolerant church.” For Maier, Hermalin asserted, his “free sensibility and unbelief became an underlying religion.”<sup>646</sup> Hermalin’s use of religion in this column had analogues elsewhere in his *Varhayt* writing. In an October 1909 human-interest story, for example, Hermalin affirmed, “religion, in all likelihood, is a human need, or it is second nature for humans.”<sup>647</sup> Since religion was second nature, it followed that “not only can believers be religious, but non-believers are also capable of being adherents of religion.” While moderns did not *need* to associate with any conventional religious community, religious sentiments and religious impulses remained.<sup>648</sup>

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<sup>645</sup> Ibid. There was even a point when the couple had company at their home and Maier demanded treyf food for their guests.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid.

<sup>647</sup> H., “Varum men geyt in kirkhe,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Oct. 29, 1909.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid. Like other Yiddish journalists in the radical press, Hermalin drew on popular science and anthropology to argue religion was part of humanity’s second nature. Using artistic expression an example, he summarized, “Music,

Throughout Hermalin's advice columns and human-interest stories, he stressed tolerance between the religious and irreligious. Sure, it would be best if they avoided each other, but they were bound to come into contact, at work, at home, on the street, etc. Tolerance was the ultimate sign of one's Americanization. It was also a sign a freethinker was truly free to think and a sign of true Judaism for the religious. Hermalin had his particular style and approach, but his broader sentiments were not distant from the *Forverts* and its Bintel Brief column. For example, when one freethinker, J.B., needed advice for coping with future orthodox in-laws, an editor advised "there are times when it pay to give in to old parents and not grieve them."<sup>649</sup> The *Varhayt* and *Forverts* had different interpretations of nationalist sentiments, but both advanced a tolerance growing ever distant from radical approaches to religion years prior.

### **Yankev Pfeffer: *Apikorses* as Religion and Socialism as Religion**

Addressed throughout this study, Yiddish journalists of all stripes found themselves in positions where their personal views did not mirror the forward-facing sentiments of the papers employing them. While critics, historic and contemporary, might criticize this seeming inconsistency, historical actors may have had few issues with such arrangements and alignments. As the American Yiddish press expanded and the political atmosphere diversified, many journalists with radical ties took positions at conservative newspapers. This section analyzes how Yankev Pfeffer, a founding member of the *Forverts* and editor of the conservative weekly *Amerikaner*, depicted *apikorses* and socialism as religion, both appearing in spring and summer 1908.

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theater, all derive from the temple, from service to god, and as a result people find beauty, loveliness, pleasure, and a lofty delight in it."

For some other work about freethinkers, see H., "A harbe kashe," *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Mar. 8, 1912; idem, "Der khosid shoyte," *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Jun. 19, 1912; idem, "Fraydenker un shtarbt mit kharote," *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Nov. 30, 1913; idem, "A frume mame in a fraydenker's hoyz"; idem, "Er iz a fraydenker un zi iz a frume," *Tog* (New York, NY), Sep. 4, 1915; idem, "A por fraydenkers oyf der linker zayt," *Tog* (New York, NY), May 11, 1917; idem, "An idiot iz nokh erger fun a hipokrit," *Tog* (New York, NY), Oct. 17, 1917.

<sup>649</sup> *A Bintel Brief*, ed. Metzker, 53.

Before turning to Pfeffer, it is important to consider the complex use of “religion” in the conservative Yiddish press. Shown in chapter one, conservative newspapers like the *Tageblat* often employed “religion” when describing Jewish radicals—it was rhetorically functional in portraying radicals as fanatics. Radicals themselves, Faygenboym prime among them, described social revolution in sacred terms. Among some radicals, the trend continued into the first decade of the twentieth century—they described radical politics as religion. But the trend also persisted in the conservative Yiddish press. As a case in point, in a *Tageblat* article in 1906, a pseudonymous author, “Ben-Adam,” criticized freethinking youths in Russia and the United States for blindly devoting themselves to “the Torah of freethought.” Even worse, the freethinking Jewish youth try forcing their “path of righteousness” on everyone else. They do not behave like true freethinkers. “A freethinker,” the author stressed, “says that since he has a right to be free, so too does the next person have a right to be pious.” The author concluded by challenging readers to compare the much-maligned rabbi with the freethinking, radical youth—they will quickly realize “who’s more of a fanatic [and] who’s more honorable and freer.”<sup>650</sup>

Yankev Pfeffer was born in Radzikov, Galicia to a wealthy Hasidic family. He received a *heder* education in his early years alongside some private tutoring in Polish and German. An ardent Hasid in his youth, he moved Hungary to study in the Siget Rav’s yeshivah. He became swept up in the Haskalah at the age of eighteen and, upon returning to Radzikov, fervently promoted *maskilic* ideas. He left for the United States in 1895. At some point, he became a socialist and aided in the founding of the *Forverts*, where he also began his career as a journalist in 1901. Pfeffer was soon contributing to an array of periodicals, including *Minikes’ yontef*

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<sup>650</sup> Ben-Adam [“human being”], “Hayntige fanatizmus,” *Tageblat* (New York, NY), Oct. 2, 1906. As the author represented freethinking youths, “fanatic intolerance” made them into inquisitors and “sinister Jesuits” following the motto “the one who isn’t with us is against us.” Ben-Adam also recognized freethinking fanatics existed on both sides of the Atlantic, his examples being young Russian Bundists and Jewish youths on the Lower East Side.

*bleter*, the *Tageblatt*, and the *Morgn-zhurnal*. He eventually became the editor of the weekly *Amerikaner*.<sup>651</sup>

In April 1908, Pfeffer published an article in the *Amerikaner* entitled “The New Great Religion.”<sup>652</sup> He began with a bit of mystery—he started describing the features of an unnamed religion. So, what did this unnamed religion share with conventional religious traditions? Where did it differ? The unnamed religion was not as old as conventional religious traditions, and it did not have long-established institutions, e.g., churches, synagogues, mosques, etc. The unnamed religion, however, did mirror conventional religious traditions in several key ways—it had followers and fervor. “Its followers,” Pfeffer stated, “number in the millions, and they are just as fanatical as the followers of all religions were and are.” Here, Pfeffer finally put a name to the unnamed religion: *apikorses*. He recognized that, if you were to talk to the *apikorsim*, “they’ll show you all sorts of proof they have no faith.” After all, their motto is, Pfeffer claimed, “there isn’t”—“there isn’t a God in the heavens, there isn’t a higher being who created or rules this world, there isn’t a heaven, and there isn’t a this and there isn’t a that.”<sup>653</sup> He also assumed his readers may balk at calling *apikorses* a religion since it is fashionable, scientific, and modern. Pfeffer turned to the notion of faith to prove his point: “The large majority of people who follow *apikorses* know just as little of it as they knew of religions, and they follow this idea like the former fanatics followed their teachers.”<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>651</sup> Reyzen, “Pfeffer, Yaakov,” *Leksikon*, vol. 2: 949–51. His last name appears (handwritten) alongside other notable Yiddish journalists—like Zelikovits, Paley, Y.Y. Zevin, M. Seiffert, Max Bucans, Kh. Malits, and Wiernik—on a communication from “The Zunser Jubilee Committee,” August 19, 1904, Peter Wiernik and Bertha Wiernik Collection, Subgroup II: Peter Wiernik Papers, 1888-1936, box 11, f. 5, Yeshiva University Libraries. It is unclear who wrote the list (possibly Wiernik), but it indicates Pfeffer was a notable journalist at the time.

<sup>652</sup> Y. Pfeffer, “Di naye groyse religyon,” *Amerikaner* (New York, NY), Apr. 10, 1908.

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*

Pfeffer's chief criticism of the religion of *apikorses* was its unwavering confidence in scientific materialism. Despite humanity's scientific advancements, the world remains a mystery. Humanity is, too. He stated, "We don't know exactly what man is—what is his soul, spirit, or mind—and we can't say one word about the secret of life." Even while science advances, it only raises more questions. And yet, Pfeffer continued, "*apikorses* became the modern religion, and it is draped in the mantle of science." The *apikorsim* have as much faith in scientists as "this or that people believed that everything said by Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, or their representatives is correct and the pure truth." So, he summarized, "The belief is ultimately the same, and the fanaticism is also the same." Hedging his bets, Pfeffer assured readers he was not an opponent of scientific research or the human search for understanding, nor was he trying to turn readers into fanatics. Rather, in his editorial voice, "we are against foolish belief and fanaticism even when this belief is a belief in science." Though he did not use the word "tolerance," the principle of tolerance undergirded his criticism of *apikorses*. Nobody, Pfeffer stressed, has "any right to persecute, hate, or ridicule someone for believing or not believing in something."<sup>655</sup>

A month later, Pfeffer offered a likeminded critique of socialism after a recent congress of the Socialist Party of America (SPA).<sup>656</sup> As he summarized the congress, the socialists had reaffirmed that "socialism is a private matter, a purely material question, not against religion, and is not at all involved with religion." Pfeffer was skeptical of the convention's resolution since it only passed by one vote. He also considered it disingenuous—the resolution was simply to garner the votes of the religious. In the end, he said "this decision will actually change nothing and accomplishes nothing." Many socialists will maintain their antagonism toward religion: "If

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

<sup>656</sup> Y. Pfeffer, "Sotsyalizmus un religyon," *Amerikaner* (New York, NY), May 29, 1908.

you were to tell a follower of the socialist movement that socialism has nothing to do with religion, and that a person can be religious and still be a socialist, or if you would tell one of these people that socialism is a private thing, that it's a material question, a typical business proposition, he would eat you alive."<sup>657</sup>

As Pfeffer depicted it, socialism had once sought to create a religion. "The entire agitation against religion," he claimed, "was driven by the goal of... implant[ing] a new type of faith." Antireligious socialists became "greater fanatics in their belief than the religious." Their faith even had signs and symbols, like any conventional religion: "Socialism's founders and leaders... were venerated exactly like the wildest fanatics venerated their gods, and they preached the red flag's sacredness, exactly like the fanatic Christians preached their flag's sacredness, or some other fanatic sect preached their flag's sacredness." Pfeffer wrote that socialism as religion was built into its very foundations as an antireligious movement:

Socialism was created at a time when a wind of fanatic *apikorses* blew over all Europe, and when people suddenly 'discovered' there was nothing more important in life than the question of bread and butter, that all claims of the human soul are nonsense, that the person is just like a cow, which has the singular goal of eating more and creating more bodily pleasure, when the singular problem of humanity was declared to be materialism. Especially in America, the "Hasidim" of socialism "had been taught that socialism can never materialize, that salvation can never come unless religion— socialism's greatest hindrance—will be eradicated." And so, the socialist *apikorsim* persecuted and persecute those who think

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid. Pfeffer even recognized he was writing about these issues in a conservative paper, a paper whose readers were likely "no Hasidim of socialist cliques," but he sensed the matter was still relevant to the general reader.

differently. They were even willing, Pfeffer claimed, to hate their own parents and to expend more energy fighting religion than capitalism.<sup>658</sup>

In Pfeffer's view, socialism as religion could not be maintained any longer. First, socialists, "even if unknowingly," felt deep down "that humanity's problems are more than dry materialism." Second, religion did not die, as socialists had predicted. As evidence, Pfeffer claimed that at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century there was an increase in religious belief, a sign materialism alone did not satisfy. Socialists, therefore, "began giving up the battle against religion." And, in so doing, socialists rethought socialism as religion, turning it into "a purely material question." As Pfeffer understood socialism, it simply demanded better conditions for workers. In his words, "socialism is a trade union in a large format" or "a political party." So, "the local, blind followers of socialism" needed to realize that socialism "cannot satisfy the wishes, needs, and strivings of the person with higher notions, of the person who has a soul and demands food for it and not only for the body." Pfeffer's article, as a response to the recent socialist convention, sought to define socialism and religion's separate spheres of influence. When socialism encroached upon religion, it became a fanatical religion.<sup>659</sup>

Pfeffer's "Socialism and Religion" garnered some interest, and at least one reader responded with a letter.<sup>660</sup> Known only by the initials A.G., the letter writer expressed shock at Pfeffer's article. A.G. believed Pfeffer was a socialist, only to discover the editor was "an opponent of socialism." A.G. wanted Pfeffer to clarify his position and posed pointed questions,

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<sup>658</sup> Ibid.

<sup>659</sup> Ibid. He also asked, "Is it an ideal to which the entire humanity must strive or is it a usual business proposition? Does socialism have anything to do with sacredness, with matters of the soul, or is it simply a material question?" Employing an example, that of a shoemakers' union, nobody would seemingly fault shoemakers demanding better wages and better conditions. "The worker is," he wrote, "entitled to get from the boss as much as he can, just as the boss is entitled to give as little as he can." This fight should have no relationship to religion or sacred matters. Socialist may stress how it is a "noble deed" to aid the struggle of the oppressed, but Pfeffer rhetorically inquired, "What does this have to do with sacredness, religion, and creating new fanaticism?"

<sup>660</sup> Y. Pfeffer, "Idealn un fanatizmus," *Amerikaner* (New York, NY), Jul. 3, 1908.

like “Do you intend to say that the economic system under which we live is just? Do you agree with an order in which a small number revel in all kinds of insane luxuries and the great majority suffer and groan under their yoke?” Pfeffer responded by affirming socialism’s political value. Using his editorial voice, he wrote, “We’re entirely in agreement with socialism in so far as it describes the wrongs of our economic system and demands a better order.” When describing American capitalism, he sought to balance radical sensibilities and conservative sensibilities. On the one hand, “the bosses of this earth should have to divide their riches so one person doesn’t have too little and the other person too much.” But on the other hand, “To preach hate of one class against another” was unnecessary, especially because “the oppressed are just as, or more responsible, for the system than the oppressors.” “We’re no fanatics of socialism,” he summarized, “just as we’re no fanatics of other ideas.”<sup>661</sup> In the final lines of his response, Pfeffer revealed his main criticisms were aimed at “scientific socialism” all along. So, while Pfeffer disagreed with certain materialist aspects of socialist doctrine, he declared his belief in enlightenment and evolution. Humanity had “evolved from savagery to its present phase,” and so “it will also evolve to such a phase where it will cease quarreling over a piece of bread.” The better system that will someday appear, however, will not look exactly how socialists originally envisioned. Socialism was, he repeated in his concluding remarks, “a purely economic or material question” and should become “a fanatical religion.”<sup>662</sup>

Pfeffer’s play on “religion”—turning *apikorses* and socialism into religions—reflected freethinking discourses in the radical Yiddish press. In the 1890s, freethinking radicals, like Faygenboym, used sacred language to construct radical culture as an alternative to an observant Jewish life (chapter one). Both the *apikorsim* and fanatic socialists (who were also *apikorsim*)

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<sup>661</sup> Ibid.

<sup>662</sup> Ibid.

sought to destroy religion *as religions*, but religion persisted. Adapting to modern norms—norms that prevailed in the United States, too—meant relinquishing a pretense to religion. Pfeffer, it must be noted, did not advocate a particular form of religious expression or living an observant Jewish life; he advocated a broadly tolerant stance toward religion and the religious.

Pfeffer's editorials also reflected arguments circulating in the conservative Yiddish press. Between 1905 and 1914, journalists in the conservative Yiddish press expressed some confidence in religion's future. In 1912 in the *Tageblatt*, for example, Gedalya Bublik argued against religious pessimists—those who believed religion was doomed—by noting that Europe and America were experiencing a kind of religious revival.<sup>663</sup> Bublik's chief evidence came via a religious reawakening in France, “the land of *apikorses*” and “revolution,” but he saw similar changes in Germany, where new philosophies showed “a greater inclination to religion,” and England, where “spiritualism was growing, and materialism was declining.” The United States, too, as he understood it, was in the throes of a reawakening. For Bublik, religious reawakening revealed the limits of philosophy and science in modern times. Both could not satisfy human needs, could not answer essential questions about life's meaning, and could not offer “consolation,” “inspiration,” and “enchantment.” By themselves, they left “the human heart empty and dry.” But, like Pfeffer, he guaranteed readers that he was not rejecting philosophy and science outright—he was placing them in what he considered their appropriate spheres.<sup>664</sup> So, religious readers of the *Tageblatt* could take heart from this wider reawakening. They also recognize Jewish religious texts as “eternal sources of spiritual enchantment and poetry.” Historical analysis—“the Tanakh cut apart and crumpled up and ‘explained’ according to empty

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<sup>663</sup> Gedalya Bublik, “Di ervakung fun der religyon,” *YT* (New York, NY), Jun. 30, 1912. For another, much earlier conversation about religion and France, see “Iber'n erd kugel.,” *YG* (New York, NY), Jul. 24, 1896.

<sup>664</sup> Bublik, “Di ervakung fun der religyon.”

speculations and conjectures of the critics”—would not satisfy. Rather, a poetic understanding of “the plain, old Tanakh” could influence “the tender hearts of the Jewish youth.”<sup>665</sup>

### **Rethinking Antireligious Propaganda: Reviewing Benyomen Faygenboym’s *Kosher and treyf* (1909)**

As America’s Yiddish pamphlet and Yiddish book market took off in the 1890s and early 1900s, book reviews became an important feature of Yiddish periodicals, conservative, radical, or otherwise. Book reviews not only informed readers of a work’s contents; they could quickly become forums for ideological debate. For the intelligentsia, diverse, intensely held views on a variety of matters seemed to heighten the stakes in the evaluation of Yiddish texts. Reviews of antireligious propaganda were part of the conversation, too. This section probes a series of book reviews for Benyomen Faygenboym’s *Kosher and treyf*. Published in late March 1909, it was a nearly 240-page book challenging conventional religious interpretations of Jewish rituals and Jewish holidays.<sup>666</sup> Reviews were not universally negative; the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, for instance, published a primarily positive review. Regardless, almost every review, even the *Fraye arbeter shtime*’s, expressed a similar perspective on Faygenboym’s brand of antireligion—it was on the decline. The reviews, thus, did not focus exclusively on scientific objectivity (some reviewers did challenge Faygenboym’s evidence)—they indexed broader conversations surrounding the usefulness of antireligious propaganda.

Before diving into the reviews of *Kosher and treyf*, it is helpful to recall Faygenboym’s complexities (also see chapter two). Upon migrating to the *Forverts* in 1904, Faygenboym continued publishing antireligious articles in the socialist daily, but his tolerance remained

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<sup>665</sup> Ibid.

<sup>666</sup> Faygenboym, *Kosher un treyf*; Faygenboym acknowledged the earlier criticism in the second edition, see Faygenboym, *Kosher un treyf* (New York: Forward Book Publishing Dept., 1919), V-VI.

broader than opponents assumed.<sup>667</sup> He analyzed religion from an ostensibly scientific standpoint and held firm to “religion is private.” As a case in point, in February 1908, when a *Forverts* reader asked whether Faygenboym *really* thought a socialist could be religious, he declared (quoting the reader’s letter at points): “It’s a scientific truth that religion, as an interior belief, is a private concern. It’s a political demand to render it a private concern in life—so that ‘its immense influence on social, political, and economic life’ should be done away with!”

The privacy of religion, in other words, aided in secularizing the public sphere, and thereby furthered the socialist cause—it relegated religion to spiritual realms alone.<sup>668</sup> Most reviewers of *Kosher and treyf*, however, did not nuance Faygenboym’s views and did not *actually* engage his book on its own terms. One reviewer nearly admitted as much when saying he dreaded reviewing the book because Faygenboym’s sensational reputation preceded him.<sup>669</sup> By and large, they read *Kosher and treyf* in light of the changing tides, and the tides had turned against the veteran socialist.

Several weeks before *Kosher and treyf* appeared on shelves, the *Forverts*, apparently holding an advanced copy, published a glowing review. Anticipating criticism, the unnamed reviewer emphasized how *Kosher and treyf* was not antireligious agitation, but a collection of “serious, scientific, cultural-historical treatises.” The reviewer also stressed the book’s primary

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<sup>667</sup> See, for example, B. Faygenboym, “A interesanter fakt vegen religyon un sotsyalizmus.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 9, 1907; idem, “Yidishe makhloykus geendigt mit gornit,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 2, 1907; idem, “Di makhloyke tsvishen gloyben un bildung.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 23, 1907; idem, “Trosts in der gemore.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Dec. 30, 1907; idem, “A yid, a lamdn, un khosid, a heyser sotsyalist.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 13, 1908; idem, “Di toykhekhe un der gehenem.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 23, 1908; idem, “Kaboles hatoyre.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 5, 1908; idem, “Di zind fun di ‘meraglim’ .,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 27, 1908; idem, “Natur-vunder un gloyben.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 4, 1908; idem, “Der heyliger eyzel.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 18, 1908; idem, “Mekhirus khomets.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 7, 1909; idem, “Miskher un emune.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 20, 1909; idem, “Der yidisher natsyonalizmus fun mitsraim biz haynt,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 27, 1909.

<sup>668</sup> B. Faygenboym, “A yid, a lamdn, un khosid, a heyser sotsyalist.” The letter also asked, “Isn’t one of the foundations of the Jewish religion the spirit of chosenness (*ato bekhartonu*), which directly conflicts with socialist teaching?”

<sup>669</sup> Dr. I. Ginzburg, “‘Kosher un treyf un andere mitsves’ fun B. Faygenboym,” *Naye leben* (Jun. 1909): 46–55.

audience was not the religiously observant or “professional *apikorsim*,” i.e., those whose mission was simply mocking religion and the religious. It was, rather, for all Yiddish readers who consider themselves learned, enlightened, or progressive, especially those “who invent ‘unfounded opinions’ to explain religious matters and, in so doing, spread new falsities.” Among them, the reviewer claimed, were “the cheap ‘*apikorsim*,’ the *maskilim*, [and] the ‘rationalists’.” Religion was a serious academic subject, and every intellectual needed to study it scientifically. Stated rather dramatically, *Kosher and treyf* could become “the ‘*Shulchan Aruch*’ of freethinkers.”<sup>670</sup>

Though the *Forverts*’ review seemed to imply *Kosher and treyf* was already in print, it was still at a point when the glowing review could be incorporated into the foreword. *Kosher and treyf*’s publisher, The Free Thought Publishing Co. (likely Faygenboym himself), used the *Forverts*’ review as a sign of the book’s warm reception. The review and its use in the book proved a sore spot for the book’s other reviewers. By 1909, Faygenboym had been part of the *Forverts*’ staff for approximately half a decade. It was, one reviewer wrote, as if “Mr. Faygenboym’s left hand was writing a love letter to his right hand.”<sup>671</sup> Even the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, which published a positive review, called the article’s inclusion a “cheap advertisement.”<sup>672</sup> The *Forverts*’ glowing review felt far from objective, and objectivity was supposed to be *Kosher and treyf*’s calling card.

In the book’s introduction, “The Truth Isn’t Harmful!,” Faygenboym framed *himself* as a rare freethinker. He was the remnant of an older generation. His antireligion had once been

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<sup>670</sup> “Der inhalt fun Faygenboym’s bukh.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Feb. 26, 1909.

<sup>671</sup> Y.L. Dalidansky, “Ven an apikoyres dreyt mit’n groben finger,” *YT* (New York, NY), May 13, 1909.

