

## RUSSIAN JEWISH INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND THE MAKING OF SECULAR JEWISH CULTURE

DAVID SHNEER AND BRANDON SPRINGER

David Shneer: Department of History, Program in Jewish Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder  
E-mail: david.shneer@colorado.edu

Brandon Springer: Department of Humanities, Peak Preparatory  
E-mail: bspringer@uplifteducation.org

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Kenneth Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009)

Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)

Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007)

The lore and the objects that the Jews had lived by was not, ultimately, the point: the creation of a secular new culture mattered much more to him.

Gabriella Safran on Semyon Akimovitch Rappaport (S. An-sky), 205

Jewish intellectual history has been dominated by Jews' engagement with German thought. In the last twenty years, there have been dozens if not hundreds of dissertations and books written about Jewish thinkers who encountered German philosophical traditions, from the eighteenth-century enlightener Moses Mendelssohn and the nineteenth-century German Reformer Abraham Geiger to early twentieth-century philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. We have the Frankfurt school and neo-Hasidic thinkers. We have research seminars on Hans Jonas and books on antinomianism in interwar German Jewish thought.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on German Jewish thought is vast, so the following are some examples: On Moses Mendelssohn see David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1996); Samuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity* (New Haven, 2010); Alan Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (Albany, 1994); Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison, 2004). On Geiger and Reform Judaism see Christian Wiese (ed.), *Redefining Judaism in an Age of*

Intellectual history often relies on the trope of influence and of intellectual fathers begetting sons. (Never mind about the mothers and daughters.) Jewish intellectual history is no stranger to the idea of influence or begetting: Baruch/Benedict Spinoza begat Moses Mendelssohn, who begat Heinrich Heine, Reformers, and their modern Orthodox opponents. They begat modern German Jewish thinkers, who operated “under the influence” of people like Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, like Martin Buber, who himself “begat” Franz Rosenzweig and Gershom Scholem, who were themselves under the influence of thinkers like Martin Heidegger. And let’s not forget Marx, who looms large in this history and was the primary influence of the Frankfurt school. Then, like a dark curtain closing on the stage, the era of German Jewish intellectual history came to a close with the rise of the Nazis (or fled to the United States with members of the Frankfurt school and to Israel with Scholem and others).<sup>2</sup>

There is no shortage of begetting in Russian intellectual history. Russian intellectual history often runs from the revolutionary Decembrists of the 1810s and 1820s, who begat the conservative Slavophiles and the liberal westernizers of the 1840s and 1850s. The story then turns to Alexander Herzen, and the generation of the 1860s and critics like Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Eventually, the history reaches colorful thinkers like turn-of-the-century Silver Age writer Vasily Rozanov. And just as the Nazis did for German intellectual history, Soviet history killed the Russian intellectual tradition. (Courses called Soviet intellectual history are rare.)

Those who have written about Jews from the Russian Empire in the vein of intellectual history write about their subjects’ encounter with *German*, not

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*Emancipation* (Leiden, 2005); Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago, 1998); and Michael Meyer’s many works including *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit, 1995). On Buber and Rosenzweig see Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, 1991); *idem*, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit, 1989), as well his many edited volumes of Buber’s work; *idem*, *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Waltham, 1998); Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton 2009); Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003). On antinomianism see Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (Princeton, 2008). On Hans Jonas see Princeton’s Tikvah: Project on Jewish Thought’s special working group dedicated to Jonas: [www.princeton.edu/tikvah/projects/jonas](http://www.princeton.edu/tikvah/projects/jonas).

<sup>2</sup> An alternative script has the tradition moving to France thanks to Emmanuel Levinas; see Pierre Bouretz’s monumental *Witnesses for the Future: Philosophy and Messianism*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Baltimore, 2010). It was the exile of German Jewish intellectuals that gave rise to centers of Jewish intellectual history like Hebrew University and the University of Chicago, as well as the New School for Social Research in New York.

*Russian*, thought. Abraham Socher's work on Solomon Maimon or Nancy Sinkoff on Mendel Lefin and modern Jewry are indicative of this.<sup>3</sup> But what happens to Jewish intellectual history when it moves to Russia in the late nineteenth century through the Second World War, in the same period when modern German Jewish thought flowers?

These three books suggest that Russian Jewish intellectual history is about secularizing the sacred, whether this theme is highlighted through the Jews' relationship with Jewish law and canonical texts like the Talmud, or with Jesus Christ. If these books are exemplars of Russian Jewish intellectual history, they reveal the Jewish intellectual response to modernization and the important question of how thinkers proposed that their people become modern, and where Jews should end up on the continuum between religion and assimilation. But within this unifying framework, these books reveal two important and contending possibilities.

