THE SHOFAR THAT PLAYED MARSEILLES

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE JEWISH LABOR MOVEMENT

Two girls wearing banners with slogan "ABOLISH CHILD SLAVERY!!" in English and Yiddish, one carrying American flag; spectators stand nearby. Probably taken during May 1, 1909 labor parade in New York City. George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress)

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In the autumn of1890, a curious announcement appeared in certain New York City newspapers:

> Grand Yom Kippur Ball
> With theatre.
> Arranged with the consent of all new rabbis of Liberty.
> Kol Nydre Night and Day.
> In the year 5651, after the invention of the Jewish
> idols, and 1890, after the birth of the false Messiah . . .
> The Koll Nydre will be offered by John Most.
> Music, dancing, buffet, "Marseillaise," and other
> hymns against Satan.[1]

What is one to make of this announcement? What could be the purpose of such a "ball?" More importantly, what would compel a group of clearly non-religious Jews to create and publicize an event apparently designed to mock Judaism?

The previous eight years had seen a marked increase in immigration to the United States from the Jews of Eastern Europe, a group unique among their immigrant contemporaries. These Jews had arrived from czarist Russia, escaping the persecution and degradation of life in the Pale of Settlement, an area of roughly 386,000 square miles between the Baltic and Black Seas. Once in the new land, they sought to remain in the United States permanently. Moreover, unlike other ethnically distinct immigrant groups, the Jewish migration was characterized by a high percentage of skilled workers and artisans.

Hailing from a geographically proscribed area, possessed of a shared culture, prepared to make a home and bringing a host of skills and occupations, it is

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[1] *New York Sun*, September 24, 1890, in Tcherikover, 2:444.

perhaps not surprising that these Jewish immigrants were instrumental in the labor struggles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – a force and a movement that has been termed the Jewish Labor Movement (JLM). And yet, as evidenced in the text above, many Jews were ambivalent or openly hostile regarding the religion that gave them their identity.

This work is intended to address this apparent contradiction. The first section is a brief overview of the Jewish texts that outline the rights of labor and individual workers. The struggles between labor and Judaism is all the more puzzling is that Judaism is notable among the world's faiths for its sophisticated body of labor law. Jewish law, from the Torah to current *responsa*, overwhelmingly favors the needs of workers over the desires of employers. We investigate both texts from the Torah itself, as well as rabbinic and halakhic takes on that foundational scripture.

The second section addresses the causes of the uneasy relationship between Jewish labor and the Jewish religion. It can be said that other religious traditions have more easily integrated labor struggles within their purview.[2] If other traditions used Jewish biblical texts as a starting point, why was this more difficult for Jews themselves?

The third section investigates points of contact between the realms of organized Labor and organized Judaism. Some scholars have argued that the JLM was characterized by a traditionally Jewish "flavor," influenced by both text and

[2] See, for example, Rosalie Riegle Troester, ed. *Voices from the Catholic Worker* (1993), and Gustavo Gutierrez. *Teologia de la Liberacion, Perspectivas* (1971; English translation, 1988).

tradition. While this work is important and compelling, it may strike us as speculative in nature. Is there sufficient evidence to make such a claim?

The fourth and final section focuses on those who forged philosophical or practical connections between Judaism and the JLM. We ask: How did these individuals understand their role in the larger Jewish community? How did they defend their positions in a sometimes hostile environment? What were their most noteworthy achievements?

Judaism has been a potent force for social and political change throughout the millennia. For those of us who seek to continue working in that tradition, I conclude with a brief discussion of lessons we can learn from the struggles and achievements of our predecessors. Can Judaism again be a potent voice against growing labor injustice in our globalized world? We look to our forebears to help us utilize both Jewish text and community in the revitalization of the modem laborer, in both *guf* and *nefesh*.