<sup>672</sup> D.B., “Bikher, tsaytshriften, un literarishe naves, 1.,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Jul. 24, 1909; also see idem, “Bikher, tsaytshriften, un literarishe naves, 2.,” *FASh* (New York, NY), Jul. 31, 1909.

mainstream, but now, fellow *intelligentn* derided him.<sup>673</sup> “It wasn’t very long ago,” he wrote, “when, among enlightened Jews, the best and truest friend of the people was the one who showed the people their errors and enlightened them about their foolishness.” Times had changed, however: “a hysteria of ‘chosenness’ (*ato-bekhartonu ’izmus*) came over our enlightened people, and even a lot of our revolutionaries, and they entirely reversed course.” And so, “people with free sensibilities, who not very long ago were delighted with my enlightenment work, today cry they don’t understand why I ‘deliberately set out only to show the bad side of Jewishness.’ And they revile me.”<sup>674</sup> In their “hysteria of ‘chosenness’,” many had adopted the age-old rationalist interpretation of religion, which was “interpreting a meaning into religion such that it doesn’t have supernatural causes in mind, but natural, rational causes—reasonable causes, that is.” Or, as Faygenboym called them, they were “irrational rationalists.”<sup>675</sup> He remained confident his position was just “sober truth,” scientific and objective, in other words. *Kosher and treyf*, therefore, fit Faygenboym’s longtime goal of normalization, i.e., proving Jews are no better and no worse than anyone else.<sup>676</sup> Normalization would eventually mean the disappearance of prejudice based on nation, race, and religion.<sup>677</sup>

Reviews of *Kosher and treyf* ran widely over the coming months, from the *Fraye arbeter shtime* to the *Tageblat*. The most interesting, however, ran in the socialist Yiddish press, and they were largely negative. M. Mikhelzohn, a pseudonym of Mikhl Rubinshteyn, wrote a review for *Der arbeter*, a socialist weekly published in New York from 1904 to 1910. Rubinshteyn had only been in the United States since 1908, but he had experience as a Yiddish journalist across

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<sup>673</sup> Faygenboym, “Aynteylung: Der emes iz nit shedlikh!” in *Kosher un treyf*, 1–11.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. See the citation marked as \*.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

Europe. Details about his background are sparse, but he had edited several Yiddish publications of the Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party) before emigrating.<sup>678</sup> Mikhelzohn's review of *Kosher and treyf* was also the most extensive, appearing in four parts over three months.<sup>679</sup> From almost the outset, Mikhelzohn's primary objective was proving the book was out of time and place. He even began by saying it resembled "a book of questions and answers from a smalltown rabbi."<sup>680</sup> Faygenboym's likely protests to the contrary, Mikhelzohn read *Kosher and treyf* as direct agitation against religion. But he recognized it was attempting to have a more scientific tone than the antireligious articles upon which it was based. So, Mikhelzohn found an underlying problem—*Kosher and treyf* was antireligious agitation with scientific pretensions. Agitation (subjective) and science (objective) did not cohabit well. Why, then, did Faygenboym change the tone of his antireligious writing, from agitation to science? Mikhelzohn claimed an answer: Faygenboym, "the old, professional *apikoyres*," realized "agitation against religion is now bankrupt."

For Mikhelzohn, direct attacks on religion, like Faygenboym's, were useless. They contradicted history realities. Religion has always marshaled past opposition or crises. Mikhelzohn, like many other Yiddish journalists (Peskin, Hermalin, etc.), made a key distinction between "religion" and "dogmas," which "though very closely tied, are not one and the same." Religion's essence lay in its attempt to answer questions about divine providence, immortality of the soul, divine justice, etc. Because science has not convincingly answered these questions, religion's philosophical side remains relevant. In Mikhelzohn's words, "As long as religion will

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<sup>678</sup> Reyzen, "Rubinshteyn, Mikhl," *Leksikon* (1914), 591–2. For his own conversation about religion, see Mikhl Rubinshteyn, *Vegn toyres-moyshe* (Warsaw: Edelshteyn, 1908).

<sup>679</sup> M. Mikhelzohn, "Profesyonele apikorsim," *Arbeter* (New York, NY), May 22, 1909; idem, "Profesyonele apikorsim. 2.," *Arbeter* (New York, NY), May 29, 1909; idem, "Profesyonele apikorsim. 3.," *Arbeter* (New York, NY), Jun. 5, 1909; idem, "Profesyonele apikorsim. 4 (shlus)," *Arbeter* (New York, NY), Jul. 17, 1909.

<sup>680</sup> M. Mikhelzohn, "Profesyonele apikorsim" (May 22). The Hebrew words *sefer*, *shaylus*, and *tshuvus* might have been used to highlight the book's supposed Old-World parochialism.

satisfy certain spiritual needs, needs which penetrate deep into the spirit of the masses, it will exist.”<sup>681</sup> Dogmas, on the other hand, change as socioeconomic pressures change. Had not the histories of Greek/Roman gods, Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism proven the adaptability of dogma? In the end, Mikhelzohn did not think Faygenboym properly understood either religion or science. *Kosher and treyf* instead proved its author “fanatically *apikoysish*” and “anti-Jewish from beginning to end.” The book, Mikhelzohn summarized, “isn’t history, it’s regular agitation; it isn’t research, but a battle.”<sup>682</sup>

Veteran Yiddish journalist and practicing medical doctor Iser Ginzburg published a review of *Kosher and treyf* in Zhitlovsky’s *Naye leben*.<sup>683</sup> Having arrived in the United States in 1893, he was a freethinker who regularly analyzed religion from a cultural-historical perspective.<sup>684</sup> Ginzburg began by informing reader that, before even picking up the book, *Kosher and treyf*’s subject matter seemed “a very old, long forgotten theme.” “It might have made sense,” he contended, “to write [about it] in Russia, Poland, or Galicia in the last century, but not in twentieth-century America.”<sup>685</sup> One problem in the United States was the widespread lack of strict observance. “Even those who keep kosher aren’t super fastidious about it,” Ginzburg chuckled, and so “fighting against kosher-proscriptions in America is like Don Quixote fighting windmills.”<sup>686</sup> He interpreted *Kosher and treyf* in precisely the same manner as Mikhelzohn—it was out-of-place agitation.<sup>687</sup> Similarly, Ginzburg claimed Faygenboym dressed

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<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

<sup>682</sup> Mikhelzohn, “Profesyonele apikorsim. 4 (shlus)” (Jul. 17). Mikhelzohn also attacked the *Forverts* for “spread[ing] moral prostitution among the newly initiated socialists.”

<sup>683</sup> Ginzburg, ““Kosher un treyf un andere mitsves’ fun b. faygenboym,” 46–55. On Ginzburg, see Shulman, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in amerike*, 71.

<sup>684</sup> For one of Ginzburg’s earliest works, see I. Ginzburg, *Der yidisher got amohl un haynt* (Leeds: The Free Thought Publishing Association, 1902). YIVO Library, microfilm collection (SN00024.4); also idem, *Di entshtehung fun kristenthum* (New York: Forverts, 1917).

<sup>685</sup> Ginzburg, ““Kosher un treyf un andere mitsves’ fun b. faygenboym,” 47.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>687</sup> Ibid., 48. Ginzburg also wrote that Faygenboym’s agitation was best suited for a “small *shtetl apikoyres*,”

outmoded agitation in scientific pretensions. “[Faygenboym] very often mentions the word science in order to put on an intimidating face for the audience,” he summarized.<sup>688</sup> Ginzburg’s review was not as detailed as Mikhelzohn’s, nor did it comment as much on antireligious propaganda in general. It was just as severe, however. As a case in point, Ginzburg laughed that it was self-flagellation when Faygenboym scolded so-called “cheap *apikorsim*,” meaning Faygenboym was a “cheap *apikoyres*.”<sup>689</sup>

Another review, published in the *Tsukunft* and entitled “Science or *Pilpul*?” (*pilpul* referring to religious disputations), came from by Ben-Tsien Hofman, better known by his pseudonym Tsivion.<sup>690</sup> Hofman was a Bundist who arrived in the United States in 1908 and quickly became popular in the American Yiddish press, mainly with the *Tsukunft* and the *Forverts*, though he sometimes clashed with Cahan. While some Bundist, like A.Sh. Zaks, recognized “a deep Jewish national consciousness among our American comrades”<sup>691</sup> when they arrived, Hofman noticed the strength of assimilationist radical politics. In his first years in the United States, he wrote, “Cosmopolitanism that looks forward to the amalgamation of all the different nations into one mankind has everywhere been warmly received by the Jewish socialists but nowhere with more warmth than by those in America.”<sup>692</sup> Hofman soon joined the chorus of those who criticized “Yiddish-speaking socialism.” In June 1908, for example, he laughed (in the *Forverts*) at the idea that the *Forverts* was not a Jewish paper but a socialist paper in Yiddish. Was not the Bintel Brief popular because it spoke to readers *as Jews in America*? As an internationalist Bintel Brief, it would be meaningless. He declared, “A newspaper that’s

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<sup>688</sup> Ibid., 46–55.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid., 49. Ginzburg said it was “Faygenboym the Marxist flogging Faygenboym the cheap *apikoyres*.”

<sup>690</sup> B. Hofman, “Visenshaft oder pilpul?” *Tsukunft* (Jun. 1909): 366–72.

<sup>691</sup> Qtd. in Y. Sh. Herts, *Di yidishe sotsyalistishe bavegung in amerike* (New York: Der Veker, 1954), 148.

<sup>692</sup> Qtd. in Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 464. [Tsivion, “Di yidishe agitatsyons byuro,” *Tsukunft* (May 1909), 275]

Jewish only according to the Yiddish letters in which it's printed is nothing more than a sexless or hermaphroditic being."<sup>693</sup>

To Hofman, *Kosher and treyf* proved Faygenboym was “a *maskil* of the old style, who scolds the people of Israel—that they should become like everyone else.” Like the *maskilim*, Faygenboym was claiming Jews needed to relinquish their “wild customs” and assimilate. Therefore, Hofman said humorously: “We need only buy the book *Kosher and treyf*, peruse it well, then visit a *goyish* butcher, buy a pound of pork, a pound of rump roast, cook it up in a ‘dairy pan,’ roast it in butter in a ‘meat pan’ for a bit, gobble it up, unwashed, without a blessing or a prayer, have it with a little glass of non-kosher wine, and—we’re rescued from exile.” The picture Hofman painted was one in which the most *treyf* meal could somehow make the Jewish Question disappear. Faygenboym was, in other words, being naïve. Faygenboym’s attack on religious rationalism, likewise, showed he lived “in the good ol’ days of the Haskalah.” Only Faygenboym had not forgotten these now-stale disputes. “Poor rationalists,” Hofman chided, “even in the grave Faygenboym won’t let you rest peacefully.” Like other reviewers, Hofman challenged *Kosher and treyf* supposed objectivity—it was filled with bad history and bad science. The entire project was “more *pilpul* than science,” a book filled with Talmudic disputations. [In his review, which appeared in the *Tageblatt*, Y.L. Dalidansky also called the book *pilpul*.<sup>694</sup>]

The most important feature of Hofman’s review was its concluding reflections on socialist agitation against religion. “I’m personally convinced,” he wrote, “that nothing brought such shame on the socialists on the American Jewish street than direct agitation against religion.”

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<sup>693</sup> Tsivion, “Iz der ‘Forverts’ a yidishe tsaytung?,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 8, 1908. An editor even added a note saying, “We are generally in full agreement with the thought comrade Tsivion expresses here.”

<sup>694</sup> Dalidansky, “Ven an apikoyres dreyt mit’n groben finger.”

Furthermore, agitation did not make religion weaker but stronger. Hofman sensed that when a socialist delivers a speech and just mentions religion, the audience focuses exclusively on what is said about religion. The masses are sensitive to such commentary, and it spreads hate for socialism and distracts from the socialist message. Similarly, he wrote, “We know very well from our Jews and non-Jews that radicalism in religion has no relationship at all to true radicalism.” One could, after all, make the case that a “pious scoundrel” is better than “a scoundrel with free sensibilities.” At least the former fears something (i.e., God), even if only occasionally; the latter, however, fears nothing. Religion must be fought indirectly, not directly. Faygenboym was, in Hofman’s assessment, simply “a stubborn assimilator.” And so, *Kosher and treyf* can’t be included in the catalog of scientific books, and among socialist agitation literature—certainly not. But for ‘freethinkers’ who have only one concern—‘kicking’ God, it isn’t a bad book.”<sup>695</sup>

As stated, the *Fraye arbeter shtime*’s review was mainly positive, but it also depicted Faygenboym’s antireligion as outside the norm. Jewishness was “in fashion” once again, which meant *Kosher and treyf* was swimming against the current. Its publication was, therefore, “a truly brave act.” The reviewer optimistically declared the book would be “a thorn in the eye of our nationalist jingoists” and “make true freethinkers out of many, many readers.” Heroic as *Kosher and treyf* was, the reviewer could not deny it was a form of propaganda “greatly neglected in recent years.”<sup>696</sup> It should be noted that while the *Fraye arbeter shtime*’s review was mainly positive, it contained some interesting critiques. Like Hofman, the reviewer considered some of Faygenboym’s solutions to the Jewish Question simplistic, like giving up dietary laws. They did not advocate maintaining dietary restrictions, but sensed dissolving of this boundary

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<sup>695</sup> Hofman, “Visenshaft oder pilpul?”

<sup>696</sup> “Bikher. tsaytshriften, un literarishe naves” (Jul. 24).

would not solve problems like antisemitism. Furthermore, like Mikhelzohn and Ginzburg, the *Fraye arbeter shtime*'s reviewer argued that, at least at times, Faygenboym acts like a “cheap *apikoyres*.” Mocking religion was not a problem, but Faygenboym could not be both an antireligious agitator and an objective commentator. He needed to choose one or the other.<sup>697</sup> So, although generally positive, the *Fraye arbeter shtime*'s review highlighted some of the same tensions and issues as negative reviews.

By 1909, many members of the Jewish radical intelligentsia considered Faygenboym's antireligious agitation to be out-of-fashion. They may have still embraced internationalism and cosmopolitanism, at least in some sense, but many believed direct agitation against religion was counterproductive. Joking about Faygenboym's impiety became especially popular during these years as well. In 1909, a cartoon published in *Der groyser kundes* (“The Big Stick”) featured Faygenboym and Rozentsvayg destroying the Ten Commandments with axes bearing the titles of their recently published antireligious works, *Kosher un treyf* and *Sotsyalizmus in beys hamedresh*, respectively [Figure 4.2]. Another, more poignant cartoon appeared in the *Kundes* in 1912 [Figure 4.3]. It features Faygenboym on bended knee praying to Karl Marx, who sits atop a copy of *Das Kapital*. Marx's Buddha-like posture, halo, and possible *globus cruciger*, as well as burning incense, suggest a sacred figure. The worshipful scene even takes place atop a large stone block with a marker reading, “B. Faygenboym, The Most Pious Marxist.” A caption below indicates it's a type of monument. It reads, “Dedicated to the fanatic *apikoyres*, B. Faygenboym, who destroyed all gods, except his own—Karl Marx...” Said otherwise, while Faygenboym tries to destroy conventional religion, his hammer (Marxism) became sacred.<sup>698</sup>

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<sup>697</sup> “Bikher. tsaytshriften, un literarishe naves, 2.” (Jul. 31).

<sup>698</sup> Similar, see “Dem Kundes' verter-bukh,” *Kundes* (New York, NY), Dec. 10, 1909, p. 11.



[Figure 4.2]

Cartoon: Untitled [*Kundes*, May 28, 1909; public domain]

Caption: Instead of lumberjacks (*holts-heker*)—they’re “tablet-jacks” (*lukhus-heker*)...

Note: Faygenboym (left) and Rozentsvayg (right) both have axes in their hands. The axes bear the titles of their antireligious books, *Kosher un treyf* and *Sotsyalizmus in beys hamedresh* (19??), respectively. They are using them to destroy the Ten Commandments.



[Figure 4.3]

Cartoon: Untitled [*Kundes*, Oct. 25, 1912; public domain]

Plaque: B. Faygenboym, The Most Observant Marxist

Caption: Dedicated to the fanatical heretic, B. Faygenboym, who destroyed all gods, except his own god—Karl Marx...

Faygenboym may not have protested the 1912 depiction. Despite the changing times, he continued unabated. And, again, he was more nuanced than critics recognized. Late in 1909, for instance, he published several *Forverts* articles about how irreligious moderns remained tied to religious impulses. The first article, tellingly entitled “Where Religion is True and Necessary,”

opened with a quote from Herbert Spencer about how a “kernel of truth” lay behind every superstition.<sup>699</sup> Superstitions revealed universal human needs, like the need to adore a divine being. Freethinkers could not escape these universal human needs either. As Faygenboym summarized, “People actually need a religion, and we (freethinkers) have a religion, too.” Since the freethinker’s religion was universal humanity, then the veneration of universal humanity was their divine being. “If you want to call this his ‘religiosity,’” he wrote, “then all freethinkers are religious, then the most free-sensing researcher of nature is the most pious believer in ‘god’.”<sup>700</sup> Faygenboym held fast to these ideas—the freethinker had a kind of religion, and it venerated universal humanity.

### **Debating Religion, Freethought, and Jewishness in the *Forverts***

Debates about how freethinkers should relate to religion and the religious were numerous in the first decade of the 1900s and into the 1910s. This was particularly true for freethinking socialists. Could the religious actually be socialists? Would increased tolerance change the “feel” of radical politics? Some of these debates did not focus on Jews at all. As a case in point, after a 1908 convention of Christian socialists, the *Forverts* hosted a debate regarding their place in socialist politics. Could an avowedly Christian movement create legitimate socialists? Would they corrupt the class struggle? Was it a guise for injecting Jesus into the labor movement? Some *Forverts* contributors remained skeptical, or at least cautious, while others affirmed the sincerity of the Christian socialists.<sup>701</sup> Debates surrounding behavior, tolerance, and sincerity occurred in prior periods (see chapter one and chapter two), but acculturation and a new generation of radicals

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<sup>699</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Vu religyon iz emes un noythvendig,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Nov. 20, 1909.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

<sup>701</sup> See, for example, Ab. Cahan, “Religyon un sotsyalizmus in amerika.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 4, 1908; M. Baranov, “Vos iz dos?,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 8, 1908; Sh. Peskin, “Nokh amol vegen di Kristlikhe sotsyalisten.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 10, 1908; Dr. Zhitlovsky, “Yidishe religyon, kristlikhe religyon, visenshaft un sotsyalizmus.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 13, 1908; A. Graf, “Tsu der debate vegen di galokhim-sotsyalisten.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 18, 1908.

transformed the conversation. *Forverts* contributors were soon debating their relationship to folk customs, i.e., traditions and rituals tied to a historically observant lifestyle.

Cahan recalled several debates surrounding religion and freethought in his later writings, some standing out more than others. One debate he recalled on several occasions occurred in 1911.<sup>702</sup> Though the *Forverts* had already turned a corner on folk customs, matters intensified when Cahan advocated freethinkers attend the Passover seder. His endorsement appeared in a piece entitled “In Honor of Passover and America,” published on the first night of Passover (April 13).<sup>703</sup> Its subheading was telling: “Whether we want to or not, America changes us all, and we don’t have to be ashamed of it.” He began by noting a key change in American Jewish life. There were “progressive, educated Jewish families” who avoided Passover twenty years ago but were now enthusiastic seder participants. In the past, “a freethinker wouldn’t be allowed to show interest in the Jewish people,” but today, freethinkers who observe Passover need not defend themselves. He conveyed the change in terms of acculturation. In Eastern Europe, progressive, educated Jews once considered the United States “lowly, cheap, and treyf,” and when they arrived, their preconceived notions about the United States persisted. The same progressive Jews also once held negative attitudes toward other Jews. Or, in Cahan’s own words, there was a time when “an educated Jew was actually an antisemite.”<sup>704</sup>

In Cahan’s view, the pogroms, with their “streams of Jewish blood,” had changed everything—the violence transformed the educated Jew from an antisemite into a Jew who embraces the Jewish people. Having personally witnessed the transformation, Cahan noted how the Jewish immigrant youth, who were “full of derision and hate for America” only three to four

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<sup>702</sup> Cahan, “My First Pesach In America—in 1883”; and idem, “Mayn ershter peysekhn in amerike”; idem, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 5: 31–3.

<sup>703</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Lekoved peysekhn un lekoved amerika,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 13, 1911.

<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*

years ago, had become “enthusiastic Americans.” The Republic had “certain dark shadows,” but dark shadows existed only because “the light is also so strong here.” As an example of light and dark side-by-side, Cahan noted that the United States erected barriers to working-class success more rapidly in America than elsewhere, but a revolutionary spirit had grown just as quickly. As evidence of this spirit, the socialist cause had made remarkable political and cultural gains in recent years. The enthusiasm of the transformed, progressive Jewish immigrant, both toward the United States and Jewishness, could be seen in Passover’s commercial hubbub. This commercial activity signaled “a vital inner commitment,” that “American civilization, with its blessings and curses, is quickly absorbing the immigrant soul.” So, a socialist freethinker can affirm, “it’s okay to love America!... [and] it’s okay to love a Jew.”<sup>705</sup>

“In Honor of Passover and in Honor of America” did not explain why or how a freethinker might observe Passover. After receiving letters from readers, it became clear the matter required further treatment. In two articles that ran over consecutive days (April 22 and April 23), both entitled “Jewishness,” Cahan refined some of his ideas about freethinkers celebrating Passover.<sup>706</sup> To start, he did not have in mind observing Passover in a religious fashion. The holiday, rather, could be understood as “a scene in the life of the Jewish people.” The seder, for example, was “full of Jewishness—Jewishness not in the sense of piety, but in the sense of the people’s unity.” Cahan described a secularized, folk seder in terms of kneidlach, not Haggadah (a common refrain). Throughout his argument, he included eloquent descriptions of the feelings the Passover atmosphere evoked. He summarized, “If the Jew has a special soul, a second soul, every Sabbath, he has a very special soul at the seder—a third soul.” The *Forverts*

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<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

<sup>706</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Yidishkeyt,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 22, 1911; idem, “Yidishkeyt,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 23, 1911.

had not neglected talking about Passover in the past, but it was time to move past these “dry” studies. He wanted the “life” of a true Jewish holiday, and he sensed many readers wanted the same.<sup>707</sup>

Cahan’s “Jewishness” articles anticipated potential questions and rebuttals from fiercely antireligious freethinkers. Wasn’t freethought contrarian toward *all* religious matters, even those which *could* be secularized? Cahan did not think freethought was a radically contrarian stance on every occasion. He posed as a counterquestion: “What would you say about the Jewish atheist who’d rather die of starvation before eating kugel and tzimmes because they’re Jewish foods?” He assumed all freethinking readers, apart from fanatics, would permit a freethinker to eat Jewish foods if their life was at stake. If so, then practically everyone had limits to being a contrarian. Cahan turned to a more concrete case: Christmas. He had witnessed freethinking Jews with Christmas trees and Christmas presents for their children. Are these freethinkers celebrating a Christian holiday with religious intention? No. In the United States, Christmas activities were social norms, not piety. Yet, those same freethinkers refused to sit at the Passover seder; they could instead celebrate Passover like they celebrated Christmas.