To use the terms of Kenneth Moss, did Jews need to "indigenize" by turning the Jewish textual canon from the basis of Jewish law into the foundation of the Jewish nation? Did intellectuals need to elevate the eastern European Jewish vernacular—that is, Yiddish—to the status of language of a nation, rather than treating it as a poor handmaiden to Hebrew or as bastardized German? Did it fall to them, as it did to Buber further west, to investigate and mine eastern European Jewish folklore to create an authentic Jewish culture? Or did Jews need to do the opposite and "deparochialize" in order to become a modern nation? Did they need to expand Jewish culture through engagement with modern European thought and new poetic forms? Should Jews translate the greats of world literature like Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde into Jewish languages to build a modern Jewish nation or was this a "sell-out" to authentic Jewish culture?

These three books are ultimately about secularization and its discontents, about Jewish culture's encounter with modernity, and about how Jews might maintain a distinct identity in a secular world. As scholarly enterprises, each book suggests that Russian Jewish intellectual history is as much an engagement with the political situation in the surrounding crumbling Russian Empire as it is about the ideas and philosophy that define German Jewish intellectual history. This new wave of Russian Jewish intellectual history reminds us that intellectuals, like all people, are ultimately political animals.

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Socher, *The Radical Enlightenment of Solomon Maimon: Judaism, Heresy, and Philosophy* (Stanford, 2006); Nancy Sinkoff, *Out of the Shtetl: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands* (Providence, 2006).

Kenneth Moss's *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* describes the brief period, from 1917 to 1921, when Jewish cultural activists took part in the revolutions going on around them. And it is undoubtedly a strong book. Moss mines sources in multiple languages and, more importantly, reads them creatively and critically to suggest a new way of understanding what these Jewish cultural activists were doing in the heady years of war and revolution. The figures leading this movement shared an overriding appreciation for the role that culture played in national construction and, according to Moss, agreed at least initially on the autonomy of culture from politics. Chaim Nachman Bialik, writing in Hebrew, S. An-sky in Russian and Yiddish, and I. L. Perets in Yiddish all believed that a modern secular Jewish culture needed to be based on traditional Jewish texts and folkloric Jewish culture. Moss calls these culturalists the "indigenizers," those who believe that Jews, like all other peoples of the time, needed to create an autonomous content of modern secular Jewish culture to support their nation. Another group, comprising critics like David Frischmann and Moyshe Litvakov, lambasted Jewish tradition for stifling creativity and instead followed Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurists, by calling for a rejection of the past. Still others saw inspiration for the new Jewish revolutionary culture not in Judaic traditions but rather in the adjacent world of European writings, initiating an effort to translate the canon of European literature into Hebrew and Yiddish. Only by being embedded within Europe, they believed, could Jewish culture be, in Moss's words, "deparochialized."

Although he provides important readings of culturalists like Bialik and Perets, Moss suggests that too much time has been spent on the indigenizers and not enough on the deparochializers. Scholars have paid too much attention to those who look more obviously like Jewish nationalists of the time period. Too much Bialik, too much An-sky, too much Perets. But what about the Hebrew critic David Frischmann or the Yiddish poet Dovid Hofshteyn, both of whom believed that *less* Jewish content, such as the Bible, traditions, and folklore, and more Jewish form, by producing new modern culture in Jewish languages, would be the route for Jews to join the family of nations. Moss's analysis of the second group helps us understand how one can believe in the translation of European classics into Hebrew and Yiddish and simultaneously Jewish national autonomy and identity.

In the wake of a war that destroyed much traditional Jewish life in the former Pale of Settlement, the region of the Russian Empire where any Jew could legally reside, the creation of new cultures became all the more pressing. Jewish culturalists believed that in this time period, they were witnessing the consolidation of a national identity in place of either assimilation to Russian Christian culture or retrenchment into traditional Judaism. They charted a third way to understand modern Jewish identity—the creation of the secular Jewish

nation. Despite the deep contradictions at the core of their national ideology, this intelligentsia's vision of secular Jewish culture was not just a series of ideas, but shaped its commitments and practices on a day-to-day basis. Moving beyond traditional intellectual history, which can remain at the level of ideas, Moss shows how the deparochializing cultural ideology generated new cultural forms, and did not remain purely in the realm of mere intellectual rumination about the nation. Ultimately, Moss's greatest contribution is his demonstration that these thinkers *created* secular Jewish culture. Their ideology's potential was realized in a wide range of literary texts as well as in concrete cultural institutions, which also expressed its contradictions.