Because the topic is vast, I am limiting the scope of inquiry, with a few exceptions, to Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City from 1880 until the First World War. Out of respect for religious sensitivities, I do not fully spell out any divine names, altering original citations when necessary.

1

Labor Rights in Jewish Texts

The irony of the rift between secular Jewish labor leaders and traditional Jewish institutions is that traditional Jewish texts are replete with injunctions regarding the just treatment of workers. In this section we briefly outline that discussion throughout Jewish thought.

❖ *LABOR RIGHTS IN WRITTEN TORAH*

At the beginning of creation, it is G-d Who decides that relentless labor in unacceptable. The institution of Shabbat and its description in Torah has a two-fold implication for labor. First, a day off is seen as both necessary and holy. Furthermore, the delineation of Shabbat as the completion of Creation[1] establishes labor itself as G-dly, Divine in nature and inextricably connected to the holy Sabbath.

Later in Genesis, chapter 29, we find the story of Jacob and Laban, the first documented report of an employer-employee relationship. Laban's conduct is remembered as the classic example of chicanery in such dealings. One *Midrash* tells us that for the first month, Jacob received only a half-wage. When Laban then tells him, "Name your wage,"[2] the cheating and underpayment worsen.

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[1] Genesis 2:2
[2] Genesis 29:15

When Jacob claims his payment, his beloved Rachel, he is instead tricked into serving an extra seven years.

After fourteen years, and earning no property of his own, Jacob must negotiate an agreement to earn a portion of the flock. The medieval commentator Rashi tells us that Laban cheated by removing healthy animals from the flock with the intent of leaving only the sickly and old animals. Other commentators report that Laban constantly toyed with Jacob in their negotiations, changing his mind ten times before finalizing any agreements.

As a result, the Torah sets down specific ethical guidelines that must be met in the treatment of laborers. Included in these guidelines are standards for management and distribution of compensation. Leviticus requires the prompt payment of wages, warning that the "wages of a hired servant shall not abide (*lo talin*) with you until morning."[3] Significantly, it does not matter if the workers are Jewish:

> You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he be of your brethren or of your strangers who are in your land and your gates. In his day shall you pay him his wage. You shall not let the sun go down upon it, for he is poor and to that he devoted his soul. Otherwise, he will cry to YKVK and it will be accounted as a sin to you.[4]

❖ *LABOR RIGHTS IN TALMUD AND LAW CODES – PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE*

The Rabbis of the Talmud, as well as our sages, are just as stringent regarding this precept, perhaps more so. In their discussion of the negative mitzvah of *lo*

[3] Leviticus 19:13
[4] Deuteronomy 24:14-15

talin, both the Gemara and the Rambam rule that an employer who maliciously withholds payment may be liable for as many as five transgressions.[5] These include theft and withholding wages (*oshek*), itself a separate category of transgression.

Clearly, then, the employer has specific obligations vis á vis the workers. The Gemara's concern for hired workers derives from the assumption that such workers are poor, vulnerable, and in need of social and legislative protection. It is assumed that workers would perform difficult, often dangerous, work, only in exchange for the wage upon which they desperately depend. "Why," the Gemara asks, "would a worker place himself at the risk of death [if] not for his wage?" Thus, one who withholds pay is compared to one who "takes from him his soul."[6] Workers protections against such employers are explicitly stated in terms of legal rights. Rav, for example, declares that a worker retains the right to rescind the terms of employment at any time, "even in midday," learning from *Ki Li* – "for to Me," says G-d – "*B'nei Yisrael* are slaves"[7] that to rule otherwise would relegate workers to the status of "slaves to slaves."[8]

Furthermore, Jewish tradition favors the claims of laborers in payroll disputes. Generally, defendants in a civil case who deny the existence of a debt are free of liability absent witnesses. Not so in the case of labor disputes. Workers who claim that they have yet to be paid are permitted to take an oath to that effect,

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[5] *Bava Metzia*, 110-111, *M.T. Sechirut* 11:2
[6] *Bava Metzia* 112a
[7] Leviticus 25:55
[8] *Bava Metzia* 10a

and collect their pay, regardless of whether the employer makes a counterclaim.[9] While the objection is raised that the employer ought to have his say in terms of an oath, Rav Nachman argues that the *chachamim* enacted that the oath is transferred to the worker "for the sake of his livelihood."[10] The rights of the worker and the protection of the agreed-upon wage remain of primary importance.