Cahan arrived at an argument that would spark considerable controversy, though it only occupied a small portion of his “Jewishness” articles. Atheists, Cahan claimed, had made “a cold, dry, unfeeling, heartless religion” from antireligion, creating “a new ‘set’ of sins and commandments.”<sup>708</sup> In their fanaticism, they exhibited no sympathy for the sensibilities of the observant. Their readiness to wound pious Jewish hearts proved they could be “just as intolerant as religious zealots.” Cahan did not say most freethinkers were intolerant zealots. He recognized

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<sup>707</sup> Cahan, “Yidishkeyt” (Apr. 22).

<sup>708</sup> Ibid. Also see Sherman, “Nationalism, Secularism and Religion in the Jewish Labor Movement,” 358; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 112.

that, by 1911, most freethinkers had set themselves free from fanaticism. They were still atheists, but they were more tolerant. These freethinkers did not turn freethought into a religion. They did not fear becoming “leavened,” i.e., becoming religious, when celebrating Passover.<sup>709</sup>

Letters supporting and opposing Cahan’s position poured into the *Forverts*’ offices, and the daily published a lengthy letter from a reader who signed simply as “An Alter Apikoyres,” or “Old Heretic.”<sup>710</sup> “Alter Apikoyres” did not necessarily mean the writer was aged. The writer, rather, may have been referencing an undercurrent flowing throughout Cahan’s articles—the former stance on Jewish folk traditions was outdated.<sup>711</sup> Rather than rejecting freethought as religion, the Alter Apikoyres affirmed Cahan’s framing. They wrote: “Every ideal—if one is truly devoted to it—is like a new religion. Yes, for us, old *apikorsim*, freethought is a sacred matter, a religion.” According to the letter writer, freethought as religion relied on a freethinker’s fervent devotion, even in the face of suffering. “Jewish freedom fighters,” they stated, “sacrifice themselves for their ideal like religious martyrs sacrifice themselves for their religion.” The Alter Apikoyres stressed that “freethought is cheap” in the United States—“A person gets it at the pushcarts, they don’t have any worry or grief about shouldering it... Therefore, it isn’t so sacred. *Apikorses* is a diluted wine here” (sentiments Tashrak’s Bentshe would appreciate). Freethinkers in the United States were, therefore, largely not religious with their freethought. In the Old

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<sup>709</sup> Cahan, “Yidishkeyt” (Apr. 23). Should a freethinking socialist just join ranks with Zhitlovsky or similar radicals who advanced a *yidische kultur* program? While Cahan did not think most Jewish immigrants would take such a step, he made sure to use “religion” when distancing himself from such radicals. A *yidische kultur* program created “a new ten commandments, new sins and new mitzvot, a new Torah with a new Gemara.” It too was dry, cold, and lifeless, with “little relation to the life of the Jewish people.”

<sup>710</sup> An Alter Apikoyres, “Di shtime fun an alten apikoyres.,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 30, 1911.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid. The Alter Apikoyres was clearly a reader of the *Forverts* but scoffed at features of its journalistic style. In tongue in cheek rhetoric, the writer noted how the *Forverts* constantly published “Bintel Brief” letters about love affairs between men and women. The Alter Apikoyres claimed their relationship with freethought was no different—it was a love affair. The letter, therefore, was worthy of being published in the *Forverts*. And, like a love affair gone awry, Cahan’s “Jewishness” articles had broken the Alter Apikoyres heart.

World, by contrast, freethinkers “had suffered for our holy war.” Showing how the letter writer connected radical politics and freethought, the Alter Apikoyres recycled common mantras:

Down with crusty old superstition!... Down with the darkness of nationalism! A person is a person! There are no Jews, there are no Christians! There are no Frenchman, there are no Germans! We are all children of one mother—nature!” And, “‘Cosmopolitanism’—the unity of all people regardless of race or nation, of religion or skin color!—that must be our ‘slogan.’<sup>712</sup>

According to the letter writer, Cahan had done a disservice to advancing enlightenment among Jewish immigrants, and so many “weaklings” (i.e., freethinkers lacking conviction), will return to piety. Cahan had not, after all, set limits on secularized folk customs. What about davening? What about obvious superstitions, like warding off the evil eye? For the Alter Apikoyres, middle ground was a mirage: “A person can’t serve both God and the devil. One can’t be both religious and irreligious at the time. If a freethinker is allowed to sit at a seder table, that means he’s allowed to be hypocrite.” If Cahan wanted to eat kneidlach so badly, then why at a seder and not at a restaurant? Enjoying Jewish foods was an entirely different matter than a seder. The Alter Apikoyres compared it to another, personal example—he had a friend, also an *apikoyres*, who would “delude himself” by going to shul purportedly to hear the hazan. Then, because he was already there, the freethinking friend would daven. Permissibility, in other words, was a slippery slope.<sup>713</sup>

Apparently waiting to hear all arguments from other readers, Cahan responded several weeks later with two articles entitled “Apikorsim.” Aside from countering specific claims made by the Alter Apikoyres, the most unique aspect of these two articles was how Cahan separated

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<sup>712</sup> Ibid.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

“freethinkers” and “free thinkers.”<sup>714</sup> The “free thinker,” he claimed, was “truly free to think” while “freethinkers” were fanatics. As he depicted freethinking fanatics, they were *apikorsim* who, with the advent of modernity, discovered new ideas about the world and humanity and reacted with bitterness toward God and religion. They simply shifted from fanatical piety to fanatical impiety.<sup>715</sup> “Free thinkers,” however, understood religion philosophically—“He thinks about religion like he thinks about other phenomenon in human life. He thinks about its sources, its development.” Cahan also rejected the claim he was leading “weaklings” toward piety. It was fanatic “freethinkers” (not “free thinkers”) who exhibited reactionary tendencies. Fanatics have an “antireligious spirit [that] stands on a razors edge,” allowing them to fall from extreme piety to extreme impiety, and back again.<sup>716</sup>

As regular contributors were queuing to enter the debate, Cahan penned two more articles.<sup>717</sup> They featured several comments igniting further debate. Cahan recounted how Jews had long been involved in the Russian revolutionary movement while showing little interest in their Jewish origins. Non-Jewish, Russian revolutionaries, on the other hand, were free to idealize the life of the Russian peasant. Jewish revolutionaries had followed suit in idealizing the Russian peasant. The same occurred in other locations. When Jews in Germany and France were welcomed into revolutionary circles, they also idealized German and French culture. Non-Jewish, German revolutionaries and non-Jewish, French revolutionaries were likewise not expected to relinquish distinctiveness.<sup>718</sup> Jews were tolerated in non-Jewish circles; they were

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<sup>714</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Apikorsim,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 13, 1911; also see idem, “Apikorsim,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 17, 1911; idem, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 5: 31–3.

<sup>715</sup> Cahan, “Apikorsim” (May 13).

<sup>716</sup> Ibid. As Cahan described it, the philosophically minded “free thinker” is no different than a folklorist, a botanist, an ornithologist, and a linguist.

<sup>717</sup> Ab. Cahan, “Natsyonalisten un assimilators,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 20, 1911; idem, “Yiden un kosmopoliten,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 27, 1911. A manuscript of “Yiden un kosmopoliten” appears in the YIVO Archives, Abraham Cahan Papers, RG 1139, box 15, f. 317.

<sup>718</sup> Cahan, “Yiden un kosmopoliten.”

not equal partners. “A true internationalist feeling,” Cahan stressed, “demands the Jew feel as a partner with all partners together. And that is only possible when he enters into the international movement as none other than a Jew.” Internationalism remained important—it required Jews not “laughably exaggerate” Jewishness (e.g., nationalist chauvinism). Assimilation was still an ideal, too. But, when Cahan described assimilation, he did not have in mind a complete loss of Jewish distinctiveness: “[The socialist’s] assimilation exists in the fact that he wishes the Jews adopt the best forms of the best culture. And one of the best points of true culture exists in the fact that one should not be a traitor to one’s own people, to one’s own self.”<sup>719</sup>

One of Cahan’s main opponents, and the first to respond, was veteran journalist M. Baranov.<sup>720</sup> His critique began by painting several pictures. In the first, a Jewish freethinker returns to his Lithuanian *shtetl* after twenty or thirty years away. Upon arrival, he smells the putrid air and sees the *shtetl*’s backwardness. If Baranov were this type of freethinker, he would immediately board the train and leave. A different freethinker, Cahan perhaps, would wander the *shtetl* streets and recall “sweet memories.” This freethinker may even feel they are experiencing a “poetic-rebirth of [their] patriotism.” In truth, Baranov chided, it was mere sentimentality. In the same fashion, a freethinker who has not stepped foot in a *shul* for twenty or thirty years may come to a point in their life where they start “idealizing their past.” And so, they may darken the doorway of a traditional *shul*. One kind of freethinker will flee when remembering the *shul*’s sinister aspects. Or, they may realize a *shul* is “not a museum or circus,” but a holy place. A different kind of freethinker, however, will stay and have an experience that inspires “sacred

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<sup>719</sup> Ibid. Cahan drew some inspiration from the Bund, in fact.

<sup>720</sup> M. Baranov, “Yidishkeyt,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), May 31, 1911.

memories.” But, again, it would only be “a poetic rebirth of their former suffering and foolishness.”<sup>721</sup>

Using these two pictures of “sentimental” freethinkers, Baranov stressed that freethinking Jews should not try to rebuild already-burned bridges to the past. Passover was holy for pious Jews, and it therefore should not be a freethinker’s toy. It is offensive, not tolerant. Baranov also rejected Cahan’s comparison between the Passover seder and Christmas trees. When Jews have a Christmas tree, Baranov argued, it is simply a “game” for their children. Judaism was not a “game”—it was still causing harm and needed to be opposed. It was “too early to make poetry of it.” Even further, why did a freethinker need to make poetry from Jewish religious tradition? Baranov personally found enough poetry in the wider world to satisfy his cravings. He said rather harshly, “It’s ridiculous for people who don’t believe to write sentimental pieces honoring the Sabbath, sentimental pieces honoring Yom Kippur, and to become poetically soft-hearted in honor of Passover or Shavuot.” Nostalgia distracted from the need to move “Forward, only and always forward!”<sup>722</sup>

Baranov had offended Cahan, and the latter went on the attack in a two-part article entitled “‘Christmas Trees’ and Passover Kneidlach.”<sup>723</sup> Cahan’s summarized Baranov’s view as “the same old story”—“that which smells *goyish* is kosher and that which smells Jewish is treyf.”<sup>724</sup> Baranov, that is, privileged Russian revolutionary culture—a culture idealizing Russian peasant life—but denigrated Jews when they adored their *shtetl* pasts.<sup>725</sup> Cahan did not run from

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<sup>721</sup> Ibid.

<sup>722</sup> Ibid.

<sup>723</sup> Ab. Cahan, “‘Kristmas tris’ un peysekhdik kneydlekh,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 4, 1911; idem, “‘Kristmas tris’ un peysekhdik kneydlekh,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 5, 1911. Cahan was, it seems, arguing against other critics while criticizing Baranov, since he made several assumptions about Baranov’s position that were not actually present in the articles.

<sup>724</sup> Cahan, “‘Kristmas tris’ un peysekhdik kneydlekh” (Jun. 4).

<sup>725</sup> Cahan did not, in other words, think Baranov would have condemned progressive, Russian revolutionaries (non-Jews) for being enamored with Russian peasant life. So, why was it now not permissible to be enamored with one’s

accusations of sentimentality—he was not the kind of freethinker who would flee his dingy *shtetl* if having an opportunity to visit. Speaking of himself in third person, he continued, “If that means sentimental dribble, then he admits he suffers from this illness. But he also sees poetry in the Jewish ‘*shtetl*’ ... He must disclose he has just such a defect, and that he doesn’t even consider it a defect.” Sentimentality was, perhaps, even necessary for modern progressives. Mirroring claims he made right after Kishinev, Cahan declared, “Woe would progress be if feeling was condemned as sentimental dribble. Cold, dark reason alone isn’t enough for people to want to sacrifice themselves for an ideal.” Sentimentality was even vital to a radical’s work: “there are no martyrs without strong attachment to a people, without fiery love and compassion for fellowman, without a deep inspiration for a principle.”<sup>726</sup> Baranov, Cahan argued, had embraced an outdated “reactionary spirit”; he could only see “the superstitions of Jewish life and Judaism and equated these qualities with Jewish life [as a whole].”<sup>727</sup> Cahan, on the other hand, viewed the seder as a family affair “connected to the sweet memories of our childhood years.”<sup>728</sup> He maintained he was still antireligious, saying, “Let’s fight against religion, against every form of superstition with all our power,” and encouraged assimilation into a “civilized, developed, progressive humanity.” And yet, “a sincere free thinker (*sic*) and internationalist socialist” could still have self-respect and affections for their Jewish origins.<sup>729</sup>

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*shtetl*? His second article returned to the history of Jewish revolutionaries in Russia, specifically addressing what he called the “nihilist period.” Cahan again reiterated that the first nihilists Jewish revolutionaries, with their “incomplete” and “jumbled” idea about human equality, did not recognize Jews as equal to Russian peasants, who they venerated as a “moral paradigm,” a symbol of “the folk.” They did not yet possess self-respect. See Cahan, “‘Kristmas tris’ un peysekhdik kneydlekh” (Jun. 5).

<sup>726</sup> He concluded his first part with “Hurray for sentimental dribble!” See Cahan, “‘Kristmas tris’ un peysekhdik kneydlekh” (Jun. 4).

<sup>727</sup> Cahan, “‘Kristmas tris’ un peysekhdik kneydlekh” (Jun. 5). Cahan again reversed Baranov’s rhetoric, stating, “one of the saddest forms of superstition or illusions, one of the saddest forms of ‘going backward’ is when a socialist can’t free themselves from the implanted, moldy opinion that a socialist isn’t permitted to have any attachments to the place in which he was born, to the family to which he belongs, to the people whose language he learned in his mother’s arms.”

<sup>728</sup> Ibid. Cahan said, “Comrade Baranov has made a mistake if he believes it’s primarily a religious ceremony.”

<sup>729</sup> Ibid.

Sensing Cahan attacked him personally and put words in his mouth (and Cahan did both), Baranov responded with a two-part, clarifying article.<sup>730</sup> Baranov declared that he rejected not only sentimentality toward Jewish things but also sentimentality toward non-Jewish things. His prior articles, he claimed, were mainly criticizing “patriots for whom even a bit of Jewish filth is good, even a tangled Jewish mess is beautiful, merely because they—the filth and tangled mess—are Jewish.”<sup>731</sup> Throughout his response, Baranov reiterated a generally negative view of how Jewish radicals had embraced Jewishness. Enlightening the masses, for example, did not require venerating the Jewish *shtetl*; it was “enough to be human.” Likewise, while some socialists might require extra sentimentality to do their agitation, à la Cahan, Baranov had “a sufficient mass of healthy, human feelings.” In the end, he asked Cahan to state openly and explicitly his position on nationalism. What he a progressive nationalist? Was he an assimilator? Did he seek to create a special Jewish culture?<sup>732</sup>

Faygenboym joined the discussion, leaning heavily toward Baranov’s position.<sup>733</sup> Like the Alter Apikoyres, and reflecting the view he had long maintained, Faygenboym accepted that freethinkers had a religion. “Of course,” he affirmed, “the serious *apikoyres* actually has a new religion that often imposes even heavier sacrifice than the old religion of the believer.” The general rule for this new religion was “everything is treyf that can harm the progress of humanity toward more equality, toward more fraternity.” Faygenboym also admitted the religion may have “a kind of ‘fanaticism’.” But here, he reframed fanaticism as a positive. Fanaticism could simply be a “fiery enthusiasm,” without which “nothing good was ever accomplished in the world,” and

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<sup>730</sup> M. Baranov, “I ‘kristmas tris,’ i peysekhdige kneydlekh,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 10, 1911; idem, “I ‘kristmas tris,’ i peysekhdige kneydlekh,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 11, 1911.

<sup>731</sup> Baranov, “I ‘kristmas tris,’ i peysekhdik kneydlekh” (Jun. 10).

<sup>732</sup> Baranov, “I ‘kristmas tris,’ i peysekhdik kneydlekh” (Jun. 11).

<sup>733</sup> B. Faygenboym, “Megen apikorsim ales?” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 12, 1911; idem, “Megen apikorsim ales?” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 13, 1911. Also see B. Faygenboym, “Di duneren un blitsen af’n barg sinay?” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 2, 1911.

“this ‘fanaticism’ is [the freethinker’s] life-poetry, his holy feeling.” Faygenboym did not appreciate Cahan saying “true free thinkers, Jewish and those of different nations,” are antisemites.<sup>734</sup> Freethinking socialists, for instance, love Jews. Love “does not mean loving [the Jews’] errors and foolishness,” but “freeing them of their errors and foolishness.”<sup>735</sup> Finally, Faygenboym rejected the idea that assimilation meant adopting a Christian culture. Jews would, rather, assimilate into a global civilization that “stems from freedom... from light, from splendor, from education, from science, from art, from culture, from fine discipline.” “Contemporary Jewish peculiarities,” by contrast, “stem from the dark ghetto life, a life of afflictions and sufferings... without education and without science, without civilization and without culture.” Assuming such Jewish particularities were born from misfortune, he asked readers if Jews should claim “our misfortune [is] a ‘holy’ thing?”<sup>736</sup> Faygenboym, it must be said, was not saying a freethinker *could not* participate in a Passover seder. It would, after all, “be nothing more than a new type of religious fanaticism” to declare it “a sin to sit at the seder of pious people or to eat kneidlach on Passover, latkes on Shavuot, etc.” The question was not permissibility but profitability—the freethinker needed to ask themselves what might be gained or lost by participating.<sup>737</sup>

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<sup>734</sup> Faygenboym, “Megen apikorsim ales?” (Jun. 12).

<sup>735</sup> Ibid. In this regard, Faygenboym said the true freethinker didn’t consider “Jews one hair less important than other people” (a common refrain in his oeuvre). He also said, “I can prove that already twenty-five years ago, when I criticized Jewish superstitions, I never failed to note that Christian superstitions were not one bit better.”

<sup>736</sup> Ibid. Cahan was encouraging “national alienation,” Faygenboym claimed.

<sup>737</sup> Other antireligious freethinkers shared sentiments like Faygenboym’s. Leo Rozentsvayg believed in creating a universal culture. Those who choose spitefulness could not be considered part of the ranks of freethinkers: “A freethinker doesn’t hold anyone in spite. If anyone does, they aren’t a freethinker.” Rozentsvayg argued Jewish freethinkers care deeply for believing Jews, even if their concern is equal to that of non-Jews. Writing about himself in the third person, Rozentsvayg admitted, “The writer of these lines doesn’t pretend to have a special love for the Jew, just as he has no special love for the Christian.” They expressed their love, whether universal or particular, through exposing Judaism’s backwardness. “The Jewish freethinkers,” Rozentsvayg summarized, “seeing the foolish trifle of an adult child, cries out: Israel! Enough!... Enough, don’t be a child anymore! Live in a civilized world! Live like a civilized person!” See Rozentsvayg, *Brismile*, 18, and 20-1.

An array of contributors joined the conversation. Most did not completely side with either Cahan, Baranov, or Faygenboym. These three had set debate's terms, however. Barukh Vladek, a Yiddish journalist with Bundist ties, proclaimed that "the 'fire and sword' of the old religion" had long disappeared, which meant "the fear that it will strengthen the old generation if a freethinker eats latkes and kneidlach is also nonsense." He had a more relaxed view of Jewish rituals as well: "We are Jews, freethinking Jews, socialist Jews, radical Jews, but Jews, and if a seder makes us feel good, if Hannukah games remind us of our youth and the people in our lives, we're allowed to sit at the table and have a true Hannukah pinochle."<sup>738</sup> Veteran socialist Shmuel Peskin did not fear Judaism's power either. "Today," he wrote, "the Jewish religion is only a spiritual power. We can, therefore, peaceably let it to go its own way."<sup>739</sup> But he expressed skepticism regarding Cahan's position. What would Cahan say about a *bris*, what Peskin called "the old-Asiatic, barbaric, and cruel operation"?<sup>740</sup> Peskin had his own rule of thumb: "Since I don't go to *shul* on Yom Kippur, I have no right to go to *shul* on Simchat Torah either. If I don't fast on a regular basis, I'm not allowed to partake in the seder's hominess."<sup>741</sup>

The 1911 Passover debate, like most debates about freethought, Jewishness, and radical politics, did not have a definitive winner or loser. The popular socialist daily was a space where

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<sup>738</sup> B. Vladek was, on the one hand, prepared to oppose nationalism and Zionism alongside Faygenboym and Baranov and would even welcome the disappearance of certain particularities and the dissolution of Jews as a nation. But he also claimed he was no "assimilator." Secular Jewishness did not bother him because "the Jewishness of Jewish witticism, Jewish tears, Jewish temperament, and Jewish literature" does not harm the socialist cause. See B. Vladek, "'Yidishkeyt' un sotsyalizm," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 26, 1911; idem, "'Yidishkeyt' un sotsyalizm," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jun. 27, 1911.

<sup>739</sup> Sh. Peskin, "'Yidishkeyt un sotsyalizm," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 5, 1911. As freethinkers, Peskin wrote, "we must theoretically fight the Jewish religion, and we are not permitted to compromise with it." Jewishness, however, may be unavoidable, and because rights for Jews were a daily struggle in most contexts, Jews everywhere "must remain in formation," showing pride in their people.

<sup>740</sup> Ibid. Judaism as "Asiatic" also appeared in Rozentsvayg, *Brismile*, 20.

<sup>741</sup> Peskin, "'Yidishkeyt un sotsyalizm" (Jul. 5); also see idem, "'Yidishkeyt un sotsyalizm," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 6, 1911. Morris Rosenfeld, "Yidishkeyt af der linker zayt.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 1, 1911; H. Burgin, "Hoben mir take progresirt?" *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 12, 1911; idem, "Hoben mir take progresirt?" *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jul. 13, 1911; A. Lesin, "Vegen fershiedene fershiedenheyten," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Aug. 11, 1911.

multiple views existed side-by-side. Cahan and the *Forverts* had changed, from advocating tolerance to *permitting* secularized religious traditions, from permitting secularized religious traditions to *advocating* freethinkers participate in secularized religious traditions. The daily continued to advance this tolerant stance toward religious holidays. For example, on September 27, 1913, right before the High Holidays, the *Forverts* published a letter from a man named M. Silverman, a freethinking socialist from the Bronx and an avid *Forverts* reader for the last nine years. He was such a passionate socialist that “religion,” he thought, was the most fitting word describing his commitment to socialism’s moral imperatives. He stated, “I believe in socialism as a religion, not only that socialism will improve conditions, but... it creates the just person.” Socialism fostered better friendships and improved family relations.<sup>742</sup> Citing Tolstoy, Silverman affirmed the universality of religious impulses: “A human without some sort of connection to religion is impossible, like a human without a heart.”<sup>743</sup> “I have a religion,” he again confessed, “My God is socialism... I respect the poetic and the philosophical side of the Tanakh, but I take my highest religious inspiration from socialism.”