Had Moss ended the book in 1919, that would have been the core story, but by moving his story into the period of the Civil War and ultimate Bolshevik rule, Moss reveals other underlying assumptions about Jewish culture and power and about the potentials latent in the Jewish culturalists' project. At times, and especially in the last section of the book, Moss moves from the descriptive to the prescriptive: "Some Jewish culturists understood that the collapse of traditional belief could just as easily lead to massively accelerated assimilation as to a Jewish cultural revolution—which is precisely what happened in Jewish life in the 1920s and 1930s everywhere except Palestine" (41). The first part of this statement describes his book project well, but the second part is troubling. Moss understands everything in the 1920s and 1930s outside Hebraic Palestine, known as the Yishuv, as assimilationist, showing how, for Moss, language served (and may still serve) as the primary boundary marker of Jewishness. As Moss goes on to say, Jews had a "need for autonomy to prevent assimilation."

The implication that Jews need autonomy to prevent assimilation reveals one of Moss's underlying assumptions about the relationship between nation and state—that Jews ultimately need political autonomy in order to prevent assimilation. Why the need to positively reference, on several occasions, pre-state Palestine, a place that is more or less beyond the chronology of the project? Moss closes the book by showing how Bolsheviks destroyed the world of the culturalists, and his story ends in 1921, the same year when Bialik and others leave Odessa for Palestine after their Hebrew publishing house is closed down by Bolshevik authorities.

Moss argues that the characters in his story wanted to participate in a cultural revolution that was separate from a political one. In other words, the Jewish intelligentsia fought for culture, not politics. As Bialik put it, "The national potentials of art . . . were wholly independent of political ideology" (cited in Moss, 96). Thus, according to Moss, there was no inherent connection between revolutionary politics and the ascendance of deparochialization. One was merely a catalyst for the other. But the very idea of a catalyst suggests that without it a cultural revolution might not have taken place. In other words, without the

Russian revolutions of 1917, it isn't clear whether deparochialization would have become as popular as it did. What if politics created the conditions for ideas, a cornerstone of intellectual history? It is therefore too simple to conclude, as Moss does, that when the Bolsheviks took over the Jewish cultural revolution they destroyed it by embedding it in politics.

If the indigenizers were essentialists, who searched for authentic sources of Jewish culture, Moss explains that the deparochializers were in theory antiessentialist and conceived of language as a container rather than an essence. Language was infinitely expandable and semipermeable (via translation). As Moss states,

They conceived of language as a permeable membrane. A national language would allow a national culture not because it would limit national expression to something ostensibly authentic—one of the reasons for the intense Hebrew–Yiddish language war is that both sides wanted a national language capable of empowering all dimensions of thought and expression. Rather it would provide a boundary within which an open-ended dialectic of particularity and universality, tradition and openness might play out as individuals wished. (283)

Moss is right, and importantly the same linguistic philosophy reigned among Soviet culture makers of the 1920s and 1930s, neatly encapsulated in the phrase, “national in form, socialist in content.” Like the deparochializers among Jewish culturalists of the 1910s, they too made language a key marker of national difference and translations of a literary canon—in their case a socialist and Marxist one—the centerpiece of their publishing apparatus. So although the canon may be different, the philosophy of translation and language of pre-Revolutionary deparochializers and Soviet culture makers looks quite similar. As an example, take the Jewish culturalist Nokhum Shtif, known for being a folklorist and Yiddishist, who thought that Jews' culture was “overfull with Jewishness” (cited in Moss, 121–2). A cofounder of the YIVO Institute in Vilna, in 1925 and 1926 Shtif petitioned several Soviet organizations for work in the burgeoning network of state-sponsored Yiddish-language institutions. He eventually moved to Kiev to become editor of *The Yiddish Language* (*Di yidishe shprakh*), a journal dedicated to Yiddish philology.<sup>4</sup>

There are plenty of other examples of Moss's illuminating analysis of the 1917–19 Jewish culturalist revolution, whose visions were to come true in the Soviet period. For example, Moss writes that “Jewish culturists sought ways to establish their new culture without mass support, if need be. First, many of them dreamed of harnessing the financial and institutional power of the state” (163). Moss's

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<sup>4</sup> David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* (New York and London, 2004), chap. 3.

primary example here is Ukraine, independent for a short year, in which many varieties of Jewish culture flourished with state support. But he doesn't take that same eye into the future with the Soviet takeover of Ukraine, which was the apotheosis of the vision of state-sponsored culture. On principle, the Bolsheviks harnessed the Jewish cultural revolution to the Soviet state. Moss has an affinity for deparochializers before the Soviet takeover of culture and similar disdain for them after the Soviet takeover.

It is clear that Moss doesn't like Bolsheviks, but this disdain affects some of the conclusions in this generally excellent scholarly work. In discussing Bolshevik control of Ukraine, Moss writes, "To the north, the Bolsheviks soon lost control of Vilna to the armies of the new Polish state, but would hold Ukraine through the year and, except for a brief period in 1920, for the next seventy" (220). Aside from the fact that the Germans and Romanians controlled Ukraine for several years during World War II, Moss wants us to think that what happened in Vilna was ultimately good, because the Soviets were driven out, and the city was "liberated," while what happened in Ukraine was bad, because they lived under the tyranny of the Bolsheviks. That is one interpretation, though even among these books Safran tells a very different story of the cultural implications in Vilna of the Polish takeover.

The real question is, what drives the change in attitude among the subjects of Moss's book? Is the real story the Bolsheviks; in other words, a new ideological context in which all of these culture makers now had to work? Or is the real story the unprecedented anti-Jewish violence of 1919–20, which shifted the political affiliations of many Jewish culturalists? For example, Moss asks in wonder and disappointment how a figure like Eliezer Shteynman, who had been an anti-Communist in 1917, became so pro-Communist so quickly. Elsewhere, in his analysis of the transformation of David Hofshteyn's Yiddish poetry, Moss writes, "His established poetic voice of quiet lyrical celebration was now joined by a pogrom poetry of shattered, helpless mourning and an embryonic poetry of more nakedly revolutionary zeal" (266). In both cases, one could blame either the Bolsheviks, who harnessed culture to their ideological revolution, or the unprecedented anti-Jewish violence, against which only the Bolsheviks actively fought. Instead of emphasizing this ambiguity, however, the last sixty pages of Moss's study are defined by a tone of disappointment at the destruction of the culturalist project, which Moss blames squarely on the Bolsheviks. In relationship to their turbulent world, Moss argues that these Jewish culturalists were "in 1917, but not of it" (285), by which he means that their long-germinated ideas were unleashed in 1917, but had little to do with the violent tumult of the society around them. But how is it possible for a group of influential people, especially some so invested in politics, not to be a part of, or at least affected by, 1917 and the aftermath of the February and October Revolutions?

Isn't the statement that culture is independent from politics itself a political statement?

For Moss, the triumph of the culturalist project happened in the state of Israel, which championed Hebrew-language culture often at the expense of traditional Jewish idioms. This was deparochialization at the expense of indigenization. Moss doesn't mention the role secular Bible studies and archaeology played in Israeli Jewish national identity, and instead focuses on the role of Hebrew in forming a boundary around Jewish culture. The irony here, of course, is that 20 percent of Israeli citizens are Arab, and many of them are fluent Hebrew speakers. Therefore, another way to think about the idea of turning the deparochial idea into state policy is that the state of Israel made Hebrew a state language, not a national one, thus defining the boundary not on national identity but on citizenship. In the end, Moss's book does the important work of defining the terms for the creation of secular Jewish culture. And it is this strength that makes some of the larger conclusions he draws about culture, politics, and power frustrating.

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And what about the fate of culturalism outside the state of Israel? Which kind of Jewish culture triumphed? In her introduction, Gabriella Safran asks why S. An-sky has become one of the most studied figures in Jewish studies today. In stark contrast to Moss, who clearly sides with the deparochializers, Gabriella Safran takes the side of the indigenizer, and not just any indigenizer, but the central figure in the movement to root Jewish life in eastern European soil. In her biography, Safran weaves a compelling and thorough narrative of An-sky's life. Safran has re-created an intellectual world with An-sky, the famous writer of the play *The Dybbuk*, at its center, surrounded by those thinkers whose influence he underwent and those that he "begat" (he didn't actually have any children)—as well as those among his contemporaries who were a little of each.

This world stretched from An-sky's influences in the non-Jewish Russian intelligentsia such as Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, Gleb Uspensky, Pyotr Lavrov, Viktor Chernov, and Nikolai Chernyshevsky, to militant Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky (for whose Jewish Legion An-sky raised funds) (249). Safran's context also includes the classic writers of Yiddish literature (I. L. Perets, Sholem Aleichem and Mendele), his Hebraist friend Bialik, and An-sky's lifelong companion Chaim Zhitlowsky and his wife Vera Zhitlowskaya. In his fifty-seven years, An-sky came into contact and intellectual dialogue with hundreds of Russian and Russian Jewish ethnographers, journalists, propagandists, linguists, folklorists, historians, poets, writers, editors, musicologists, anthropologists, radicals, rebels and revolutionaries. An-sky's biography, then, tells not only the intellectual history of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia around the turn of the twentieth

century, but also a general Russian intellectual history with emphasis on how non-Jewish thought affected Russian Jewish thinkers and vice versa.