Silverman needed some advice. His shop mates were Christians, and his socialist ideas helped him win their affections. Silverman’s coworkers knew he was a Jew, and they would expect him to observe Jewish holidays. If he worked on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, his coworkers might deem him “a bum Jew.” Since Silverman was a conduit for socialist thought at his shop, he feared the attitudes of his shop mates toward him *as a Jew* might change, and therefore their attitudes toward socialism might change. The money was not insignificant either. Silverman was saving for citizenship papers and sending money back to his poor mother. Should

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<sup>742</sup> “Sotsyalizmus als religyon,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 27, 1913.

<sup>743</sup> Ibid. One translation of Tolstoy’s quote, rendered in 1902, states: “A man without a religion—that is, without any perceptive relation to the universe—is as impossible as a man without a heart.” See Lyof N. Tolstoï, *XX. Essays, Letters, and Miscellanies* [multiple translators] (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), 397.

a freethinking socialist stay home on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, perhaps feigning observance?

The editor who responded found Silverman's predicament intriguing—it was a reversal of normal circumstances. Most young freethinkers wrote the *Forverts* about how parents and neighbors chaffed at their lack of piety while Silverman “feels very troubled not observing Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in front of *goyim!*” Uncommon as the specifics may be, the editor found the conundrum “an accurate picture of life”—many nonobservant Jews collide with the expectations of non-Jews, who think all Jews are or should be observant. What should Silverman do? The editor told readers, “We believe his new religion—his socialist religion—doesn't permit him to do anything that would cause him to lose his standing and trust with his coworkers.” The *Forverts*, in other words, advocated Silverman not work on Jewish holidays. Because he was spreading enlightenment and socialism at the shop, his coworkers would eventually have a better understanding. For now, he should tread lightly. Silverman should act with respect toward the views of others, the editor continued, just as every freethinker should act respectfully toward their own pious family members. Respectful freethinkers garnered respect for freethought.

The editor had one final point upon which to comment—Silverman's “socialism as religion.” Before reprinting Silverman's letter in full the editor had actually opened the advice column by noting, “this letter contains a remarkable point, which is more important the entire question,” i.e., “socialism as religion.” What then did they think of Silverman's “socialism as religion”? In Silverman, the editor had found *the* exemplary godless-yet-religious socialist. The commentary read: “the most interesting thing in this letter is the breath of religious enthusiasm that emanates from [Silverman]—the true religious feelings socialism creates. Religious feelings

in the best and noblest sense of the word, without the sinister, fanatical sense of it.”<sup>744</sup> Silverman, unlike antireligious fanatics, was a model of tolerance—he was a free freethinker.

### **Conclusion**

These four examples show that Yiddish radicals had tolerance toward religion and the religious on their minds. Not every radical agreed, but the dominant thrust was that times had changed. Freethinking radicals were increasingly divided by how they answered key questions: Could freethought function like a religion? Was it a problem if it did? Freethinkers like Faygenboym and the Alter Apikoyres did not find the label “religion” troublesome while Cahan, Hermalin, and Pfeffer applied “religion” to certain freethinkers to highlight their fanaticism. While most reviewers of *Kosher and treyf* did not use “religion” when criticizing Faygenboym’s book, they referred to the veteran socialist as a passé *shtetl-apikoyres*. My intent has not been to draw a coherence from these conversations. Rather, it has been to reveal how diversely situated Yiddish journalists put “religion” to use when describing their position versus that of their opponents. Circumstances were about to change once again. The Great War would place its own stamp on the rhetoric surrounding freethought and religion. This period, however, the years between 1905 and 1914, set the stage for wartime responses.

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<sup>744</sup> “Sotsyalizmus als religyon.”

## **PART THREE: 1914 and Beyond**

## CHAPTER FIVE: Depicting Freethinkers during the Great War and in the Early Interwar Period

### Introduction

In his memoirs, Abraham Cahan recalled how the *Forverts*' Passover debate of 1911 prompted almost innumerable letters from readers.<sup>745</sup> One stood out for its pathos. Cahan invited its writer, a man, to meet him. The two ended up spending an entire afternoon discussing politics and religion. Cahan found the man quite intelligent and left with a generally positive impression, but he also remembered the man's rigid ideological fervor—he was one of those people who, when impassioned, “stop acting with reason and are only ruled by feeling.”<sup>746</sup> Cahan encountered him again sometime during or immediately after World War I, but he was a changed man. His son had fallen in the war. The shattered father coped by seeking “some sort of spiritual rescue.” He was drawn “back to religion,” that is. As Cahan relayed the man's story, he had temporarily turned to religion to “deceive himself” (the man's words), that “his son's life had not come to a complete end, that he had an ‘afterlife’ (*yene velt*).” In the end, his religious sentiments proved temporary, but they had a lasting effect. Before parting, the man evidently turned to Cahan and said, “Well, I can't deceive myself with thinking there's an ‘afterlife.’ My misfortune has been useful in one sense. You won, Mr. Cahan. I'm tolerant now. I'm not so stubborn in my freethought.”<sup>747</sup>

In the context of Cahan's memoirs, this anecdote appeared in a section describing the tolerance he advocated at the *Forverts*. He was building a case for his brand of tolerance—the man admitted, after all, to having finally embraced Cahan's tolerant freethought. Whether true,

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<sup>745</sup> Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn leben*, vol. 4: 31.

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>747</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

partially true, or untrue, it is interesting Cahan included an anecdote about wartime tragedy to argue his point. Death, the primary force compelling the man toward tolerance, *actually* had nothing to do with Cahan or the *Forverts*, and yet Cahan connected the man's tragedy to the Passover debate of 1911 and other, earlier debates about tolerance and freethought. For the devastated father, the loss raised existential questions that, in the framing given, shifted his freethought into alignment with Cahan's. Wartime tragedy was a catalyst for tolerance, and Cahan (via the devastated father) wasn't the only one to say so.

Cahan's story of the heartbroken freethinker highlights several themes central to this chapter. World War I and its aftermath did not fundamentally transform *all* aspects of the conversation surrounding freethought, but it did shape it. With the war came proclamations of peace between freethinkers and the observant, but it also brought declarations that freethought was declining. Some of these trends continued into the immediate postwar period, as sacred matters remained a point of conversation in the Yiddish press. This chapter argues for the war's shaping effect on the conversation surrounding freethinkers and freethought. Again, war was not the only factor stimulating change, but many Yiddish journalists used the war as a framing device for explaining religion's future.

This chapter begins by addressing claims there was a peace on the Jewish street in the United States, a claim stimulating some fictional depictions of Jewish freethinkers.<sup>748</sup> As the Yiddish press, radical and conservative, grappled with war, they sought to understand its immaterial effects.<sup>749</sup> The chapter thus turns its attention to wartime commentary on *religious*

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<sup>748</sup> For example, see Tuvye Shmeykhl, "Di milkhome-trehren fun zeyer shtedtel hot zey feraynigt.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Oct. 20, 1916; Reprinted and expanded as Chone Gottesfeld, "Milkhome-trehren," *Minikes'* (Oct. 1917).

<sup>749</sup> Gedalya Bublik, "Di virkung fun milkhome oyf der religyon," *Minikes'* (Oct. 1916). A.Y. Netter, "Milkhome un ire urzakhn," *FASh* (New York, NY), Apr. 1, 1916; "Nokh a milkhome-faktor," *FASh* (New York, NY), Aug. 18, 1917. Elyash, "Nishto keyn fraydenker," *YT* (New York, NY), Apr. 11, 1918; idem, "Fun fraydenkerey tsu religye," *YT* (New York, NY), Jul. 2, 1918.

*sentiments* vis-à-vis freethought. It ends by examining the American Yiddish press during the early interwar period, a time in which acculturation and antisemitism shaped the conversation surrounding freethought.<sup>750</sup> Scholars of American Jewish history have largely neglected World War I and its immediate impact on American Jewish religious life. Judaism in the broader interwar period, however, has received considerable treatment. Scholars have largely described the interwar period in terms of declining interest in religion, especially among the children of immigrant Jews.<sup>751</sup> Declarations of denominational decline were not entirely inaccurate, but this narrative focuses almost exclusively on religious institutions. While proclamations of religious flourishing could be overstated—and I do not seek to overstate them, it was also true that the interwar period witnessed religious creativity and religious blending.<sup>752</sup> Observed through the lenses of freethought, interest in religion looks different during the war and early interwar period. Declarations of religion's rise or fall are, again, often subject to rhetorical excess, but the war and its immediate aftermath raised the hopes of many prognosticators (not all) who hope something new would emerge from violence and destruction.

### **War and Peace on the Jewish Street**

The outbreak of European conflict reignited old debates in socialist circles. Should socialists maintain their international alliance or stand behind the nations where they live? At the *Forverts*,

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<sup>750</sup> For example, see A.D. Oguz's *Di fraydenker*. Serialized in the *Morgn-zhurnal* (New York, NY), May-August 1922; also see B. Kovner, "A 'fraydenker, a mayseh fir pesach,'" *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 13, 1922; B. Kovner, "A khazn a fraydenker....," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Sep. 26, 1923. For more from Kovner, see YIVO Archives, Jacob Adler Papers, RG 473. This collection contains many of Adler's (i.e., Kovner's) manuscripts.

<sup>751</sup> Historian Jeffrey Gurock, for example, noted that in the early 1920s "disinterest in synagogue life—of any denominational sort—was rampant among the masses of second-generation east European Jews, who then constituted the largest individual cohort of American Jews. Unlike their parents, they were manifestly disinclined to identify formally with their people's religious past and showed little enthusiasm for charting its future." See Gurock, "American Judaism Between the Two World Wars," in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, 95.

<sup>752</sup> Gurock himself recognized that "a new American Judaism evolved that defied easy denominational labeling." See *ibid.*, 97. For work on WWI in general, see the essays in Marsha L. Rozenblit and Jonathan Karp, eds. *World War I and the Jews: Conflict and Transformation in Europe, the Middle East, and America* (New York: Berghan Books, 2017); Edward Madigan and Gideon Reuveni, eds., *The Jewish Experience of the First World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Cahan claimed that internationalism could be consistent with passionate sentiments toward one's country. Hardline internationalists, like Faygenboym and Baranov, disagreed. Cahan's stance, however, reflected sentiments in Europe and the United States. Most European socialists ended up backing the governments where they lived. In the United States, immigrant Jews' disdain for the czar meant most, socialists included, started the war with pro-German sympathies.<sup>753</sup> And sympathies generally shifted when the czar was overthrown (March 1917) and the United States entered in war (April 1917). The Balfour Declaration (November 1917)—a public statement of the British government about their intent to establish a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine—furthered the patriotic *Jewish* feelings many radicals felt. The war's divisive effect was felt in anarchist circles, too.<sup>754</sup> Early on, most anarchist notables proclaimed an antimilitarist, pacificist stance. Some took sides, however. While officially neutral when the war began, Yanovsky's *Fraye arbeter shtime* published renowned anarchist Petr Kropotkin's letters supporting the Allied cause.<sup>755</sup> Some Jewish anarchists, like veteran journalist Michael Kohn, joined most immigrant Jews in hoping Germany would liberate Jews from the czar.<sup>756</sup> After the

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<sup>753</sup> It was a complex situation on the ground. One *Fraye arbeter shtime* reader highlighted this complexity in April 1916 when stating, "Here, on the 'East Side,' thousands of miles away from the battlefield, we also can't be neutral, and we fight, usually, with the mouth or with the pen, for one side or the other, according to our sympathies." See L.H., "Brief tsum redaktor," *FASh* (New York, NY), Apr. 15, 1916. This letter writer was responding to Yankev Netter. April 1, Netter published "War and Its Causes" in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, an article detailing the general causes of war and the specific causes of the current war. He identified causes as the economy, religion, nationalism, and race-hate, among others. L.H. challenged Netter's list. Among the complaints, they did not think religion a cause for the present conflict. The leading combatants, they claimed, "nearly all have the same religion." The writer continued: "Besides, the official church has taken a better stand in the present war than the socialists and anarchists who, for certain motives, seek to justify the present bloodbath of their governments." Religion and the religious, in other words, were not to blame. For Netter's original piece, see "Milkhome un ihre urzakhen, 1.," *FASh* (New York, NY), Apr. 1, 1916.

<sup>754</sup> See the essays in *Anarchism, 1914–18: Internationalism, Anti-Militarism and War*, eds. Matthew S. Adams and Ruth Kinna (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

<sup>755</sup> Kenyon Zimmer, "At war with empire: the anti-colonial roots of American anarchist debates during the First World War," in *Anarchism, 1914–18*, 182–9; full article, see 175–98.

<sup>756</sup> *Ibid.*, 188–9.

Russian Revolution, Yanovsky openly supported the Allied cause, and antimilitarist anarchists chastised him for the about-face.

Divisive as the war was in certain circles, it also united American Jewry in common cause. Jews across the country banded together to raise support for relief in war-torn Europe.<sup>757</sup> Class and ideology shaped these efforts, but organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (“the Joint”) cut across various subcommunities.<sup>758</sup> Jewish leaders regularly mentioned the inclusion of freethinkers as a sign of unity. American-born Reform rabbi Judah Magnes, speaking on behalf of the Joint during a 1916 trip to Germany, declared: “Through our efforts the most differentiated Jewish groups, which hitherto knew nothing about each other and wanted to know nothing about each other, have come together in the relief work and are working together... In the American Committee, there are represented the rich and the poor, *the pious and the freethinker*, the Zionist, the Socialist, the Orthodox. We have all cooperated in this relief effort.”<sup>759</sup> In December 1917, Jewish lawyer and statesman Henry Morgenthau made a similar claim while promoting a New York-area relief drive: “A problem

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<sup>757</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 208–11. For a primary source example, see the names listed on the correspondence for the “Central Committee for the Relief of Jews Suffering Through the War,” Peter Wiernik and Bertha Wiernik Collection, Subgroup II: Peter Wiernik Papers, 1888-1936, box 11, f. 1, Yeshiva University Libraries; also see Invitation from Mr. Felix M. Warburg to Mr. Peter Wiernick (*sic*), Peter Wiernik and Bertha Wiernik Collection, Subgroup II: Peter Wiernik Papers, 1888-1936, box 11, f. 1, Yeshiva University Libraries. The invitation is specifically for those involved in the “Campaign for Jewish War Sufferers.” Finally, see correspondence from the “Welcome Committee for the Jewish Boys Returning from the War,” August 6, 1919, Peter Wiernik and Bertha Wiernik Collection, Subgroup II: Peter Wiernik Papers, 1888-1936, box 11, f. 20, Yeshiva University Libraries.

<sup>758</sup> Jessica Cooperman, *Making Judaism Safe for America: World War I and the Origins of Religious Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018). On World War I’s influence on Jewish philanthropy in America, see Marc Lee Raphael, “The Origins of Organized National Jewish Philanthropy in the United States, 1914-1939,” in *The Jews of North America*, ed. Moses Rischin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987). General work on religion and World War I, see Jonathan H. Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: The American Soldier and the Great War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

<sup>759</sup> See section “Minutes of the Meeting of the Juedisches Hilfskomité fuer Polen. Held at the Anwaltshaus, September 30, 1916” in *Commission of the American Jewish Relief Funds: Report to the Joint Distribution Committee* (New York: Press of Clarence S. Nathan, 1917), qt. from p. 38; emphasis mine. Judah Magnes and Alexander M. Dushkin are listed as authors. On Jüdische Hilfskomite für Polen, see Abraham G. Duker, *Jews in the World War: A Brief Historical Sketch* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1939), 18–19. Though this version of Duker’s report was published in 1939, it reviewed the Jewish presence in World War I.

that touches the very existence of a people should be solved by the entire people, by all the members of the people. ... No Jew, be he poor or rich, be he *a believer or a freethinker*, has a right to free himself from this most elementary human and Jewish duty.”<sup>760</sup> Placing freethinkers alongside believers undergirded claims that *all* Jews were, and should, support relief efforts.

Declarations of communal unity found literary expression in the Yiddish press. Answers to this question found literary expression. The most notable example was a short story by Tuvye Shmeykhl, entitled “Wartime Tears for Their *Shtetl* United Them” (hereafter “Wartime Tears”) which was published in the *Forverts* in October 1916. Tuvye Shmeykhl was a pseudonym of popular writer Chone Gottesfeld, who was born in 1890 in Skala, Galicia to a moderate Hasidic family. Before leaving Skala for Czernowitz, where young Chone received formal secular education, he recalled being exposed to the American Yiddish press, Zionism, and socialism. Skala, a town on the border with Russia, was also brimming with Jewish revolutionaries after 1905. Chone would return to Skala after living in Czernowitz and Vienna, only to depart for the United States in 1910.<sup>761</sup> By the time he emigrated, revolutionary influences and secular education had distanced him from the piety of his parents, though he occasionally davened to satisfy his mother’s observant sensibilities.<sup>762</sup> With initially limited success as a writer in New York, he joined Cleveland’s *Yidishe prese*. Around 1914, however, he began regularly contributing to the *Forverts* and the *Tsukunft*, becoming well-known for his humorous tales as Tuvye Shmeykhl.<sup>763</sup>

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<sup>760</sup> Henry Morgenthau, “A Test for New York Jewry,” *American Jewish Chronicle* 4, no. 4 (November 30, 1917), 85; emphasis mine.

<sup>761</sup> Reyzen, “Gottesfeld, Chone,” *Leksikon*, vol. 1: 464; also see Shoulson’s introduction to Chone Gottesfeld, “Hometown to Treyf Ground,” trans. Sophia Shoulson, in *Pakn Treger: Digital Translation Issue*, “Coming to America” (Spring 2020), <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/pakn-treger/2020-pakn-treger-digital-translation-issue/hometown-treyf>; also see Chone Gottesfeld, *Vos ikh gedenk fun mayn lebn* (New York: Fareynikte Galitsianer Yidn in Amerike, 1960).

<sup>762</sup> Gottesfeld, *Vos ikh gedenk fun mayn lebn*, 209.

<sup>763</sup> Reyzen, “Gottesfeld, Chone,” *Leksikon*, vol. 1: 464.

As its title suggests, Shmeykhel's "Wartime Tears" narrates how the war unifies the *landslayt* of Dinivke, a fictional *shtetl*.<sup>764</sup> In the Old World, the Jews of Dinivke are like Jews in other *shtetlach*: they can be separated into two groups, observant/pious (*frume*) and unobservant/secular (*fraye*). But the Jews of Dinivke are also distinct—they are known for their fanaticism. The Dinivke immigrants transport their fanaticism to the United States. The *landslayt* community remains divided between pious and impious, and when they end up in contact, it leads to arguments and blows. Members of the respective subgroups do not attend the life celebrations and parties of the other. They go so far as to avoid eye contact, and even families are split by the separate camps.<sup>765</sup> While Shmeykhel never uses the word *fraydenker*, and *fray* can simply mean "secular," the distance he draws between the observant and unobservant reflects typical depictions of freethinkers in the American Yiddish press.

The pious and secular *landslayt* of Dinivke both have representative leaders of their subgroups. The religious are led by "Reb. Nochum," who is not a rabbi, in fact, but an old, pious Jew. A man by the name of Berele heads the secular group. Each subgroup looks at the representative leader of the other with disdain. The pious, for instance, remember how Berele, back in Dinivke, would smoke cigarettes on the Sabbath. Though they have never met, Reb. Nochum and Berele hold similarly negative impressions of the other. Berele imagines Reb. Nochum as "a wild Jew," with a beard and *payos*, shuckling over the Gemara all day. Nochum imagines "apostate" Berele sitting in a saloon, playing cards, cussing, and eating pork. "Fantasies" in tow, they become "the greatest of enemies" in their minds.<sup>766</sup>

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<sup>764</sup> Tuvye Shmeykhl, "Di milkhome-trehren fun zeyer shtetl hot zey fereynigt," *Forverts* (New York, NY), October 20, 1916.

<sup>765</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>766</sup> *Ibid.*

The situation changes when the members of the hometown association receive a report from their former *shtetl*: Cossacks laid Dinivke to waste and its inhabitants are now destitute. The devastated *landslayt*, *frume* and *fraye*, hold a meeting. Reb. Nochum speaks first, using the Torah to demonstrate the need to aid the victims of the violence. While addressing the crowd, Reb. Nochum weeps “like a baby.” The secular *landslayt* do not mock Nochum. They actually join him. The secular see in Reb. Nochum “their old, pious fathers dying of hunger in the old home.” Berele’s eyes also fill with tears as he watches Reb. Nochum weep. He then cries out, “We are all Jews. We are all from one *shtetl*.” The entire audience agrees with Berele and applauds, the loudest coming from the religious, who were surprised such a “goy” could be so moved by Jewish suffering.<sup>767</sup>

That evening, Reb. Nochum and Berele finally become acquainted. They compliment each other in a manner reflecting the rhetoric they privilege, indicating how they are building bridges. Berele informs Reb. Nochum he has a “warm heart” and speaks “like a great man” (possibly “human” or “person,” lit., *mensch*), language reflecting a humanistic sensibility. Reb. Nochum tells Berele, “You have a *Jewish* heart, you spoke like a great *Jew*,” language reflecting particularity.<sup>768</sup> So, in Shmeykhel’s summary, “The misfortune of their *shtetl* brought them together.” And the solidarity lasts and extends beyond the two leaders. The secular *landslayt* discover their observant counterparts have “humanitarian hearts” while the observant discover the secular have “Jewish hearts.” Shmeykhel’s commentary suggests the main lesson was tolerance. The secular did not become any more religious. Rather, “They learned to have more

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid.

patience and more respect for the honest feelings and opinions of the observant.” Wartime horror moves them to unity.<sup>769</sup>

Yiddish journalists, it must be noted, did not always offer the war as an explanation for unity during the wartime years. To some, time seemed to heal all wounds. A notable piece in this vein, entitled “Tolerance on the Jewish Street,” came from the pen of Bernard Gorin and was published in the *Morgn-zhurnal* around Passover 1915.<sup>770</sup> According to Gorin, intolerance between irreligious Jews *and* religious Jews defined the modern period and spanned Europe and the United States. Despite intolerance on both sides, Gorin made sure to note “the Jewish youth who shed the yoke of faith maybe turned out to be even more intolerant than believers.” And why had the Jewish youth shown such a disdain for religion and the religious? Gorin’s answer: “The young generation that had been born from the womb of the Haskalah did not understand any other posture than spite.” The Jewish youth kept their animosity when they relocated to the New World, and so, “tolerance wasn’t known on the Jewish street.” Yom Kippur balls were one of Gorin’s key pieces of evidence.<sup>771</sup>

Gorin had noticed tolerant trends in recent years, however. He partly considered these trends a result of radicals “showing more interest in Jewishness.” But, perhaps ironically, Gorin sensed it was also partly the product of mockery. Cartoonists and professional jokesters, like those laughing at Faygenboym (chapter four), had taught freethinkers and the observant not to take themselves too seriously. Indications of tolerance were everywhere, and Gorin saw them in once-imaginable interactions and intersections. It was not rare, for example, to hear a Jewish radical address a *shul* about some political issue. The radical would not even propagandize but

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<sup>769</sup> Ibid. A second version of the story, simply entitled “War Tears,” appeared in *Minikes*’ about a year later, see C. Gottesfeld, “Milkhome-trehren: a zayt bild,” *Minikes*’ (Oct. 1917): 77–8.