Since An-sky is the lens through which Safran views Russian Jewish intellectual history and the making of secular Jewish culture, understanding his identity becomes essential to understanding the Russian Jewish intelligentsia in the decades leading up to the 1917 October Revolution. Safran's narrative frames "the dybbuk's creator" as a dybbuk himself, a ghost-like character from Jewish folklore that An-sky encountered in the stories he heard during his two-year ethnographic expedition from 1912 to 1914. Like a dybbuk, An-sky is a soul caught between worlds, an individual in crisis. He was frustrated sexually, politically, culturally, and socially. Safran presents a man who reinvented and reconstructed himself constantly and who was consistently ambivalent in most matters. Publicly in favor of trilingualism among Russian Jews, he privately admitted that perhaps Yiddish ought to be dominant (183). Early a proponent of Jewish terrorism against the oppressive tsarist regime, he later favored the power of words over the power of violence, and yet later he became a vehement supporter of his friend Jabotinsky's far-right Zionist militancy. Though never a Zionist, he always yearned for cultural "soil" (4).

If it were not anachronistic to say so, An-sky would probably have called himself queer in contemporary language used to describe sexual identity. In his day, when such a category wasn't available, An-sky struggled with his sexuality, and relied on a category that did exist when he publicly articulated a belief in the revolutionary's duty to reject sex and sexuality in the name of revolution (17). Nonetheless, he lived through two childless marriages and various other liaisons. At times proto-postmodern, An-sky lived outside and in between simple dichotomies. "His frustrated passions, like those of his hero Khonen [the main character in *The Dybbuk*], pushed him to assume new forms and in those forms his voice could live on after his death," Safran writes (296).

But even as Safran's narrative depicts An-sky as the dybbuk, he is also presented as the golem (another icon of Jewish folklore that fascinated An-sky), a supernatural hero who defends the Jews with an arsenal of words and ideas. He was one of the preeminent public intellectuals of his day, a populist consistently devoted to the Russian peasant, a Socialist Revolutionary impatient for change, a neo-Hasid influenced by mysticism, but, perhaps most important, a secular Jew grounded in the real world (259).

An-sky made a living adapting to a changing intellectual landscape and "passing" in both the Russian and Jewish spheres, two worlds that he saw as irreconcilably separate. After all, An-sky's solidarity with the Russian peasantry often conflicted with his despair over the plight of Jews in the Pale of Settlement. One thing is clear, though. An-sky is consistently devoted to the creation of a secular Jewish culture to replace a religious one while maintaining the distinctive

difference and particularity of the Jewish people. As such, he was the champion of what Safran dubs a particular “Jewish verbal rebellion” in Russia (145). An-sky, then, was both a deeply political Jewish nationalist and proletarian revolutionary and one of the most prominent cultural producers of his time. In Paris, An-sky formed the Agrarian Socialist League among the Russian émigré community through which he began producing Yiddish propaganda (83). In Bern, he began to gather a circle of young Russian Jewish revolutionaries and intellectuals around himself (95). In St Petersburg, he joined scholarly and literary societies and transformed Jewish folklore into “revolutionary propaganda” (143). As Safran portrays him, then, An-sky was simultaneously cultural creator and political organizer.

Safran paints a very grim picture of the years before An-sky’s death in 1920 for the Jews as a whole, especially the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, with war, revolution, and pogroms ravaging Russia. If Moss’s central story is how the Bolsheviks and their particular form of statecraft destroyed culture, then Safran’s is how brutal anti-Jewish violence destroyed the world that An-sky studied. In stark contrast to Moss’s depiction of Vilna, which changed hands from Bolshevik to Polish occupation in 1919, Safran tells a story not of liberation, but of a violent pogrom, seen through An-sky’s eyes, that resulted in the deaths of sixty-five Jews, including An-sky’s friend A. Vayter, and the arrests of hundreds, including the famous literary critic Shmuel Nizer (284). Safran ends her story shortly after An-sky flees Vilna for Warsaw and dies in 1920.