<sup>770</sup> Polland, “‘May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?’,” 391.

<sup>771</sup> Gorin, “Tolerants oyf der yidisher gas.”

speak about matters of general concern. Gorin had similarly seen an anarchist deep in conversation with a rabbi, “and from their posture it was easy to see it was not their first meeting.” Twenty years ago, this same anarchist would have “looked at every rabbi as if looking at a personal enemy.” While Gorin did not think the tolerant trend was exclusively American, it was clear that acculturation, irrespective of war, had an impact.<sup>772</sup>

The fact that many radicals were “showing more interest in Jewishness” was observable in the Yiddish newspaper market. A new daily, *Der tog*, began in 1914 and started hitting its stride during the war. It was clearly irreligious and sought to steer clear of religious disputes. D.M. Hermalin, who migrated to the *Tog* early after it began, summarized in late August 1915, “We are not God’s policemen and do not wish to substitute for the position of God’s attorney. *Der tog* itself isn’t a religious newspaper and, as everyone knows, appears on the Sabbath.”<sup>773</sup> It did, however, support Yiddish secular schools and was pro-Zionist, putting it at odds with antinationalists, e.g., cosmopolitans and Reform Jews, and the *Tageblatt*’s religiously inclined nationalism.<sup>774</sup> It consistently advocated irreligious Jews celebrate Jewish holidays, if only in a nationalist vein.<sup>775</sup> When summarizing the newspaper’s readership in November 1919, Hermalin claimed, “A small percent comprise the Orthodox. The remainder are freethinkers, Socialists and

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<sup>772</sup> Ibid.

<sup>773</sup> H. [D. M. Hermalin], “Di miskherim mit tikets in shuhlen um shabos,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Aug. 24, 1915. More from Hermalin, see idem, “A frume mame in a fraydenker’s hoyz”; idem, “Er is a fraydenker un zi is a frume.,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Sep. 4, 1915; idem, “A por fraydenker oyf der linker zayt.,” *Tog* (New York, NY), May 11, 1917; idem, “A yidisher fraydenker fun alte zayten.,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Jul. 28, 1917; idem, “A mayseh vegen a komishen fraydenker.,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Oct. 9, 1917; idem, “An idiot iz nokh erger fun hipokrit.,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Oct. 17, 1917.

<sup>774</sup> Shapiro, “Words to the Wives,” 107. On the *Tog* and secular nationalist Yiddish schools, see *ibid.*, 127; also see Khaykin, *Yidishe bleter in amerike*, 360; M. Katz, “Yidish dertsung bay radikale elteren,” *Tog* (New York, NY), May 4, 1916.

<sup>775</sup> Shapiro, “Words to the Wives,” 105, and 105–6, n.374–n.379; also see H., “Der koyekh fun fanatizm lebt nokh,” *Tog* (New York, NY), May 5, 1917; idem, “A frumer id vos iz kayn id nit,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Dec. 15, 1917; idem, “Vegen di nayn-teg un dos alten tische-bov,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Jul. 13, 1918; idem, “Der emes’er tsiel fun yidishkeyt bay yiden,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Sep. 27, 1918.

even some Anarchists. All... are united in the concept that Jews must have their own home where they may lay their heads.”<sup>776</sup>

While not religious, the *Tog* would, in fact, address religious matters far more often than the *Forverts*. Contributors approached religion from a generally positivist, historical-cultural standpoint. It even published religious texts, as in 1922, when it serialized Yehoash’s well-regarded Yiddish translation of the Torah. An example of the paper’s approach to freethought and religious matters was evident in a 1917 Shavuot editorial by Dr. Yekhezkel Vortsman (1878-1938). A native of Podolia, Vortsman had received a PhD in chemistry in Switzerland, where he also joined the Zionist circles of Nachman Syrkin and Chaim Weitzmann. When he arrived in the United States in 1907, he was already a seasoned journalist and would soon contribute to an array of Yiddish periodicals, from Atlanta to Los Angeles to Montreal. His Shavuot editorial, entitled “Our Torah,” argued “that a modern, non-spiteful freethinker understands better and more deeply [how] to appreciate the greatness of the Jewish Torah than many, many pious Jews.”<sup>777</sup> Vortsman recounted Torah’s reception in modern Jewish history. Pious Jews, fearing how scientific advancements challenged traditional views of the Torah, had long ago become ensconced in a kind of literalism. This rejection of modernity’s norms alienated the youth, not only from the Torah but also from the Jewish people. Times had changed, however. “That period,” Vortsman summarized, “is already long behind us... The old are no longer fanatically embittered and the youth no longer quarrel with God... to prove their modernity.” The modern, freethinking Jew still doesn’t believe in the stories of the Torah, but they appreciate the Torah’s beauty from a historical-cultural standpoint. While fiercely antireligious freethinkers, à la

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<sup>776</sup> H., “Vegen der emune fun di reformirte yiden,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Nov. 19, 1919. [Here, translation comes from in Shapiro, “Words to the Wives,” 108]

<sup>777</sup> Dr. Y. Vortsman, “Unzer Toyre,” *Tog* (New York, NY), May 27, 1917.

Faygenboym, may have also claimed to appreciate the Torah, they likely would not have taken Vortsman's next step. He did not think the modern study of the Torah led to antireligion but an appreciation of the Jews' "folks-spirit" and "the Jewish genius." Vortsman wrote further, "If [the freethinking Jew] studies religious history, he sees that the most widespread world religions at present, Christianity and Islam, have taken their best prescriptions from us, from the Jewish Torah." So too, when the freethinking Jew studies radical politics, they can find analogs in the Torah's "sacred laws." The freethinker could appreciate the Torah more than the strictly observant, since the freethinker's appreciation did not arise from blind devotion but respectful, scientific study.<sup>778</sup>

Some Yiddish journalists split the difference—acculturation was inevitable, but war accelerated it. E. Vohliner, pseudonym of Leyzer Landau, took this route in 1917 with a poignant piece published in *Unzer vort*, a Chicago-based Yiddish weekly. A native of the Zhitomir region, Landau arrived in the United States in 1902, where he ran in anarchist circles and eventually joined Labor Zionism. The title of his 1917 piece might be best translated "Cooperative Evolution," though cooperative in *daytshmerish* Yiddish, "*genosenshaftlikhe*," indexed "*genosen*," the word for radical comrades.<sup>779</sup> It reads like a short history of Jewish socialists in the United States, including events that took place before Vohliner arrived on American shores, and revolved around an irony—Jewish comrades believed in evolution, but they apparently did not believe its laws applied to them. As self-taught revolutionaries, they had learned the laws of evolution after discovering "a secret revolutionary brochure or popularization of Darwinism." Newfound knowledge in tow, they "distance[d] themselves from anything connected to Jewish

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<sup>778</sup> Ibid.

<sup>779</sup> E. Vohliner, "Genosenshaftlikhe evolutsye," *Unzer vort* (Chicago, IL), Jul. 1, 1917.

belonging.”<sup>780</sup> The Jewish comrades were, therefore, fiercely antireligious. Their anti-Jewishness, however, did not last long in the face of a growing interest in nationalism and “Jewish matters.” “Under the influence of the new winds,” even veteran radicals embraced “the Bund’s *treyf* nationalism,” though they did so in secret.

Changes continued apace. Vohliner explicitly referenced the Cahan, Baranov, and Faygenboym debate for apparently “legitimiz[ing] Passover kneidlach,” which signalled one could embrace Jewishness without religion and nationalism. An open embrace of Jewishness was, as Vohliner summarized, “the beginning of an evolutionary process seemingly impossible a couple years prior.” The Bundists and Socialist Territorialists, therefore, drew the veteran, freethinking radicals “into general Jewish issues.” The Great War, however, brought about the “most unbelievable wonder”—veteran comrades joined hands with Zionists. Interestingly, Vohliner published this piece before the Balfour Declaration, an event substantively accelerating Zionist fervor. Regardless, veteran comrades were soon “sitting, awestruck, in Marshall’s waiting room and saying they, alongside Jacob Schiff, have general-Jewish interests.” Vohliner, with his “spiritual vision,” foresaw veteran comrades becoming complete socialist nationalists. He concluded by returning to the big idea: evolution. Veteran radicals had once been so confident in evolution, but they apparently forgot, or did not want to believe, that the same rules applied to them—they would have to evolve, too.<sup>781</sup> Again, this sketch emphasized an evolutionary process, but the war was a key accelerant. Vohliner mainly centered on socialist politics, not religion. Regardless, his piece showed how socialist comrades change their relationship toward the religious aspects of Jewishness.

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<sup>780</sup> Ibid. I have translated *Yidentum* (*Yidntum*) as Jewish belonging.

<sup>781</sup> Ibid.

Did an “evolutionary process,” the war, or a combination create a peace between freethinkers and the observant? There were still conflicts on New York’s Jewish streets. Freethinkers and observant Jews openly brawled on Yom Kippur 1915, just five months after Gorin’s article about tolerance.<sup>782</sup> Some antireligious intellectuals, like Faygenboym, continued their attacks. Faygenboym specifically accused freethinking, socialist “patriots” of strengthening religion’s position through their “blindness.” Freethinking “patriots,” he argued, claim that “religious superstition and religious prejudice have absolutely no power over Jews these days,” but “they don’t see the enormous, sinister power clericalism still has over the wide masses.”<sup>783</sup> Leo Rozentsvayg also remained on the offensive. In his 1916 tract, *Brismile*, the name for a circumcision ceremony, Rozentsvayg stressed that tolerance was a freethinker’s duty while also mocking the religious.<sup>784</sup> He continued publishing antireligious articles in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, though he knew they would not be well-received because of “the present national orientation.”<sup>785</sup>

Some Yiddish writers openly laughed at the staunchly antireligious. In a one-page piece published in *Minikes’* in October 1916, a pseudonymous author by the name “Mockery’s Descendent” wrote about a New York-area *apikoyres* who could not avoid religious Jews.<sup>786</sup> As the narrator relays the man’s tale, the *apikoyres* feels like the world is persecuting him—he cannot find a place in New York away from religious Jews. He says, “I do not believe in

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<sup>782</sup> Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi*, 86.

<sup>783</sup> Faygenboym, *Di religyon un di arbeter*, 17.

<sup>784</sup> Rozentsvayg, *Brismile*, 16. He also wrote: “Many religious teachers believe religion or belief is a sign of human progress. That isn’t correct,” *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>785</sup> Full context: Leo Rozentsvayg, upon publishing *Brismile*, thanked Yanovsky for publishing his antireligious articles in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. Rozentsvayg admitted his articles weren’t popular in “the present national orientation.” See Rozentsvayg, “Hagdome,” in *Brismile*. Another antireligious work at the time, see A. Grinshteyn, *Anti-religyon* (New York: author, 1915).

<sup>786</sup> Khoyzek’s Eynikel, “A moyre’diger krekhts fun an apikoyres,” *Minikes’* (Oct. 1916): 50. Also see Z. Levin, “Nokh gor a griner apikoyres,” *Minikes’* (Oct. 1916): 55. Another tragic, wartime piece in the same issue, see M. Olgin, “Geshrey fun yunge kindershe neshomus,” *Minikes’* (Oct. 1916): 75.

Jewishness. I hate a rabbi like I hate death. I detest a hazan like a spider. I can't look at a shul."

The *apikoyres* even moved regularly to avoid religious Jews, from Forsyth Street to Houston Street, and then to Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, the *apikoyres* lives "in a goyish neighborhood" approximately "a half-block from a church." He has peace for a few months, but Jews end up buying the church property and turn it into a shul—"with a star of David, a hazan, a rabbi, a *shokhet*, a *shemesh*, a president, and they eventually sold Torah readings and tickets—a regular circus!" The *apikoyres* moves again, this time to a wealthier area where the residents are almost exclusively Christian, though some unobservant Jews live there too. His "joyous" situation lasts until right before Rosh Hashanah. As the *apikoyres* walks around the neighborhood, he sees a sign advertising a famous hazan and choir—Christians did not sell the building, but they rented it out for the High Holidays. The *apikoyres* can only complain to the narrator that the world is persecuting him.<sup>787</sup> Sad as the depiction may sound, it was a laughable take on Jewish life in New York.

### **Debating the War's Impact on Religion**

From the war's start until its end, the Anglo-American press speculated how the conflict would impact religious institutions and religious sentiments, a conversation Jewish leaders in the Anglophone world joined.<sup>788</sup> For example, when Joseph Herman Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the

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<sup>787</sup> Khozyek's Eynikel, "A moyre'diger krekhts fun an apikoyres."

<sup>788</sup> "Religion Reborn in War: Dr. McComb Predicts World Will Turn to Spiritual Affairs," *Sun* (New York, NY), Dec. 5, 1916; "War's Effect on Religion," *Washington Post* (from the *Melbourne Argus*) (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 23, 1917; "Religion and War," *Boston Daily Globe* (Boston, MA), Feb. 5, 1916; "War and Religion," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.) May 3, 1918; "War's Influence on Religion," *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, MI), Jul. 21, 1918; Tertius Van Dyke, "Religion and the War: Some Aspects of Things Spiritual in Three Books of the Month," *The Bookman* (Aug. 1918): 653; "Says War Aided Religion," *Sun* (New York, NY), Nov. 20, 1918; "Religion's Opportunity Now That the War Is Over," *Current Opinion* lxvi, no. 1, (Jan. 1919): 45; William L. McPherson, "Religion Before and After War," *New York Tribune* (New York, NY), Sep. 6, 1919. The Anglo-American Jewish also debated the war's impact on religion. "Religion and War," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 22, 1915; "War and Religion," *American Israelite* (from the *Jewish Chronicle*) (Cincinnati, OH), Jan. 6, 1916; "Religion and War," *Jewish Advocate* (Boston, MA), Aug. 24, 1916; "About Men and Things: Religion and War," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), Jun. 1, 1917; Abram S. Isaacs, "War and Religion," *Jewish Exponent* (from *The Bookman*) (Philadelphia, PA), Jan. 18, 1918.

United Kingdom and a graduate of Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary, visited the frontlines in July 1915, he reportedly told the press, “Situated as [soldiers] are, within sight of death at any moment, their hearts go out to their religion probably as never before.”<sup>789</sup>

There were optimists, like Hertz, and skeptics.<sup>790</sup> Journalists in the American Yiddish press joined the discussion as well, and freethinkers and freethought played a role in the conversation

Radical Yiddish journalists generally viewed wartime piety with suspicion while journalists for the conservative Yiddish press were more optimistic. The *Forverts*, less inclined to discuss religious matters than some newspapers, joined the conversation in January 1915 with an editorial aptly entitled, “Is the World Becoming Pious?”<sup>791</sup> Its subtitle, “The war has made the world crazy...,” foretold the stance its author would take.<sup>792</sup> The piece, centered mainly on the growing popularity of Christian revivalist Billy Sunday, outlined how the preacher gained notoriety: he used slang, chewed tobacco, and adored baseball. And so, he “touches the right heartstrings of present-day ‘fellows’ in America,” turning otherwise modern audiences into “a pious insane asylum.” Sunday’s popularity was not unusual—he was one of many preachers in American history who “‘revive’ believers’ former ardent interest in religion.” And the growing warmth toward religion was everywhere. Even in France, the pinnacle of secularity, religion was gaining momentum. Despite growing piety, the *Forverts*’ editorialist actually interpreted revival as a sign of religion’s decline, especially in the United States. “Until 50-60 years ago,” the author remarked, “Americans were insanely pious,” and religion was *the* staple of daily life in the United States. More recently, however, “religion had gone to sleep.” “Aside from a small number of old people, and aside from the priests and church prophets,” religion no longer had a

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<sup>789</sup> “War Deepens Soldiers Religion, Rabbi Finds,” *New York Tribune* (New York, NY), Jul. 25, 1915.

<sup>790</sup> For the use of “optimists,” see “War’s Influence on Religion.”

<sup>791</sup> Shapiro, “Words to the Wives,” 112–3, esp. see 112 n.400.

<sup>792</sup> “Vert di velt frum?,” *Forverts* (New York, NY), Jan. 10, 1915.

privileged place in society. The cause, according to the author, was not the spread of freethought among the American public. A general “secularity” had prevailed. Modern life was and is “very distant from religious feelings.”<sup>793</sup>

If modern life was distant from religious feelings,” how can religion’s rebirth be explained? “The war caused it!” This answer, the editorialist admitted, might seem counterintuitive. Philosophically, a creator God could be easily blamed for allowing humans to murder each other, and institutional religion could be blamed for doing little to prevent it. These were “logical responses,” however, and humans are rarely concerned with logic. In times of destruction, humanity leans on its “psychological nature,” and global conflict had forced humans to confront death on a daily basis. “Death, death, death floats in front of one’s eyes,” and a fear of death drives people to wish for “something that’s more important than life, something that lives after death.” What starts as a wish gains strength and becomes a closely held belief. Sunday might repackage revivalism for contemporary times, but revival relies on ancient existential angst. “Indeed,” the editorialist declared, “the world has gone insane,” but angst and, therefore, religious revival would not last. The war was “only a passing phase, a moment. [The world] will come round. It will sober up once again.”<sup>794</sup>

Less than a week later, the *Varhayt* commented on the war and religion too, doing so in the context of an advice column.<sup>795</sup> The paper received a letter from a woman by the name of “M. Rashkin,” a regular *Varhayt* reader in Montreal who, “although not frum,” could not stomach a friend blaming Jewish religious authorities and mocking Judaism during a time of war. She wanted to know what the daily’s editors thought of her anger. An unidentified

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<sup>793</sup> Ibid.

<sup>794</sup> Ibid.

<sup>795</sup> “Di milkhomus fun felker un di neshome fun’m menshen,” *Varhayt* (New York, NY), Jan. 16, 1915.

respondent began the newspaper's response by addressing the war's causes, emphasizing that religion was generally not to blame for the conflict. "All major religions of the world," they wrote, "with the exception of Christianity, preached peace and taught people to value it."<sup>796</sup> The majority of the respondent's commentary, however, centered on the war's uncertain impact on individuals. War could "make weaklings out of the strong, fools out of the wise, pious people out of freethinkers (*frayzinnige*), and freethinkers out of the pious." While war can often drive people insane, it can offer clarity as well. As an example, the respondent fired shots at radical ideologues: "people who previously didn't have a right relationship with reality and dreamed of perpetual peace, cosmopolitanism, internationalism, etc. were, through the war, sobered up and brought back to real life."<sup>797</sup> Despite war's uncertain effect on individual, a principle prevailed: "[war] does not make people freer (i.e., more secular), but more pious and more religious." Wartime uncertainty often turns people "pious and mystical."<sup>798</sup>

Journalists for the conservative Yiddish press were more likely to interpret increased interest in religion as permanent. They were also more likely to prognosticate the decline of freethought. Gedalya Bublik, who had already commented on global signs of increased piety in 1912, proffered similar commentary during the war.<sup>799</sup> In April 1915, he again took to the *Tageblat* to note how France, "the land of *apikorses*," was witnessing a return to religion, a return the war was only accelerating it.<sup>800</sup> During the war, Bublik became editor of the *Tageblat*,

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<sup>796</sup> Ibid. The *Tageblat* also laughed at the idea that Christianity is a "religion of peace," as its adherents claim. See "Der ershter patsh," *YT* (New York, NY), Dec. 25, 1914.

<sup>797</sup> "Di milkhomus fun felker un di neshome fun'm menshen." For a similar discussion of war, nationalism, and internationalism/cosmopolitanism, see Tsivion, "Milkhome un natsyonalizm," 17–18; also see idem, "A bisele optimizm," *Minikes* (Oct. 1916): 6–8.

<sup>798</sup> "Di milkhomus fun felker un di neshome fun'm menshen." The war's impact on religion was the subject of a Yom Kippur meeting advertised in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, see Sep. 22, 1917.

<sup>799</sup> Bublik, "Di ervakhung fun der religyon."

<sup>800</sup> Bublik, "Di fraye frankraykh vert frum," *YT* (New York, NY), Apr. 7, 1915.

and under his leadership the paper aligned more explicitly with Orthodox views.<sup>801</sup> He used the conservative daily to promote the inseparability of Judaism and Jewish nationalism. As he stated in 1915, “Our religion and our nation are one body, half a body cannot exist,” or in 1917, “It is natural that Zionists and Orthodox should go hand-in-hand in all Jewish national matters.”<sup>802</sup> In historian Gil Ribak’s summary, “Under Bublik’s influence, the paper dedicated more space to reports about and announcements by the Mizrahi movement and to Orthodox educational institutions such as the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.”<sup>803</sup>

Bublik’s most notable commentary on religion and the war appeared in October 1916 in *Minikes*. He had heard reports of a “religious mood” everywhere, including “on the battlefield and among those living in the impacted countries.”<sup>804</sup> This resurgence, he argued, revealed “humanity’s nature.” When the human heart loses hope, it seeks solace “in the infinite, in the eternal.” Solace is “religion’s primary power and enchantment,” like “a friend in a time of need.” Humanity, in its arrogance, tries to keep its distance from existential angst, but when humanity’s powerlessness is revealed, the veil “falls from our eyes.” The present war, therefore, disclosed a consistent human pattern: pride, loss of pride, return to God. “The ‘*apikorsishe*’ materialism of the nineteenth century,” which undoubtedly weakened religion’s status and created positive change, also nourished modernity’s arrogance. The horrors of war—“seas of bloodshed and tears” and “orphans and widows”—challenged this arrogance. Destruction, he summarized, will make “[humanity] seek out his solace for the victims—he will seek out his religion.”<sup>805</sup>

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<sup>801</sup> Ribak, “The *Yidishes Tageblat*,” 811, 819–20.

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid.*, 820. For citations see n.89 and n.90.

<sup>803</sup> *Ibid.*, 820. Also see Gedalya Bublik, “Dos ‘Tageblat’ un ortodoksishes yudentum in amerike,” in *Finfun zibetsik yor yidische prese in amerike, 1870-1945*, eds. Y. Glatshyeyn, Sh. Niger, and H. Rogoff (New York: I.L. Peretz Shrayber Farayn, 1945). On the *Tageblat* and secular nationalist Yiddish schools, see Shapiro, “Words to the Wives,” 126–7.

<sup>804</sup> Gedalya Bublik, “Di virkung fun milkhome oyf der religyon,” *Minikes*’ (Oct. 1916): 10.