This is one example of how a different interpretive lens renders radically different judgments on history. Safran’s nuanced portrayal shows us that whereas the Bolsheviks may have brought violent suppression of *political* opponents in Vilna, the Poles brought a particularly *anti-Jewish* violence. An-sky, as Safran portrays him, had few friends among the Bolsheviks even in the days leading up to the October Revolution in Petrograd when “An-sky found himself at the center of an anti-Bolshevik resistance” (271). In the months between the February Revolution and the Bolshevik ascension to power, An-sky had served as a member of the establishment (to be sure, a new experience for him). His many friends among the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR) who controlled the Provisional Government, especially Chernov, allowed him access to power. He was derisive about Bolshevik politics, especially those of Bolshevik Jews such as Lev Kamenev and Leon Trotsky. Thus in October An-sky became an object of Bolshevik suppression once they gained power. But not because he was a Jew; his suppression occurred because he was a Socialist Revolutionary, a member of the party in power during the months between the February and October Revolutions. He was their political enemy. Though An-sky was deeply troubled by the subversion of his beloved revolution by the Bolsheviks, he understood that the Red Army did not perpetrate anti-Jewish violence. As Safran writes,

His acknowledgement in Warsaw in 1920 that the Red Army—the Bolsheviks from whom he had so recently fled—was acting better than the allies of his old SR friends, and his insistence that pogroms were not inevitable, showed the limits of his loyalties both to the PSR and to Zionism . . . [H]e was willing to admire even his own mortal enemies when he saw that they were making [the construction of a Jewish future in Russia] possible (286).

An-sky and his contemporaries prefigured many of the debates that would rage among their radical progeny in the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia in the 1920s. Though he was not included in the 1908 Yiddish Language Conference in Czernowitz, An-sky had much to say on the language debates and was in dialogue with the other intellectuals of the time, especially Nizer, marking an important period in the development of Russian Jewish intellectual history that would become the intellectual framework for the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia (176). As in most things, An-sky was ambivalent about the distinctions between assimilation and tradition and about choosing between Russian and Yiddish, but as a good indigenizer, and unlike the deparochializers, he saw language as secondary to cultural creation—particularly Jewish art, literature, institutions, and educational systems. Ultimately, like a good indigenizer, he put content over form by saying that modern Jewish culture should be developed by secularizing classic Jewish texts and collecting folklore in either language (178).

As Safran reminds us, “intellectuals operated on emotions more than any consistent allegiance to ideology” (295–6). Perhaps An-sky represented this more than any of his contemporaries, and in no debate more representative of this facet of his career than that over assimilation and conversion. Safran portrays his moral indignation at conversion and the Jewish reclamation of Jesus, a name “which had been on the lips of those who perpetrated violence against Jews for millennia,” as consistent with his own intellectual history and emotional solidarity with the poor and oppressed throughout his life (161). Perhaps more important, his rejection of Jesus flowed naturally from his belief in the necessary particularity of the Jewish people.

Despite describing his many shifting political activities, Safran shows that An-sky maintained a consistency throughout his life even as he revised his own biography as he grew older, especially as generational divisions opened up. An-sky, Bialik, and the cultural Zionist Ahad Ha'am were the “old men” of the 1910s, who represented a secular Jewish nationalism that recognized texts like the Bible and Talmud and traditional Jewish holidays as cultural patrimony rather than as divine revelation. Their more radical, deparochializing younger colleagues saw that same patrimony as stifling. For them, language, which needed to be inspired by the greats of world literature, was the primary marker of Jewish difference in the modern world.

In the end, Moss's and Safran's books describe the rise of secular Jewish culture so differently for two reasons. First, because they have chosen and therefore sympathize with very different characters. Second, the two authors have different goals. Moss gives light to deparochializers, a group of people overshadowed by their more famous indigenizers, and argues that their cultural revolution was destroyed by the Bolsheviks. Safran writes the definitive biography of a famous, but ironically little known, Jewish cultural figure, who defined what it meant to be an indigenizer.

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An-sky and the secular Jewish revolution tie these two books to a third. It seems ironic that a book about Jesus in modern Jewish culture would really be about the formation of a distinctive secular Jewish culture from the early nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. But that is what Matthew Hoffman's book, about how Jesus functioned in modern Jewish culture, aims to show. Hoffman shows how Jesus became all things to all modern Jews, and that Jews' relation to Jesus said everything about the modern Jew and very little about Jesus. For nineteenth-century Reform German Jews, who were challenging the Rabbinic establishment, Jesus was the archetypal Reform Jew. To 1920s Yiddish literary expressionists, Jesus was the ultimate sufferer, as Jews in eastern Europe suffered from pogroms, hunger, and mass migration.

Although Moss doesn't include Chaim Zhitlowsky in his pantheon of deparochializing thinkers, probably because Zhitlowsky was in the United States in the 1910s, Hoffman supports Moss's argument that he was not an assimilationist. Instead, Zhitlowsky fits into a broader intellectual and cultural discourse about universalizing in order to nationalize. As Hoffman writes, quoting Zhitlowsky, "only one who has not been completely freed from the 'assimilationist ideal' and does not see a national life-force in the Jewish people 'lives in constant fear of the surrounding environment. The truth is the opposite'" (89). Hoffman and Moss do both include Micha Berdichevsky and Yosef Brenner among their radical Jewish nationalists, who "pushed the boundaries of secular Jewish identity even further" (92). Like Zhitlowsky, they argued that the Jewish reclamation of Jesus taking place in Yiddish and Hebrew was a national project about breaking open the boundaries of Jewish culture to broader European trends. Their examples suggest that one could in theory take the ultimate step and convert to Christianity while still remaining a Jew in the national sense.

According to these deparochializers, the confidence in Jewish culture that allows for the embrace of Jesus is proof of Jewish national renaissance. As Hoffman says, "The very process of Jews more freely employing the central symbols of Western-Christian civilization resulted in the creation of a new, distinctively

modern, Jewish culture, which was both universal and particular at once.” Equally important, Hoffman rightly recognizes that there is no such thing as “universal” in a European Christian landscape. That which is “universally” understood is, by definition, Christian—as noted throughout his book with repeated parenthetical statements that Christian equals universal and European (216).

Hoffman devotes an entire chapter to Marc Chagall, the Jewish visual artist still most closely associated with images of Jesus and the crucifixion. Chagall’s first Jesus painting came out in 1912, but the most important body of his Jesus work came out in the late 1930s and the 1940s in response to anti-Jewish violence. Chagall turned Jesus into his preeminent symbol of Jesus martyrdom “under the influence of the pogroms,” just like the literary output of figures like Hofshiteyn, Leyb Kvitko, Perets Markish, and others (218). His *White Crucifixion* came out in 1938, the same year that Yiddish poet Yankev Glatshteyn published his “Good Night World,” a rejection of everything that Europe and Jesus stood for and a return to the ghetto, and when Moyshe Gebirtig’s Yiddish poem and song, “It Is Burning” (“S’brennt”), appeared as a call to Jewish action in an anti-Semitic world.

Some have understood Chagall’s many crucifixion paintings as part of the process of creating something called “Judeo-Christian values,” which emerged in the United States during World War II, as a way of moving beyond Christian supersessionism and anti-Semitism.<sup>5</sup> But Hoffman shows that this kind of ecumenicism isn’t what Chagall intended. Hoffman compares him to the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, (in)famous as the author of the 1908 *God of Vengeance* and during the war as the producer of a trilogy about Jesus and Mary. According to Hoffman, both Asch and Chagall were two misunderstood figures, each of whom took Christian symbols and explicitly Judaized them.

The comparison isn’t completely convincing. To make it work, Hoffman focuses on Asch’s short story “Christ in the Ghetto,” clearly more analogous to Chagall’s Holocaust-oriented paintings than to any of the Christian trilogy that Asch wrote in the same period that Chagall painted. Those books reimagine a historical Jesus and Mary, along the lines of nineteenth-century Reform Jews, and do so in the name of ecumenicism and positive Christian–Jewish relations

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<sup>5</sup> The term “Judeo-Christian” came into vogue in the United States during World War II through the influence of many interfaith organizations. On the term’s emergence within the Jewish intellectual sphere, see Bernard Heller, “The Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Jewish Frontier* (New York) 13/11 (Nov. 1946), 59–60; Paul Tillich, “Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition?,” *Judaism* (New York) 1/2 (April 1952), 106–9. The two engaged in a back-and-forth for several years. See also Will Herberg, *Protestant–Christian–Jew* (New York, 1960) for an example of how the term was used in sociology of religion in the postwar period. See also Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, 2004).

in the US during World War II. Chagall, on the other hand, uses Jesus in the late 1930s and during the war explicitly to protest the martyring of Jews. “For Chagall, as for many of the Yiddish modernists, the crucifixion was a uniquely Jewish symbol, and its use by Jewish artists or writers did not constitute Jewish assimilation of Christian themes, but a reclamation of inherently Jewish ones” (250). Hoffman notes that Chagall paints one of his last wartime crucifixion scenes replacing Jesus on the cross with contemporary Jews, obliterating any pretense to be talking about the past, and instead turning our focus to the genocidal present. Hoffman slips when he equates those who “depict contemporary Jewish victims in Christ-like terms or portray the historical Jesus as markedly Jewish” (251). The first is more nationalistic; the second, more ecumenical. In other words, Chagall is an indigenizer trying to make Jesus an authentically Jewish figure, because of his suffering, while Asch is a deparochializer, trying to expand the semantic field of Yiddish literature via the Christian trinity.