<sup>805</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. It was a pattern observable in the biblical text, as in the Psalms, where “this idea was expressed so clearly and so simply as only the religious genius of the Jewish people can express.” To describe modern humanity’s

As Bublik interpreted the war, it uncovered “a great victory over radicalism and freethought.” From the French Revolution until recently, religion’s opponents had maintained religion was divisive while science and freethought improved human flourishing. By undercutting the “sanctity of religions,” or so freethinkers thought, “the causes of hatred among the different parts of humanity” will end. Only brotherhood and equality will reign. Although freethought had once “taken up the mantel of goodness and humanity,” it could not stop the war. “Progress and fraternity,” Bublik reiterated, “did not impede anyone from selling weapons of murder with the simple goal of slaying people.” The war showed that scientists were, in fact, using their knowledge for evil. Modern philosophers too developed ideas useful in justifying bloodshed. Bublik specifically noted Friedrich Nietzsche, “the opponent of religion,” and Charles Darwin, “the ‘*apikoyres*’,” as two figures who led the world down troublesome paths. In both, he claimed, “there’s much more permissibility for bloodshed than in all religions combined.” While the war accelerated religious return, the full religious results of the war were not yet evident. The world would eventually recognize the true causes of bloodshed after the war. People would realize hatred based on origin, tribe, race, or national interests have been and still are causes of “all bloodletting.” Religion instead advanced “the idea that all people are equal and that all people are brothers.” Mirroring the confidence shown by other optimistic social critics, he declared, “The war will bring about a great revival of religion.”<sup>806</sup>

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pride, Bublik referenced the Hymn of Hasni, which states, “You grew fat, corpulent; you forgot the God who created you.”

<sup>806</sup> Ibid., 10. Also see Gedalya Bublik, *Der sakh-hakhal in americanem yudentum* (New York: author, 1927).

Bublik’s commentary on religious revival and the decline of freethought resembled how other conservative Yiddish writers discussed religion in wartime America, without necessarily tying it to freethought. Jewish piety in wartime America found literary form. On *erev* Rosh Hashanah 1916, Oguz published “Satan’s Defeat” in the *Morgn-zhurnal*, a short story about how Satan roams the earth looking for impious Jews. Satan ventures to New York and, rather than finding an impure land, finds a mournful, wartime America. See Polland, “‘The Sacredness of the Family’,” 148. A.D. Oguz, “Dem Satan’s mapole,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Sep. 27, 1916. Also see idem, “Tsurik tsu yidishkeyt,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Oct. 3, 1910; idem, “Dekoratirte shane tove karten,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Sep.

Commentary like Bublik's continued late into the war, the most notable cases coming from Elyahu-Khayim ben Shloyme-Zalmen Sheps, who arrived in New York from Warsaw in 1913.<sup>807</sup> With experience working for *Der moment*, a popular Yiddish newspaper in Warsaw, Sheps immediately began writing for the *Tageblatt* under the pseudonym "Elyash." [Sheps would later adopt another pen name, A. Almi, by which he would become better known in the annals of Yiddish letters.<sup>808</sup>] Readers quickly fell in love with his poetry, witty tales, and social commentary.<sup>809</sup> He was a deist and would be considered a freethinker by most definitions.<sup>810</sup> He associated freethought with atheism and scientific materialism, however, and so his personal disdain for scientific materialism meant he did not self-define as a freethinker. It created interesting alliances. In later writings, Sheps described how he defined himself as religious:

I am an "opponent" of materialism and atheism, I am religious then; and if I am religious—then I surely keep, if not all 613 *mitzvot*, a portion of them.

So, I was quite often invited by religious journals to collaborate with them.

"A person like you," an editor of a pious journal once said to me, "a person who struggles for years against atheism and materialism would have to be our constant collaborator."

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21, 1908. For wartime commentary on freethought as a "sickness," see Malits, "Di heym un di froy: muters un kinder"; idem, *Di heym un di froy*, 72.

<sup>807</sup> A. Almi, *Momentn fun a lebn* (Buenos Aires: Tzentral Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1948), 198–204; also see idem, *Mentshn un ideyen* (Warsaw: M. Goldfarb, 1933), 253. In Warsaw, Sheps had associated with the likes of I.L. Peretz, Avrom Reyzen, and Noah Pryłucki. He was also a bit of a folklorist. On Almi and other folklorists, see Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 8–11. Also see a picture of Almi with literary notables, like Hillel Zeitlin, Joseph Tunkel (Der Tunkeler) and Mordekai Spektor: "Ten men pose outdoors" (1910s-1925), YIVO Archives, Photographs of Personalities, RG 121.

<sup>808</sup> Reyzen, "Almi, A.," *Leksikon*, vol. 1: 100–2.

<sup>809</sup> Almi, *Momentn fun a lebn*, 198–204. He chose the name after a strange series of circumstances surrounding a writers' strike.

<sup>810</sup> For some of his work on religion, see A. Almi, *Di tsveyte ekzistents* (New York/Montreal: Cosmos, 1921); idem, *Eternal Frontiers* (New York: The International Press, 1939); idem, *Di reyde fun buda* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1927); idem, *Heshbn un sahkakl* (Buenos Aires: G. Kaplanski, 1959), 187–229; idem, *Di khinezische filozofye un poezye* (New York: Maks N. Mayzel, 1925); idem, *Oyfn veg fun di geter* (Warsaw: E. Gitlin, 1929); idem, *Kritik un polemik* (n.p., n.d.), 69–75; idem, *Literarische nesies* (Warsaw: M. Goldfarb, 1931), 328–39; idem, *Our Unfinished World: A Philosophy of Life in Discourse, Story, and Fable* (New York: Arco Publishing Company, 1947).

And he does not understand why I smile... go tell him that my God is the cosmic intelligence, an abstract God who does not occupy himself with such things as watching me—whether I say a blessing over food or whether I wear a *tallis-katan*...<sup>811</sup>

While this anecdote appeared in a later collection of essays, Sheps showed these tendencies in the 1910s as well. In one human-interest story centered on freethought and religion, published in the *Tageblatt* in April 1918, the deist declared, “there is no freethinker.” When so-called freethinkers lose health and happiness, they reveal their true believing colors.<sup>812</sup> “There are,” he summarized, “only foolish sayings about freethought, with which the minds of ignorant youth become confused. Hearts, however, cannot be confused by such sayings. Hearts remain believing.”<sup>813</sup>

In July 1918, Sheps, again as Elyash, told *Tageblatt* readers about some news from across the globe—in Sydney, Australia, a freethinking association, established in 1917, had changed its reneged on its freethought after only a year. In Elyash’s words, “[the members] became *apikorsim* (heretics) once again. *Apikorsim* (heretics) of *apikorses* (heresy). They do not believe in atheism anymore... they came to the decision that an all-supreme creator directs the world.” The group subsequently changed its name to the “Association of Religious Seekers” and reformed their journal to promote religious inquiry.<sup>814</sup> By usual definitions of “freethought,” the members of the Association of Religious Seekers may still have been “freethinkers,” but again, Elyash associated freethought with atheism and scientific materialism, not deism. More

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<sup>811</sup> A. Almi, *In gerangl fun ideyen: eseyen* (Buenos Aires: Bukhgemaynshaft bay der Yidisher Ratzionalistisher Gezelshaft, 1957), 160.

<sup>812</sup> Elyash, “Nishto keyn fraydenker,” *YT* (New York, NY), Apr. 11, 1918.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>814</sup> Elyash, “Fun fraydenkerey tsu religye,” *YT* (New York, NY), Jul. 2, 1918.

important, the Australia case offered an opportunity to comment on the war and religion more generally.

Placing the Sydney case in a global context, Elyash interpreted it as another example of global trends toward religion, and war was a key factor. “At present,” he wrote, “the entire world is returning to its old roots—to religion. Freethinking, which until the war appeared to be victorious (mainly among the youth), now bursts like a bubble.” Elyash, like Bublik, depicted freethinkers as (falsely) confident in the inevitability of scientific progress and secularization. On the contrary, “religion is victorious on all fronts. Even the youth are returning to a religious inclination.” One could find well-known cases of religious “return,” he argued, in Jewish circles, too. As evidence, Elyash specifically mentioned Baruch Stolpner, a Bundist activist, and Y.L. Peretz, the famed Yiddish writer from Warsaw. In his view, Stolpner and Peretz had expressed appreciation for religion after once degrading it. Elyash particularly noted Peretz’s call for secular Jews to return to *shul* (Peretz remained a critic of religious dogmatism).<sup>815</sup> Once again like Bublik, he was confident the global turn toward religion would have taken place without global conflict, but war accelerated this inevitable transformation. So, Elyash confidently concluded, “as the years pass, freethinking will become a thing of legend.”<sup>816</sup> Did freethought actually “become a thing of legend,” as Elyash and Bublik predicted? Not entirely. Freethinkers marshaled onward, but their public presence grew more controversial.

### **Freethought and Religion Moving into the Interwar Period**

The later years of the war and the early postwar saw notable changes in American Jewish life. First, there was a rising crisis. As the *Tageblatt* summarized in August 1921, “The war created a bit of an atmosphere of fanatic nationalism, nativism and ‘100 percent’ Americanism, which

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<sup>815</sup> Adi Mahalel, “The Radical Years of I.L. Peretz” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2014).

<sup>816</sup> Elyash, “Fun fraydenkerey tsu religye.”

stands in a clamorous contradiction to the broad-heartedness and tolerance of the ‘former’ Americans from before the war.”<sup>817</sup> Legislation restricting immigration led ultimately to the Immigration Act of 1924, better known as the Johnson-Reed Act. “Immigration restriction,” David A. Hollinger summarized, “gave [Protestant cultural] hegemony a new lease on life.”<sup>818</sup> The Johnson-Reed Act targeted a wide range of possible immigrants from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Southern Europe, not exclusively or mainly Jews, but some prominent proponents of immigration restriction offered antisemitic arguments for their view.

American antisemitism took its cue from a Red Scare in the wake of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. The Jewish association with radical politics became a social liability, and freethinking Jews were an especially easy target for antisemitic ire.<sup>819</sup> T.S. Eliot, for example, remarked during his Page-Barbour Lectures (1933) that “reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.”<sup>820</sup> Eliot was here suggesting that all Jews posed a racial threat, but freethinking Jews posed an even greater threat—“race *and* religion.”<sup>821</sup> It was becoming ever more clear that, again in Hollinger’s words,

Even if Protestants managed to mentally shoehorn religious Jews into the categories of religious particularism—another peculiar “denomination” like the Mormons or the Seventh-Day Adventists—the cosmopolitan, Enlightenment-inspired Jews refused to stay put... Their transcending of conventional religious categories rendered them a problem

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<sup>817</sup> “Amerika oyf a sholem bazis,” *YT* (New York, NY), August 26, 1921; also see Gil Ribak, “‘You Can’t Recognize America’: American Jewish Perceptions of Anti-Semitism as a Transnational Phenomenon after the First World War,” in *American Jewry*, 291.

<sup>818</sup> Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 22.

<sup>819</sup> Julian F. Jaffe, “The Anti-Radical Crusade in New York: 1914-1924: A Case Study of the Red Scare” (PhD diss., New York University, 1971), 371–2, 544–7.

<sup>820</sup> T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy, The Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1933), 20.

<sup>821</sup> Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 159, 164; also see Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 18.

for Protestants quite distinct from the challenge presented by Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews.<sup>822</sup>

The radical Jewish intelligentsia became involved in a protracted dispute over communism, with the *Forverts* and the *Tog* firmly in an anti-communist camp opposing the communist *Frayhayt* (Freedom), a new daily newspaper established in 1922.<sup>823</sup> The war actually broadened the *Forverts*' readership. "By the end of the war," Gennady Estraiikh summarized, "the *Forverts* had established itself more firmly in the general Yiddish-speaking community rather than only in socialist circles."<sup>824</sup>

Jewish immigrants and their children continued acculturating to American norms. The second-generation was particularly prone toward disassociating with formal religious institutions. Considering this trend, many Jewish community leaders grew more fearful of rampant assimilation. Indeed, the aftermath of the war did not prove a boon for conventional religious traditions, but an interest in spiritual matters continued. In his review of Dr. Elmer T. Clark's *Social Studies of the War* in the *New York Tribune*, Anglo-American journalist William L. McPherson noted the war brought about "new spiritual ideals and impulses," not a revival in "organized religion." McPherson wrote, "The experiences of the war... have greatly shaken the

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<sup>822</sup> Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 19.

<sup>823</sup> For a history of American Jewish communism, see Tony Michels, "Socialism with a Jewish Face: The Origins of the Yiddish-Speaking Communist Movement in the United States, 1907-1923," in *Yiddish and the Left*, eds. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 24–55; idem, *A Fire in Their Heart*, 217–50; Matthew Hoffman, "The Red Divide: The Conflict between Communists and their Opponents in the American Yiddish Press," *American Jewish History* 96, no. 1 (2010): 1–31; Bat-Ami Zucker, "American Jewish Communists and Jewish Culture in the 1930s," *Modern Judaism* 14, no. 2 (1994): 175–85; Gennady Estraiikh, "Professing Leninist Yiddishkayt: The Decline of American Yiddish Communism," *American Jewish History* 96, no. 1 (2010): 33–60; also see Jaffe, "The Anti-Radical Crusade in New York: 1914-1924," 543.

<sup>824</sup> Gennady Estraiikh, "American Yiddish Socialists at the Wartime Crossroads: Patriotism and Nationalism versus Proletarian Internationalism," in *World War I and the Jews*, 296.

influence of organized religion, and that influence can be regained only by a heroic effort to adjust old creeds to new spiritual ideals and impulses.”<sup>825</sup>

The war’s liberalizing effect on former religious and ethnic prejudices was a subcurrent in American popular culture. One notable piece was Anne Nichols’ *Abie’s Irish Rose* (1922), a record-breaking Broadway play about an interethnic romance between an Irish Catholic woman (Rose-Mary) and a Jewish man (Abie). The young lovers meet in France during the war, where he is a wounded soldier and she—a nurse. At war’s end, they must return to their prejudiced families; troubles, with some comedic relief, ensue. *Abie’s Irish Rose* was rife with progressive commentary about how the war and postwar years required old ethnic and religious prejudices to die. A rabbi and Catholic priest, both chaplains during the war, help smooth over family conflicts. Based on their wartime experience, the rabbi and priest share a universalizing vision, as the priest tells the rabbi, “Shure an’ we all had the same God above us. And what with the shells bursting and the shrapnel flying and no one knowing just what moment death would come, Catholics, Hebrews and Protestants alike forgot their prejudices and came to realize that all faiths and creeds have about the same destination, after all.”<sup>826</sup> The rabbi wholeheartedly agrees. The two spiritual authorities support Abie and Rose-Mary, who “simply aren’t troubled by the religious and racial differences which separate their parents.”<sup>827</sup> Nichols’ *Abie’s Irish Rose* clearly expressed a progressive, optimistic view of the war’s impacts. The Yiddish press saw its fair share of optimistic interpretations of the postwar world, though less optimistic about intermarriage.

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<sup>825</sup> William L. McPherson, “Religion Before and After War.”

<sup>826</sup> Anne Nichols, *Abie’s Irish Rose* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1927), 262.

<sup>827</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

The most notable, postwar depiction of freethinkers was Oguz's *The Freethinkers*, a serialized novel published in the *Morgn-zhurnal* between May and August 1922 [Figure 5.1]. Though the plot was set in the years before and during the war, the novel reflects its publication date—it addresses certain issues and concerns that came into greater relief after the war. Oguz's serial centered on three interconnected middle-class or middle-class aspiring families: a family of German immigrant antisemites (the Hochbargs), a religiously observant Jewish family (the Goldins), and a family of freethinking, assimilationists of Jewish origin (the Johnsons). The families all reside in the same suburban neighborhood in New York, and the serial's drama begins when the children in each of the families become friends with or fall in love with a child from one of the other families. The parents, with their distinct ideologies and sentiments, become forcibly intertwined. By the novel's end, a variety of push and pull factors, i.e., personal relationships, war, antisemitism, etc., lead the male members of the freethinking Johnsons to embrace religious observance.<sup>828</sup>

More than the other Johnsons males, the war violence transforms the Johnson patriarch, Adolph, from a freethinking assimilationist to a pious Jew. Adolph is not a socialist or anarchist, however, nor does he wait outside synagogues to mock the observant. He is largely tolerant. At some point after discovering freethought in the United States, he felt he was “greatly enlightened” and effectively ended further exploration of freethought. So, he “devoted himself almost exclusively to the pursuit of money” and married Matilda. Adolph rejects Jewish particularity and desires assimilation, though less aggressively than his wife. Adolph most

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<sup>828</sup> Matthew H. Brittingham, “‘He Wanted to Make Them into Educated, Enlightened People’: Jewish Immigrants, Acculturation, and Gender Stereotypes in A. D. Oguz's *Di fraydenker*,” in *Jews and Gender*, *Studies in Jewish Civilization*, 32, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2021), 135–56. For an editorial with related themes, see Efroyim Kaplan, “Yiden vos veren fervogelt in nit-yidishe gegenden,” *MZ* (New York, NY), May 25, 1923.

notably refuses to give any of his fortune to charitable causes that smell of particularity, Jewish or non-Jewish. Onlookers think Adolph is heartless, but he is “*not* a bad person by nature and [is] also no miser.”<sup>829</sup>

As Adolph’s sons begin to change from freethinkers to observant Jews, Adolph expresses some frustration. His philosophy remains generally tolerant, however. He will not put money toward religious education, but he has a broadly live-and-let-live approach. “I’ll let nature take its course. ... If my children entertain other ideas, then so be it,” he states.<sup>830</sup> Adolph partly believes their observance to be a passing fancy. Regardless, Adolph’s sons, alongside Nachman and the relative Dovid Jacobson, further challenge Adolph’s confidence in freethought and assimilation. The outbreak of the World War I and corresponding violence against Eastern European Jewry initiates Adolph’s transformation. Adolph does not initially support the idea that Jews should create aid organizations specifically for Jews impacted by the war. Such programs are too particularistic. Nachman and Dovid argue with Adolph over why he remains so distant from his *landslayt* while they suffer. Dovid presents an argument that personally affects Adolph. He paints a picture of a pogrom wherein Adolph’s father is subject to violence: “Do you remember Mr. Johnson, [your father’s] nice, long beard that gave him such a patriarchal appearance? Imagine that wild savages came and cut his beard, tearing the hair out by the root. When that became tiresome, they grabbed a match or candle and burned up the remaining hair, scorching his face! Can anything be more brutal and tragic than this?”<sup>831</sup> The vivid portrayal of violence enacted upon his father causes Adolph “to think differently.” A remorse begins to percolate within him.

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<sup>829</sup> “Di fraydenker,” *MZ* (New York, NY), May. 9, 1922.

<sup>830</sup> “Di fraydenker,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Aug. 16, 1922.

<sup>831</sup> “Di fraydenker,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Aug. 23, 1922. Brittingham, “‘He Wanted to Make Them into Educated, Enlightened People,’” 148.

In the next scene, the United States declares war on Germany and Albert Johnson, now at West Point, is sent to the front. Before departing for Europe, Albert visits his parents. Adolph witnesses Albert packing “a little *siddur*, a little Tanakh, and even a pair of tefillin.” The freethinker does not laugh at his son’s religious paraphernalia, proving he “wasn’t the same ‘enlightened’ man he had been.”<sup>832</sup> [Oguz once again employs quotation marks to indicate the character’s perception, not reality.] Adolph reacts to this scene with tears. Soon after, he becomes a Jewish nationalist. His turn to observance also centers on war, but it adds elements of his Jewish past, like the depictions of doubting freethinkers in the works of Kobrin, Libin, and Tashrak. Nachman and Dovid compel Adolph to visit *shul* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the first time he has stepped into a *shul* in thirty years. The davening on Rosh Hashanah “left a major impression on him.” Connections between fathers and sons, past and present, frame Adolph’s experience. As Adolph observes the davening on Rosh Hashanah, he vividly recalls his father leading the prayers in the Old World. In Oguz’s words, he “imagined a scene where his father stood reverently at the lectern, his coat and *tallis* becoming soaked with sweat and tears as he said the prayers with vigor and intention. It was like he saw the scene with his very own eyes.” Adolph weeps upon envisioning his father’s piety.<sup>833</sup> During a prayer about living and dying, Adolph remembers how his son Albert is caught in the wartime violence. Thus, “he cried all the more.”<sup>834</sup> And so, Adolph begins his return to a pious lifestyle.

When Oguz’s novel appeared, the Yiddish press was well-aware there were young, Americanized Jews of Eastern European descent who, despite a parent’s or parents’ radicalism, were interested in Jewish religious tradition. It did not negate fears of rampant assimilation

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<sup>832</sup> “Di fraydenker,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Aug. 24, 1922.

<sup>833</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>834</sup> “Di fraydenker,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Aug. 25, 1922. Brittingham, “‘He Wanted to Make Them into Educated, Enlightened People,’” 149.

among the second generation. Critics still remarked that, in the 1923 words of one veteran Yiddish journalist, “The new American generation is fearfully indifferent toward Jews, Jewishness, Jewish questions, and anything of relevance to us.”<sup>835</sup> But still, some young Jews were, in fact, interested in Jewish religious tradition. Socialist activist and journalist Yoysef Khaykin (1885-1946) commented on the trend in a 1923 advice column in the *Tog*.<sup>836</sup> When Hermalin died in 1921, Khaykin took over writing advice columns and human-interest stories about religious and family matters.<sup>837</sup> Signing as “Kh,” Khaykin resembled his predecessor in advocating tolerance between freethinkers and the observant, and he likewise promoted freethinkers celebrate Jewish holidays. In 1922, for example, Khaykin advised freethinkers celebrate Simchas Torah, a holiday marking the end and beginning of the annual Torah cycle, because the Torah showed a broadly Jewish idealism.<sup>838</sup> In an advice column, entitled “Father Radical, Children Religious,” Khaykin detailed how a freethinker, “Mr. Ben,” sought advice because his nine-year-old son and twelve-year-old daughter had become interested in observing “Jewish ceremonies.” The environment around them had piqued their interest in Jewishness—they live around Jews and their mother is religious. The daughter even demanded he observe the Jewish holidays and all associated rituals.<sup>839</sup>

Khaykin stressed the amazing reversal in recent years, “It is a strange thing with the Jews. Once fathers were pious and children were so-called *apikorsim*, the free, the maskilim... Today, we quite often receive letters from radical fathers, like that of Mr. Ben, who complain about the fact that their very children are inclined to piety.” The change could not, he wrote, be

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<sup>835</sup> Dr. A. Mukdoni, “Di nayste tragedye in yidishen leben,” *MZ* (New York, NY), Nov. 4, 1923.

<sup>836</sup> Kh. [Yoysef Khaykin], “Foter radikal, kinder religyez,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Apr. 15, 1923.

<sup>837</sup> Shapiro, “Words to the Wives,” 21, 156, 299.

<sup>838</sup> Kh. [Yoysef Khaykin], “Farvos iden zolen halten simkhes toyre,” *Tog* (New York, NY), Oct. 15, 1922.

<sup>839</sup> Kh., “Foter radikal, kinder religyez.”

starker. After all, fathers once raged against their children because they “weren’t Jewish enough,” while now fathers wage war over the fact that “their children aren’t goyish enough.” It is not everywhere the case, Khaykin mentioned, but it is enough of a trend to be noticeable. Khaykin went further, “today’s radical parents are much greater fanatics than (frum fathers of previous years), despite their radicalism.” The difference was not love. Both the frum fathers of previous years and today’s radical fathers love their children. Rather, the radical father is “such a great fanatic in his radicalism that he wants his children to be warriors against the entire world.” In other words, today’s radical father severs his children from those who observe, regardless of how observance is understood (e.g., national, religious, etc.). That being the case, Khaykin questioned, who’s the fanatic? Khaykin believed it was the radical father who teaches his children to be pessimists. By cutting their children off from the wider society, the radical father was teaching his children “to be at war against humanity.” Regardless of the radical parent’s desires, they fight a losing battle. The world will also teach them about observance. Perhaps, the children of radical fathers will, in the end, only hate their fathers for having “robbed [them] of the beauty of belief, the poetry of the soul.” They will feel robbed of what their friends have.<sup>840</sup>

War also reignited a global interest in the porous boundaries between life and death. Some public intellectuals, like Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the latter of whom lost a son in the war, professed Spiritualism.<sup>841</sup> Like other Americans during this time, many immigrant Jews, whether religiously observant or secularly oriented, had some interest in contact between the living and the dead. Popular Yiddish writers covered Spiritualism for interested readers, introducing them to Spiritualism’s history and famous Spiritualists. Anarchist Borekh

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<sup>840</sup> Ibid.

<sup>841</sup> John J. Kucich, *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2004). Also see Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1926), esp. Ch. XXIII: Spiritualism and the War.

Rivkin, a pseudonym of Borekh-Avrom Vaynrib (1883-1945), published pieces on Spiritualism, among other interesting psychospiritual matters, for the *Tageblat*, under the pen name Mark Toleroz [Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3]. In May 1922, *Morgn-zhurnal* contributor Yitskhok Even (1861-1925) published his first installment of a twelve-part series devoted to his travels in Spiritualist circles. A self-described *maskil*, he had explored the work of Italian Jewish criminologist and Spiritualist Cesare Lombroso, who, he wrote, “transformed me back, up to a certain extent, into a Hasid and a believer in hidden forces.”<sup>842</sup> A year later, he published the series “Miraculous Powers of the Human Spirit” in the *Amerikaner*, which focused on prophetic dreams, hypnotism, clairvoyance, and other matters of psychospiritual interest [Figure 5.4].<sup>843</sup> Spiritual matters dotted the pages of the Yiddish literary market.

Was the interest in Spiritualism and other spiritual matters a sign of shifting sands? Some thought so. Sheps, now going by “A. Almi,” published a popular book on Spiritualism in 1921, *The Second Existence*, a work befitting his disdain for scientific materialism. But he also published and read “articles of a certain metaphysical character” in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*.<sup>844</sup> In the twentieth-fifth anniversary issue of the *Fraye arbeter shtime* (1924), Almi praised the

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<sup>842</sup> Even, “Mayne erfahrungen,” *MZ* (New York, NY) May 9, 1922. Widespread interest in Spiritualism never truly negated scientific advancement. Rather, Spiritualism often relied on it. Historian of American Spiritualism Molly McGarry summarized Spiritualism’s complex relationship to recent scientific advancements when she said, “At a time when science was meant to have pushed religion to the cultural margins... [Spiritualism] offered a popular religion buttressed by scientific ‘evidence’ of human immortality.” The advances of modern technology during the heyday of Spiritualism “were often greeted with a sense of wonder; mysterious science produced spectacular magic.” See Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 17, 107. Andrew Heinze offered a similar view: “Spiritualism also correlated strongly with the advance of science; spiritualists despised the materialism of academic physiology and psychology but, as a modern people, they insisted that ‘sightings’ and ‘hearings’ and ‘readings’ constituted valid empirical data for the psychologist.” See Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 173. Also see R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>843</sup> See advertisements for “Wonderful Powers of the Human Spirit” in the *Morgn-zhurnal*, like that appearing on Oct. 1, 1923. Also see Samuel Glauber-Zimra and Boaz Huss, “‘No religion could be more spiritual than ours’: Anglo-Jewish spiritualist societies in the interwar period,” *Jewish Historical Studies* 53, no. 5 (2021): 83–104.

<sup>844</sup> Almi, *Di tsveyte ekzistents*.

anarchist weekly for having shifted its approach toward religion. The paper, he wrote, “had the courage to break the radical dogma of anti-religiosity and not tremble before every religious conception of the world like Satan before incense.” Almi argued this tendency had started with Yanovsky and extended into the new editorship. He recognized the change was not always warmly received. “It indeed,” he continued, “provokes the fury of those radicals who still remain under the mark of *gross-apikorses*.” But he also assumed “the majority [of readers] have already become accustomed to entertaining philosophical—tolerant anyhow—problems that deal with celestial domains.”<sup>845</sup>

Other Yiddish journalists saw signs of changing times elsewhere. Iser Ginzburg found one in Dr. Yankev-Meyer Zalkind’s Yiddish translation of four Talmud tractates.<sup>846</sup> Remarkably well-educated, Zalkind (1875-1937) was a native of Kobrin, Russia, an Orthodox rabbi, and PhD-holding philologist. He moved to London in 1904 and became radicalized during World War I, eventually joining anarcho-communist circles. Zalkind found evidence for anarchism in Talmudic ethics.<sup>847</sup> Scholar Anna Elena Torres remarked that “Although other Yiddish anarchists had highly learned backgrounds, Zalkind was unique in his lifelong dedication to the philological study of Talmud and his meticulous observance of *mitsvot*.”<sup>848</sup> The first portion of his Yiddish Talmud, which he underscored was based on modern scholarly methods (not traditional, religious methods), appeared in 1922. That year, Ginzburg published a review in the *Tsukunft*.

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<sup>845</sup> A. Almi, “Radikalizm un religye,” *FASH* (New York, NY), Oct. 3, 1924.

<sup>846</sup> Dr. I. Ginzburg, “Fun der bikher velt,” *Tsukunft* (Jul. 1922): 437–9.

<sup>847</sup> Anna Elena Torres, “‘Any Minute Now the World’s Overflowing Its Border’: Anarchist Modernism and Yiddish Literature” (PhD diss., University of California-Berkeley, 2016), 23; idem, “The Anarchist Sage/*Der Goen Anarkhist*: Rabbi Yankev-Meir Zalkind and Religious Genealogies of Anarchism,” *In geveb* (Feb. 2019). <https://ingeveb.org/articles/the-anarchist-sage-der-goen-anarkhist>.

<sup>848</sup> Torres, “‘Any Minute Now the World’s Overflowing Its Border,’” 27. She also stated, “The most similar figure was Russian anarchist Abba Gordin, who also searched for the origins of anarchism within Jewish religiosity.” Also see Joseph Nedava, “Abba Gordin: Portrait of a Jewish Anarchist,” *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 4, no. 2 (1974): 73–9.

Ginzburg's review began with prehistory about how Jewish freethinkers had once approached religious texts. He remarked: "There were times not so very long ago (we all still remember them) when in so-called radical circles, both socialist and anarchist, it was considered a sort of crime to talk about the Talmud." Why was the Talmud forbidden? The freethinker of old swapped radical piety for radical impiety. Freethought had become "a faith like all other faiths. It was a type of new religion." It had its Torah, dogmas, creeds, temples, and priests. Talking about the Talmud was "a heavy sin against the radical god." The only reason Jewish freethinkers touched the Talmud was to comb it for contradictions; they were radical *lomdim* (Talmud scholars) who "would pour their full wrath onto the Talmud."<sup>849</sup> Spite, however, tainted the radical's supposedly scientific anti-Talmudism. "They were," Ginzburg declared, "massive boors not only regarding the Talmud, but they were also massive boors regarding science in general and history in particular."<sup>850</sup>

While fiercely antireligious freethinkers once ruled the day, over time "the public didn't become more pious, but wiser." Slow as the process may have been, "the priests of 'freethought' were increasingly thrust aside. Instead of looking at the past from a 'freethinking' standpoint, they begin considering it from a scientific-historical point of view." Ginzburg claimed the change exposed similarities between the past and present—"the same hopes, the same dreams, the same strivings, merely in other forms, in other clothes, in another disguise, according to the concepts of that time." The aforementioned history, according to Ginzburg, showed just how revolutionary the Talmud was in Yiddish. He wrote: "Yiddish is the literature of the Jewish worker, the same Jewish worker whose first teachers and guides led on crooked paths, raised in

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<sup>849</sup> Ginzburg, "Fun der bikher velt," 437. Ginzburg stated that Jewish freethinkers showed a little respect for the Tanakh, but they were also pushed by *goyish* winds—when non-Jews rejected the Talmud, Jewish freethinkers too rejected the Talmud. When non-Jews rejected the Tanakh, so too did the Jewish freethinkers.

<sup>850</sup> *Ibid.*, 437. Also see p. 438.

the spirit of the ‘freethinking’ religion... the Talmud was translated in this Yiddish literature! The dead freethinkers will turn over in their graves, poor things.” Ginzburg also emphasized that Zalkind was no traditionally pious Jew, but a learned anarchist. And Zalkind treated the text as if it were a classic piece of literature. Ginzburg admitted the Talmud in Yiddish would not be a popular text. It may, he claimed, serve profitable to “the Jewish intelligentsia and the Jewish writers, who are, for the most part, ignoramuses concerning Jewish things in general and the Talmud in particular.” Right or wrong, Ginzburg related Zalkind’s translation to the wider history of Jewish freethinkers, employing it as an indicator of shifting attitudes toward religion and the religious.

### **Conclusion**

In 1923, Yankev Magidov, longtime veteran of American Yiddish journalism and the labor movement, declared the end of the contentious atmosphere surrounding how radicals saw religion and the religious. Radicals had, in his words, “become a bit more tolerant and the fight had almost entirely ended.”<sup>851</sup> One can certainly be skeptical of Magidov’s declaration—Bublik and Almi also declared the death of freethought just a couple years prior. Undergirding Magidov’s point, however, was the wartime and early interwar experience, one in which the American Yiddish press appear even warmer toward religion than years prior. The warmth toward religion was not toward a specific denomination or particular systems of religious observance. Rather, in the words of Ginzburg, “the public didn’t become more pious, but wiser.” Immigrant Jewish freethinkers in particular found ways of engaging religion in America’s diverse religious environment.

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<sup>851</sup> Magidov, *Der shpigel fun der ist sayd*, 176. Magidov helped cofound the United Hebrew Trades in 1888. By the mid-1890s, he was already making what would become a long, notable career as a Yiddish journalist, on staff with or a regular contributor to the *Arbeter tsaytung*, *Tsukunft*, *Naye tsayt*, *Abend blat*, *Forverts*, *Tageblat*, *Morgn-zhurnal*, and *Amerikaner*.

An important point can be raised here regarding the fact that Ginzburg emphasized Zalkind's anarchism and Almi praised the anarchist *Fraye arbeter shtime* for discussing religion—anarchist notables adopted diverse views on religion in the interwar period. In their study of debates about religion in the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, Lilian Türk and Jesse Cohn argued that the interwar period saw the rise of competing definitions of anarchism and religion.<sup>852</sup> A key figure stimulating change was Russian Jewish immigrant and anarchist Abba Gordin (1887-1964), who denounced “the materialistic and scientific pretensions of Marxism... as yet another religious illusion.”<sup>853</sup> Almi and Rivkin, as regular contributors to the *Fraye arbeter shtime* during the interwar period, participated in changing the Yiddish weekly's tone. By the 1950s, prominent anarchist Herman Frank was summarizing Jewish anarchism's narrative arch by saying, “With the passing of time... a more refined and profound approach to all kinds of problems concerning ethical and spiritual life became increasingly noticeable in the press and literature of the Jewish Anarchists, while the shallow and vulgar anti-religiousness of yesteryear rapidly declined and disappeared.”<sup>854</sup>

Changes may have been most dramatic in anarchist circles, but socialists were also becoming warmer toward religious sentiments and religious tradition. As scholars Gennady Estraiikh and Zalman Newfield found, ardent antireligious radicals who read the *Forverts* were pained by the fact that their children and grandchildren celebrated bar mitzvahs. Estraiikh and

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<sup>852</sup> Lilian Türk and Jesse Cohn, “Yiddish Radicalism, Jewish Religion: Controversies in the Fraye Arbeter Shtime, 1937–1945,” in *Essays in Anarchism and Religion*, eds. Alexandre Christoyannopoulos and Matthew S. Adams (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2017), vol. 2: 22–57.

<sup>853</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>854</sup> Qtd. in Türk and Cohn, “Yiddish Radicalism, Jewish Religion,” 46–7. [Herman Frank, “Anarchism and the Jews” in *Struggle for Tomorrow: Modern Political Ideologies of the Jewish People*, eds. Basil J. Vlavianos and Feliks Gross (New York: Arts, Inc., 1954), 284–5] B. Rivkin's *A gloybn far umgloybike* [A Faith for Unbelievers]—a book about finding religiosity in unbelief—was posthumously published in 1948, but it shows how, like Almi, Rivkin held unconventional ideas about religious matters. See Rivkin, *A gloybn far umgloybike*, ed. Mine Bordo-Rivkin (New York: D. Ignatov Literatur-Fond, 1948).

Newfield summarized: “The increasing attraction of rituals based on old Jewish traditions clearly pointed out that the secularists’ ideological and cultural values had little relevance to their children and grandchildren.”<sup>855</sup> It is also intentional that this study ends in the early interwar period for another reason—the gradual decline of Yiddish speakers and the linguistic assimilation of the second generation spelled the diminishing influence of the Yiddish press. Newspapers folded and readership consolidated. Even the book publishers that catered to a primarily Yiddish audience adjusted offerings to include more English titles.<sup>856</sup> The American radical Yiddish press continued to reflect the interests of freethinkers, but its role in shaping the popular conversation surrounding religion grew less impactful. While the shifts described by Türk and Cohn and Estraikh and Newfield occurred most visibly in the 1930s and 1940s, their seeds were sown in the early interwar period.<sup>857</sup>

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<sup>855</sup> Estraikh and Newfield, “Grandfathers Against Bar Mitzvahs,” 83. Similar tensions, see Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” 385.

<sup>856</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, “The Struggle over Yiddish in Post-Immigrant America,” in *1929: Mapping the Jewish World*, eds. Hasia R. Diner and Gennady Estraikh (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 143.

<sup>857</sup> For other Yiddish works published in the interwar period, see B. Grin, *Di filozofishe gotheyt* (New York: n.p., 1926). YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection (000051191); idem, *Di geter fun di naronim* (New York: n.p., 1926). YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection (000051191); idem, *Der mensh filozofishe gotheyt* (New York: n.p., 1926). YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection (000051191). Joseph L. Lewis, *Lincoln the Freethinker* (New York: The Lincoln Publishing Company, 1924). AJHS Monographs, E457.2 L48; idem, *Franklin the Freethinker* (New York: The Freethought Press Association, Inc., 1927). AJHS Monographs, E302.6.F8 L3; idem, *Jefferson the Freethinker*, fourth edition (New York: The Freethought Press Association, Inc., 1931). AJHS Monographs, E332.L29. Commentary on other religions also continued, see B. Dubovsky, *Di kristlakhe visnshaft un ire refues* (New York: Farlag Yidish Lebn, 1930); Almi, *Di reyde fun buda*; idem, *Di khinezishe filozofye un poezye*; idem, *Oyfn veg fun di geter*.

**די פריידענקער**  
ראטאן  
פון א.ד. אגוז

**פאנגט אן אין "מארגען זשורנאל"**  
**מארגען פאנטאזי, 8-טען מאי**

"די פריידענקער" איז א גאנץ נייע ערשיינונג אין דער  
ראטאנעוועלט. ער בעהאנדעלט א סהעמא וואס אנדערע  
ראטאנעושרייבער האבען נאך ניט בעדיהרט. דער ראט  
מאז איז אינטערעסאנט, שפאנענד און אמווירענד. יעד  
דער קאפיטעל, און אין פאר זיד, זאגט און דערזעהלט  
איד אזעלכעס, וואס פערכלייבט איד איינעקוויצט אין  
זכרון. אין דעם ראטאן ווארפט זיד דורך אן עכט ביסעל  
אמת אידישער הומאר און די שפראך איז לייכט, גלאט  
און פליסענד.

**נעדענקט אונז פאנגען "די**  
**פריידענקער" מארגען פאנטאזי!**

[Figure 5.1]

Advertisement: "The Freethinkers" [*Morgn-zhurnal*, May 7, 1922]

Note: A.D. Oguz's "The Freethinkers" was serialized in the  
*Morgn-zhurnal* from May 1922 to August 1922. This  
advertisement describes how the novel is fresh, humorous, and  
impactful.

# נייט פיטשורס איז טאגליכע בלאט

**1. מיין לעבען פון מ. ספעקטאר**

עס זיינען פאראן געווען שרייבער וואס האבען געהאט דאס געלעבן  
גענוצט אויף פילע צו בעטראכטען און פערזיילן פון זייער לעבען וויא  
עס דאס געהאט מ. ספעקטאר, איינער פון דיא גרעסטע קונסטליכער און  
דער אירישער ליבעראטור.  
דאס וועט זיין אן אונז פון שילדערונגען פון א האלבן יארהונדערט  
דערש געשריבען דורך א מיסטער האנד. דיא ערשיינונג פון ספעקט  
סארט מעמאריען און אן אויסגעזעהנליכע פאסירונג און אונזער ליי-  
טערמאט, און קיין אירישער לעבער דארף עס נישט פארשעהלען צו לעזען.  
פאנגט זיך אן דיעזען דיענסטאג, 13טען דזשון.

**2. שעהנע מעשה'ס פון דער וועלט**

דערע סאג און אונז געשיכטע פון דאס בעסטע וואס דער מענשליכער  
סוף האט אויסגעזעהנען און אלע צייטען און און אירישער לעבער. דיא  
געשיכטע וואס טרעטן אירין און דיעזער סעריע זיינען און שארף פיל  
מיט טראפט און לעבען. קיין אנדערע ווערען נישט אריינגענומען און דער  
סעריע פון די "שעהנע מעשה'ס פון דער וועלט". אין דער סעריע געהן  
אירין דיא ערהאבענסטע ערצהאלונגען פון דיא גרעסטע שריפטשטיק  
לעך וואס דיא וועלט האט פארמאגט.

**3. וואס וועט מיין קינד שמודירען?**

א סעריע פון ארטיקלען איבער דיעזער ברענענדיקער פראגע פון אירישע  
קינדער און אירישע עלטערען. עס איז געשריבען געווארען איריש דעם  
גנז פון אן אנטווערפונג און אירישע פראפעסיאנען וועלכע טרעטן און  
אבערמאכט פאר דער וועלט.

**4. פון דער חסידישער וועלט**

א נייע סעריע ספורים פון דעם חסידישען לעבען אין א וואונדערליך  
פשוטן סטיל פון בענאסימען בילעטריסט - ב. לעפלבוים.  
פאנגט זיך אן דאנערשטאג, 15טען מאי.

**5. די מודות פון דער נשמה**

א סעריע ארטיקלען איבער מיסטיציזם, ספיריטואליזם און אנדערע  
וואונדער פון מענשליכע נייט. געשריבען און א ברייאנגענעם סטיל  
פון מארק טאלעיאן.  
דיזע סעריע פאנגט זיך אן פרייטאג, 16. דזשון

**ארדערט היינט א "מאנעבלאט" ביי אייער ניוס דילעקטאר פונעם קופער**

ווען איר וועלט ערהאלטען דאס "מאנעבלאט" אין קאנאדא און אייער וואוינשטאט שיקט 76  
ענטס פון א מאנאט. ארדערט:

**THE JEWISH DAILY NEWS, 187 East Broadway, New York**

[Figure 5.2]

Advertisement: "New Features in the Tageblat" [*Morgn-zhurnal*, Jun. 11, 1922; public domain]

Note: The new features included (1) Mortkhe Spektor's life-writing; (2) world literature; (3) an article series about the education of children, (4) Hasidic tales, (5) and "The Mysteries of the Soul." This last feature was "a series of articles about mysticism, Spiritualism, and other wonders of the human spirit."

Mark Toleroz, a pseudonym of Borukh Avrom Weinrebe (better known as B. Rivkin, another pseudonym), authored these articles.

היינט אויף אלע סטענדס!  
**נאטור און**  
**וואונדער**

א מערקווירדיג וואַכענבלאט  
 דעראקטירט פון  
**ב. ריווקין**  
 (מארק טאלעראז)

**אריגינעלע געדאַנקען**  
**אריגינעלער מאטעריאַל**

אן אריגינעלער בליק אויפ'ן טעאטער, אויף  
 דער קונסט בכלל, אויף די אנטפלעקטע און  
 פאַרבארגענע כחות פון דער נעזעלשאפט  
 און אויף די אנטפלעקטע און פאַרבארגענע  
 כחות פון יעדעו מענשען.

**10 סענט אַ קאָפּי**  
**\$5.00 אַ יאָר.**

דעראקציע און ביזנעס אַפּים:  
**169 איסט בראַדוויי, ניו יאָרק סיטי**

[Figure 5.3]

Advertisement: "Nature and Wonder" [*Tog*, Mar. 11, 1922]

Note: This advertisement was for the New York-based, Yiddish weekly *Natur un vunder* (“Nature and Wonder”), edited by Mark Toleroz (Borukh Avrom Weinrebe, or B. Rivkin). The advertisement described *Natur un vunder* as “an original look at theater, at art in general, at the unrevealed and hidden powers of society and at the unrevealed and hidden powers of every person.”

**וואונדער קראפטען**  
**פון מענשליכען גייסט**  
 איז דער נאמען פון דער גייטער  
 סעריע ארטיקלען  
 פון יצחק אבן  
 וועלכע הויבען אן דיזע וואך צו  
 ערשיינען אין  
**"אמעריקאנער"**  
 די סעריע ארטיקלען וועט בע-  
 האנדלען און שילדערען אמת'ע  
 פאסירונגען און פאקטען פון  
 נביאות'דיגע חלומות, העלזעה-  
 עריי, דראמאטישע טעלעגראפיע  
 אין די מענשליכע מוחות, היפ-  
 נאטיזם, פארפיהלונגען און איר  
 בערגאנגס'נשמות (דבוקים)  
 פארפעהלט ניט צו לעזען  
 דיזע ארטיקלען.

[Figure 5.4]

Advertisement: "Miraculous Powers of the Human Spirit" [*Morgnzhurnal*, Oct. 1, 1923]

Note: Advertisement for Yitskhok Even's *Amerikaner* series on prophetic dreams, hypnotism, clairvoyance, and other topics of psychospiritual interest.