If Safran kept her project narrow by focusing on one person and Moss by being tightly bound to few short years, Hoffman’s book suggests what happens when someone takes on too much time and space. The chapters speed by and become a catalog of Jews creating Jesus images. It also doesn’t help that although he writes about English, German, Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish language cultures, Hoffman only works in Yiddish and English sources, and gets the rest from translations and secondary sources. Good intellectual history needs to get at the originals, not translations, which may be why most intellectual history is often narrow. Hoffman quotes from a myriad of other historians, always positively, showing how he embeds his work in an already well-developed historiography of the Jewish Jesus.

Although the anticommunist politics of Moss’s book are troubling, it is nonetheless good intellectual and cultural history with convincing explanatory power, and highlights one of the weaknesses of Hoffman’s. When analyzing the debate between Zhitlowsky and An-sky, Moss and Safran show that both writers expressed radically divergent means (deparochialization and indigenization) to achieve the same end—modern secular Jewish culture. Hoffman renders Zhitlowsky’s embrace of Jesus an “irony: Zhitlowsky and countless others preached secular humanism and universalism in a particularistic national language that could only be read by fellow Jews” (65). Moss shows quite clearly why their embrace was as nationalistic as it was universalist, and therefore isn’t ironic at all. Yiddish modernists writing universal literature isn’t a paradox, as Moss demonstrates, since it was precisely by importing European and Christian cultures that proponents of a specifically Jewish culture believed it would gain status and become an elite literary language.

Similarly, in trying to make sense of An-sky, Safran suggests that his rejection of Jesus makes perfect sense in his world view about the indigenous nature of

all cultures, including Jewish culture. Hoffman interprets An-sky's rejection of Jesus "as part of his renunciation of his earlier ideological and cultural stance" of being a populist working with Russian peasants. Because Hoffman hasn't spent the necessary time with his thinkers, he ends up rehashing older explanations of An-sky, who has traditionally been treated as having left Jewish life for the peasants and then returned to work for his people. In other words, Hoffman offers no new analysis of either Zhitlowsky or An-sky. Both Moss and Safran offer radically new and more satisfying explanations for the actions of these two Jewish intellectuals.

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Despite these criticisms, by taking a macro view of the making of secular Jewish culture, Hoffman recognizes the similarities between Hebrew and Yiddish universalism of the 1910s and Soviet Jewish culture of the 1920s. Hoffman shows that the cultural revolution described by Moss didn't end because of the Bolshevik takeover. For example, consider someone like the Yiddish poet Leyb Kvitko. He wrote his collection *1919* about anti-Jewish violence during the pogroms, in which he "praises the soldiers who fought for the Revolution," while he was in Berlin, not in the Soviet Union (Hoffman, 190). Moss interprets this kind of writing as sycophantic, with Kvitko currying favor with the Bolsheviks. But why would Kvitko have written this kind of poetry from Berlin? Is it possible that despite the violence perpetrated by the Bolsheviks, they were nonetheless the only power in Eastern Europe not trying to kill Jews as such and instead outlawing anti-Semitism? It is possible that Kvitko genuinely changed his relation to the Bolsheviks as a result of the unending violence perpetrated by those whom the Bolsheviks fought against in 1919–20. Kvitko returned to the Soviet Union in 1925, once the violence of wars and revolutions had ended.

Unlike both Hoffman and Safran, who constantly remind the reader how politics encroached on the lives of intellectuals and writers, Moss hates that the war-scarred world crumbling around them and the anti-Semitic violence that came in the wake of war encroached on their ideas. And for better or worse, Israel did not become the perfect enactment of the deparochializers' fantasy. After all, the Israeli government and Supreme Court both denied the right of return to Brother Daniel (Oswald Rufeisen)—a Jew who hid in a monastery during the Holocaust and later converted to Catholicism and became a priest—when he applied for immigration rights to Israel in the 1960s. No matter how secular modern Jewish culture appeared in a place like Israel, there were and are now limits on who can be called a Jew—just as the indigenizers would have wanted.

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