## EPILOGUE: An After(Free)thought? American Jews and the Religious-Secular Mélange

Sometime in the mid to late 1920s, the Arbeter Ring's New York branches hosted their first secular Passover seder, an event which drew hundreds of enthusiastic participants.<sup>858</sup> The irreligious seder, for the Arbeter Ring at least, likely started with the order's Yiddishist afterschool program, but it became clear that adults wanted one, too. Soon, Arbeter Ring branches across the country were hosting secular seders, and they would remain popular for approximately half a century. Shorn of almost all theological language, these seders stressed both Jewish pride and progressive politics. In his analysis of the Arbeter Ring's seders, for instance, scholar Neil W. Levin noted that "The traditional [Passover] symbols—the bitter herbs (*moror*), the spring green (*karpas*), the condiment (*haroset*), the four cups of wine, the matza, and the lamb shank (though its mention is omitted)—are cited not as commandments but as 'guides and signs of freedom's strength and Jewish pride'."<sup>859</sup> The events were even chock-full of poetry by prominent Yiddish writers rather than traditional prayers.<sup>860</sup>

The Arbeter Ring's seders were part of a distinctly American trend of so-called Third Seders. The name itself, a "third seder," indicated how they fell outside traditional norms—

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<sup>858</sup> The seder image I paint is based on Neil W. Levin's analysis of Third Seders and their musical accompaniment, see Neil W. Levin, "Third Seder of the Arbeter Ring," Milken Archive of Jewish Music, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/legend-of-toil-and-celebration/work/third-seder-of-the-arbeter-ring/>. Also see Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, Ch. 6; Knox, "Jewish Secularism and the Sabbath," 74; Vanessa L. Ochs, *The Passover Haggadah: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2020), 105–6; "The Goals of the Arbeter Ring Folk-Shuln," in *Jewish Education in the United States: A Documentary History*, ed. Lloyd P. Gartner (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969), 157–8. For some secular Passover celebrations announced in the *Forverts*, not necessarily Third Seders, see "Bronzviler radikalen velen praven dem seyder in leybor layseum," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 23, 1923; "Ver vil di ershte seyder nakht heren Z. Libin'en zogen di hagode?," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Mar. 29, 1923; "2,000 menshen velen praven dem ershten seyder in neshonal teater," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 17, 1924; "Haynt avend bald nokh'n seyder muzt ihr tsukumen in neshonal teater.," *Forverts* (New York, NY), Apr. 8, 1925. *Driter seyder's*, as they were known in Yiddish, began being advertised in the American Yiddish press particularly in the 1930s. Even in the 1970s, advertisements for Third Seders abounded. The Anglo-American Jewish press also regularly took note of them. For further commentary, see Yankev Glatshiteyn, "Prost un poshet," *Tog-MZ* (New York, NY), Apr. 30, 1954; idem, "Prost un poshet," *Tog-MZ* (New York, NY), May 14, 1954.

<sup>859</sup> Levin, "Third Seder of the Arbeter Ring." Brackets and italics mine.

<sup>860</sup> *Ibid.*

outside Israel, that is, a seder is customary only on each of the first two Passover nights. Although rooted in the warmth freethinking Jews showed toward secularized religious traditions in the 1910s, Third Seders were institutionalized beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. They grew so popular that organizers boasted of attendees in the thousands and of receiving non-Jewish socialites, like Frank Sinatra. The most notable hosts, according to later recollections, were the Arbeter Ring and the Labor Zionist Farband, who, like all hosting organizations, spun their Third Seders to reflect particular ideological commitments. As a case in point, the Farband's Third Seders reportedly included visiting speakers from Palestine and Israeli folk dances.<sup>861</sup> Organizers adapted them for changing times as well. The Haggadot for post-WWII Third Seders, for example, commonly praised the resistance fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.<sup>862</sup> There was another way they gave away their place in time—typically, Third Seders did not take place on the first two nights of Passover. Hosts recognized attendees, though likely quite secular in orientation, might want to spend those days with family and friends, perhaps participating in a traditional seder or perhaps participating in a more intimate, progressive seder.<sup>863</sup>

The Third Seder phenomenon is an apt place to conclude this dissertation. By the 1920s and 1930s, the Yom Kippur balls of decades prior, with their aggressive antireligious affrontery, were a distant memory. While conflicts between freethinking Jews and their opponents still occurred, they were mostly minor. A suspicion of institutional religion persisted in many progressive circles, but immigrant Jews and their children had adapted to American norms regarding religion.<sup>864</sup> In the ever-narrower circles of secular Yiddishists, there arose what scholar

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<sup>861</sup> Ibid.

<sup>862</sup> See, for example, "Third Seder Haggadah, 1955," Jewish Histories in Multiethnic Boyle Heights, UCLA Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies, Courtesy of the Workers Circle Southern California archives, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://scalar.usc.edu/hc/jewish-histories-boyle-heights/media/third-seder-haggadah-1955>.

<sup>863</sup> Levin, "Third Seder of the Arbeter Ring."

<sup>864</sup> As Edward S. Shapiro said, "With the collapse of left-wing secular Judaism in America, religious Judaism came to the fore as the most popular way for Jews to define their Jewish identity. This does not mean that American Jews

Gershon Winer called “a new Yiddish secularism.” He attributed it to three factors, which are worth quoting at length:

The first, was the American climate of opinion in which religion, even if diluted, is assertively pursued, making religious identification the only acceptable form of separatism and diversity within the framework of national unity. The second factor affecting the move to tradition was expediency—to respond to the needs of parents unprepared to remove their children from the mainstream of the Jewish community, where the religious celebration of Bar Mitzvah is a social necessity, for parents and children alike. A third motive was the concept of continuity as a rallying force in Jewish identification... Immigrants in an alien physical and cultural environment cannot afford the luxury of revolutionary change without becoming vulnerable to attrition and the severance of ties with past generations, and with the people as a whole. To avoid this rift requires an emphasis on continuity from the traditional to the modern without sacrificing intellectual integrity.<sup>865</sup>

Earlier debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers had played a role in how immigrant Jews, whether radical, conservative, or otherwise, approached religion and the religious. In the earliest years of the American Yiddish press, the freethinker was intimately tied to disputes between radical and conservative newspapers regarding the Jewish future. But even within radical circles, freethinkers divided over how to relate to religion and the religious.

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had suddenly become more religiously observant, only that increasingly they saw religion as the key element of their Jewishness.” See Shapiro, “The Decline and Rise of Secular Judaism: Is Judaism Necessary for Jewishness?,” *First Things* (Mar. 2014), 4

<sup>865</sup> Winer, “The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism,” 86.

Radicals played with “religion” in complex ways and were in conversation with the intellectual and popular discourses around them.<sup>866</sup>

With tensions mounting in the late 1890s, Jewish radicals increasingly questioned the forward-facing, revolutionary teleology, a teleology that was assimilationist. As freethinkers in doubt, they wondered whether their distance from Jewish religious tradition was desirable. Internal and external forces, e.g., market pressures, maturation, violence abroad, nationalist ideologies, etc., only increased questions and doubts. As the radical atmosphere generally turned toward a positive valuation of culturalist or nationalist frameworks, debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers trended toward a positive, albeit secular, understanding of religious traditions. The arrival of a younger generation of radicals only solidified the trend. Journalists in the conservative Yiddish press—a diverse, complex world in its own right—even professed appreciation for freethinking Jews. Some members of the older generation, like Faygenboym and Rozentsvayg, found themselves further on the defensive. Fellow radicals still respected their activism, but their approach to religion appeared outdated.

By the war years and early interwar period, the American Yiddish press pushed debates and depictions in two directions—peace and death. Some claimed there was peace on the Jewish street while others sensed freethought or institutionalized religion would someday disappear. Both tendencies showed an underlying theme: the end of an antagonistic age. The war and its aftermath put a spotlight on the fact that ardent antagonism had been slowly dying for decades. Again, tensions between freethinkers and observant Jews persisted, but opposition was becoming less relevant as years passed. Prominent anarchists were even willing to call themselves religious. It was an unconventional religiosity, and they remained anticlerical, but it was a

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<sup>866</sup> Also see, for example, Gershon Winer’s summary of Yankev Levin’s work for the Arbeter Ring afternoon schools, “The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism,” 81.

shocking maneuver, nonetheless. By the 1940s, the *Forverts* actually brought an Orthodox rabbi, Aaron Ben-Zion Shurin, onto its staff.<sup>867</sup> When looking back at Shurin's career many years later, *The New York Times* remarked that his hire "reflected the feeling of the founding editor, Abraham Cahan, that the newspaper needed to speak to the religious Jews who flooded the United States in the 30's and 40's."<sup>868</sup> A declining readership, especially a declining secular-oriented readership, influenced the decision to bring on Shurin, as did the *Forverts'* slide from an broadly socialist newspaper to a generically liberal one. Considering where the moderate socialist daily began, it too was, in the words of Gennady Estraikh and Zalman Newfield, "an unprecedented step in the history of this secular publication."<sup>869</sup>

The early Cold War years brought an uptick in religious affiliation, which appeared put to rest prior expressions of impiety. Had the prognostications of the conservative Yiddish press finally come true? Was freethought dead? Will Herberg, in his famed study of religion in America, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955), did not exactly say freethought was dead, but he considered freethinkers a dying breed. He wrote:

Through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth America knew the militant secularist, the atheist or 'freethinker,' as a familiar figure in cultural life, along with considerably larger numbers of 'agnostics' who would have nothing to do with churches and refused to identify themselves religiously. These still exist, of course, but their ranks are dwindling and they are becoming more and more inconspicuous... Indeed their kind of anti-religion is virtually meaningless to most Americans today, who simply cannot

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<sup>867</sup> Estraikh and Newfield, "Grandfathers Against Bar Mitzvahs," 84.

<sup>868</sup> Rabbi A. Shurin, as told to Alex Mindlin, "A Religious Voice in a Secular Forest," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Nov. 28, 2004. In "Grandfathers Against Bar Mitzvahs," Estraikh and Newfield attributed this quote to Rabbi Shurin, but it actually appears to be Mindlin's opening commentary.

<sup>869</sup> Estraikh and Newfield, "Grandfathers Against Bar Mitzvahs," 84.

understand how one can be ‘against religion’ and for whom some sort of religious identification is more or less a matter of course.<sup>870</sup>

Here, Herberg, a communist turned religious conservative, deemed the entire antireligious spectrum meaningless, from “militant secularists” to the seemingly tamer “agnostics.” Postwar Americans simply found “some sort of religious identification... more or less a matter of course.” It should be noted that Herberg was not necessarily optimistic about religious identification as “a matter of course.” The trend of postwar religious identification simultaneously meant “the widespread secularism of American religion,” which, he argued, meant “the authentic character of Jewish-Christian faith is falsified, and the faith itself reduced to the status of an American culture-religion.”<sup>871</sup> Herberg was not alone in his overall assessment of secular Jewish culture. As cofounder of the quarterly journal *Judaism*, he helped create a venue where scholars debated the relevance of secular Jewishness, often deeming it irrelevant. In 1959, for example, Rabbi Herbert Parzen published “The Passing of Jewish Secularism in the United States,” arguing that “At last [the secularist remnant] recognize what has been clear to most Jews for years—that American culture is unitary and national, by design and intent. The only exception is religion.”<sup>872</sup> In Parzen’s view, that is, religious identification was the only viable option for a Jewish particularity acceptable to non-Jewish Americans. Parzen may have overstated his point, but he did have a point—religion seemed impossible to avoid in the United States. The early postwar years even saw even the most ardent of secularist Yiddish schools, the

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<sup>870</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, reprint (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 46–7.

<sup>871</sup> *Ibid.*, 262, 271. Full quote from p. 271: “The widespread secularism of American religion... is often difficult for Europeans to understand, since in Europe the confrontation between secularism and religion... tends to be much more explicit and well defined. In the United States, explicit secularism—hostility or demonstrative indifference to religion—is a minor and diminishing force; the secularism that permeates the American consciousness is to be found within the churches themselves and is expressed through men and women who are sincerely devoted to religion.”

<sup>872</sup> Herbert Parzen, “The Passing of Jewish Secularism in the United States,” *Judaism* 8, Iss. 3 (1959): 195.

Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, declare “a deep interest in the future of Israel” and adopt words like “Jewish tradition” and “spiritual” in its “Statement of Principles.”<sup>873</sup> The Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute did not totally abandon a secular orientation, rather its leaders recognized the need to mute its formerly standoffish approach to religion.

Prognosticators, it seems, were right, at least concerning “freethought” and “freethinkers.” In postwar America, “freethought” and “freethinker” have not had a place in the wider public consciousness. For today’s Americans, including Jewish Americans, “freethought” and “freethinker” are almost foreign concepts. Doomed by associations with an ardent antireligious disposition, they fell out of fashion. But prognosticators were not entirely right either. They did not foresee the ethnic revivalism of the 1960s and 1970s, which revived not only unconventional religious experimentation but also forms of Jewish identification explicitly outside religious affiliation. And Jews have thrived, it seems, in an American context where religious affiliation does not exclusive dominate the public presentation of Jewishness.<sup>874</sup> Then again, even most ardent Jewish secularists in the contemporary United States have recognized religion’s meaningfulness in America’s social landscape. Scholar Edward Shapiro helpfully summarized:

Today’s secular Judaism is different from that of the immigrant generation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is less ideological, less political, and less hostile to religion. Secular American Jews have worked out a *modus vivendi* with

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<sup>873</sup> *Our First Fifty Years*, ed. Saul Goodman (New York: Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, 1972), 138; qt. in Winer, “The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism,” 84.

<sup>874</sup> Gene Demby, “A Rapid Shift For Jews Away From Religion, But Not Jewishness,” NPR, Code Switch, Oct. 1, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/10/01/228193305/a-rapid-shift-for-jews-away-from-religion-but-not-jewishness>; Jeff Diamant, “Jews in U.S. are far less religious than Christians and Americans overall, at least by traditional measures,” Pew Research Center, May 13, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/13/jews-in-u-s-are-far-less-religious-than-christians-and-americans-overall-at-least-by-traditional-measures/>; also see Shapiro, “The Decline and Rise of Secular Judaism,” 45.

religion and often incorporate religious ideas and customs, suitably secularized into their programming. They acknowledge that religion is a major element in Jewish culture while rejecting the claim that the essence of Jewishness lies in religion.<sup>875</sup>

It would be simplistic to say that present-day Jewish “nones” or Jews who are “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) have followed a path charted by the freethinking Jews of long ago.<sup>876</sup> But it would not be overly simplistic to highlight the fact that both have shared a context informing their dance with religion. In a land privileging religious identification and religious experimentation, many secularly minded Jews have found ways to adapt religious tradition to fit their lives. Even the German-born, U.S.-educated, British-based philanthropist Felix Posen, founder of the Posen Foundation, a nonprofit mainly promoting secular Jewishness, said, “I feel completely comfortable studying Judaism, and I have no problem studying religious Judaism—I just don’t believe in it. It’s part of our culture.” And, in almost the same breath, he recognized the need to distance himself from antireligion—“I have to stress that I will have nothing to do with anyone who is antireligious. I’m only interested in the positive aspects of our culture.”<sup>877</sup>

I am not saying religious-secular comingling is exceptionally American. As Jonathan Schorsch, citing cases from the United States and Israel, stated in 2008: “Jewish life and thought today could hardly be anything other than a *mélange*, *frissón*, *bricolage*, or *balagan* of the secular

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<sup>875</sup> Shapiro, “The Decline and Rise of Secular Judaism,” 46.

<sup>876</sup> For more discussion in nones and SBNRs, see Ariela Keysar, “We are all Jews,” *Contemporary Jewry* 42 (2022): 203–13; Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, “American Jewish Secularism: Jewish Life Beyond the Synagogue,” in *American Jewish Year Book 2012*, vol. 109-112, eds. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin (New York: Springer, 2012), 3–54.

<sup>877</sup> Ruthie Blum Leibowitz, “One on One with Felix Posen: Secular scholarship,” *Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem), Aug. 13, 2009, <https://www.jpost.com/features/one-on-one-with-felix-posen-secular-scholarship>; quote also appears in Shapiro, “The Decline and Rise of Secular Judaism,” 46. Also see “‘The First Ever Record of Everything Jewish.’ An Interview with Felix Posen, Founder of the Posen Library,” *Yale University Press London*, Feb. 19, 2013, <https://yalebooksblog.co.uk/2013/02/19/the-first-ever-record-of-everything-jewish-an-interview-with-felix-posen-founder-of-the-posen-library/>; and “About,” Posen Foundation, accessed Feb. 27, 2023, <https://www.posenfoundation.co.il/how-we-are/>; “About the Posen Foundation,” The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, accessed Feb. 27, 2023, <https://www.posenlibrary.com/frontend/posen-foundation>.

and religious—frequently tense, often humorous (intentionally or not), occasionally even harmonious. Isolating something called secularism is as difficult and counterproductive as isolating something called religion.”<sup>878</sup> David Biale, drawing on Israeli novelist Amos Oz, expressed a similar sentiment in his study of Jewish secular thought (supported by the Posen Foundation, too). Biale aptly stated: “The hallmarks of secularism are lack of dogma and resistance to uniformity... No hegemonic authority, either religious or nationalist, can dictate its agenda. No trajectory toward the future can be charted with confidence. Secularism can make no promise of continuity or survival, but it does guarantee the freedom to experiment, without which neither continuity nor survival is possible.”<sup>879</sup> In this way, the freethinking Jews of the distant past fit modern trends far more sweeping than their specific place in time.

But this study has been less about freethinking Jews themselves than it has been about how freethought was debated and freethinkers were depicted. The Yiddish discourses surrounding freethought and freethinkers intersected broader discussions about transformations taking place within the Jewish immigrant community at large. Debates about freethought and depictions of freethinkers were part of “the freedom to experiment” within the secular-religious *mélange*. In my introduction, I noted several works scholars have used when promoting a declension narrative of Jewish immigrant life in the United States, such as Hutchins Hapgood’s *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1913/1917), Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), and Rose Cohen’s *Out of the Shadow* (1918), among others. In chapter four, however, I opened by analyzing a seder scene from *Levinsky*, noting how Cahan’s protagonist, David Levinsky, traded traditional piety for atheism. A convert to Herbert Spencer’s

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<sup>878</sup> Jonathan Schorsch, “Religion and Secularism: Together Forever,” *AJS Perspectives*, The Religion Issue (Fall 2011), <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/the-religious-issue-fall-2011/religion-and-secularism-together-forever/>.

<sup>879</sup> Biale, *Not in the Heavens*, 192; this quote is cited by Edward Shapiro, albeit somewhat incorrectly, see Shapiro, “The Decline and Rise of Secular Judaism,” 45.

philosophy, David instead described his modern passions as religion—education, sex, family, etc.<sup>880</sup> The former *yeshiva bokher*, it turns out, was a confused mess of piety and impiety. At one point, for instance, David commented on how he continued to observe his mother’s Yahrzeit:

I still missed my mother. The anniversary of her death was still a feat of longing agony and spiritual bliss to me. I scarcely ever visited the synagogue of the Sons of Antomir these days, but on that great day I was sure to be there. Forgetful of my atheism, I would place a huge candle for her soul, attend all three serves, without omitting a line, and recite the prayer for the dead with sobs in my heart.<sup>881</sup>

Later, when briefly deciding to settle down, the “romantic ideals” of his upbringing led him to choose a devout bride from an orthodox family (it does not end well).<sup>882</sup> David was still “a convinced free-thinker (*sic*)” who believed in “the cold, drab theory of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest.” Yet, he claimed, “I looked upon religion as a most important institution, and was willing to contribute to its support.” Why? Certainly not because of spiritual interest, but because religious communities were “safeguards of law and order and correctness.”<sup>883</sup> David discarded *halakhic* norms, but he himself was a secular-religious mélange.

Another work I referenced deserves further attention as well—Antin’s *The Promised Land*. Often counted among classic depictions of an immigrant Jew’s secularization, her personal description of pervasive religious questions is far more complicated than many typically recognize. Furthermore, and like Cahan’s David, Antin’s rejection of tradition begins long before she departed her Russian hometown (Polotsk) for Boston. She knew of heretics as a young person, but it seems she did not encounter them. Antin recalled: “In the vocabulary of the more

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<sup>880</sup> Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 133, 169, 268, 380, 399, 496.

<sup>881</sup> *Ibid.*, 239. Also see p. 392.

<sup>882</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>883</sup> *Ibid.*, 379–80.

intelligent part of Polotzk (*sic*), it is true, there were such words as freethinker and apostate; but these were the names of men who had forsaken the Law in distant times or in distant parts, and whose evil fame had reached Polotzk by the circuitous route of tradition.”<sup>884</sup> Rather, she encountered a fellow heretic within her own family—Antin accidentally witnessed her father violating Sabbath proscriptions and realized “I was not the only doubter in Polotzk.”<sup>885</sup> Sure enough, once in the United States, Antin and her father both began identifying as freethinkers.<sup>886</sup> Her mother, however, remained observant, though she adapted religious sensibilities to her new environment.<sup>887</sup>

In America, the young, freethinking Antin was stigmatized after admitting her atheism to her school peers. She remembered how “Rachel and Kitty and Maggie, Sadie and Annie and Beckie, made a circle around me, and pressed me with questions, and mocked me, and threatened me with hell flames and utter extinction.” Later in life she joins a Natural History Club and revisits nagging existential questions. In describing her transition, Antin offered a comprehensive narrative arch worth reproducing in full:

In Russia I had practised (*sic*) a prescribed religion, with little faith in what I professed, and a restless questioning of the universe. When I came to America I lightly dropped the religious forms that I had half mocked before, and contented myself with a few novel phrases employed by my father in his attempt to explain the riddle of existence. The busy years flew by, when from morning till night I was preoccupied with the process of becoming an American; and no question arose in my mind that my books or my teachers could not fully answer. Then came a time when the ordinary business of my girl’s life

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<sup>884</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, 122; also see pp. 122–8.

<sup>885</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>886</sup> *Ibid.*, 242. Also pp. 331–6.

<sup>887</sup> *Ibid.*, 247–8.

discharged itself automatically, and I had leisure once more to look over and around things. This period coinciding with my moody adolescence, I rapidly entangled myself in a net of doubts and questions, after the well-known manner of a growing girl. I asked once more, How did I come to be?—and I found that I was no whit wiser than poor Reb’ Lebe, whom I had despised for his ignorance. For all my years of America and schooling, I could give no better answer to my clamoring questions than the teacher of my childhood. Whence came the fair world? Was there a God, after all? And if so, what did He intend when He made me?<sup>888</sup>

Antin was not describing typical theological or denominational measures of religious life, but it was still significant that she framed persistent existential questions in light of her past “prescribed religion” and its authorities. Antin’s religious-secular *mélange*, that is, collapsed past and present.

I close with *The Rise of Levinsky*, a piece of fiction, and *The Promised Land*, a piece of life-writing, in order to suggest how a more expansive view of the religion-secular *mélange* might influence scholarship moving forward—even works believed to be straightforward declension narratives are less straightforward upon further inspection. Pushing beyond *halakhah* and synagogue attendance may reveal alternate ways modern Jews experimented in their religious or irreligious lives. The Jewish freethinkers of yesteryear clearly played with religion and irreligion as they teased out their place in America’s social landscape, but they also became the “stuff” used for experimenting with presumed sacred-profane distinctions. Freethinking Jews, in other words, always had a place at the Passover seder, whether they wanted it or not.

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<sup>888</sup> Ibid., 331–2.

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