"Quite beyond the integrity of their persons" as free people, Schnall notes that "workers are due special consideration because of their presumptive need."[11] Even beyond the strict letter of the law, employers are enjoined to carry out their obligations to workers with compassion, a reflection of the principle of *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, the injunction to extend one's self beyond the lowest standard of behavior. This is learned most vividly in an *aggadic* tale of Rabbah bar Hanna[12] in tractate *Bava Metzia*. Rabbah bar Hanna hired laborers to transport some casks of wine. When the casks ruptured, he confiscated their clothing to cover his loss – an action specifically prohibited regarding debtors, but not mentioned in terms of workplace losses.

The workers petitioned Rav, presumably the judicial authority of last resort:

> [Rav instructed,] "Return their cloaks."
>
> "Is that the law?" [asked Rabbah bar Hanna.]
>
> He answered, "Yes, 'so that you walk the good road' (Proverbs 2:20)."

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[9] *Shavuot* 45a-b
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Schnall, 24.
[12] In some texts, "bar Hanan," or "bar Rav Huna." See also Palestinian Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 6:6.

> [The porters] then said to him, "We are poor, we have worked all day and we are hungry. Shall we get nothing?"
>
> [Rav] said, "Go and pay them."
>
> [Rabbah bar Hanna again asked,] "Is that the law?"
>
> "Yes," he answered, "'and you shall guard the paths of the righteous' (Proverbs 2:20)."[13]

Is the text from Proverbs the letter of the law? Not technically. Rabbah bar Hanna is correct in not paying the laborers, if we are to follow the strict dictates of the halakhah. Yet Rav's concern is not strict legalistic argument. In bringing down the text from Proverbs, not generally a source of Jewish law, Rav reminds Rabbah bar Hanna of his lofty status – economically as an employer, and spiritually as a Jew. Because of both ethical and spiritual responsibility, Rav ordained the spirit of the law to be, in actuality, the letter of law.

❖ *LABOR ORGANIZING AND WORK STOPPAGES*

While we see, then, that Jewish law affords a wide array of rights to the laborer, we have not yet addressed the issue of labor organizing. Yet, according to our Rabbis, compensation and labor negotiations represent separate issues. Thus, they address separately two seemingly modern-day issues of collective bargaining and work stoppages.

Unionization and Collective Bargaining. Many Jews are surprised to find that traditional sources, considered to be very exacting in the realm of religious ritual such as *kashrut* and *Shabbat* observance, is just as clear in terms of commercial legislation. Similarly, the rabbinic attitude toward *minhag*, local social custom, was extended to the commercial realm as well.

In terms of labor law, consider this principle, established in the Mishnah:

> [Regarding] one who hires laborers and demands that they rise early and work late – In a place where this is not the *minhag*, he may not force them. Where it is the *minhag* to provide food, he must provide food; where it is the *minhag* to provide fruit refreshments, he must offer fruit refreshments. Everything [must follow] according to the custom of the locality.[14]

Thus, undercutting the already inferior power of employees by hiring replacement workers is simply not allowed, if such a wage is not the *minhag* in their work community.

For the purposes of determining local custom, a community can be defined not only in terms of geography, but also by shared interest or trade. In a discussion of *tzedakah*, found in tractate *Bava Batra*, we are told that townspeople "may fix the measures, prices and wages as they see fit, and to enforce this with fines."[15] By extension, labor collectives were seen as a subset of such communal administration.

The same *sugya*, for example, describes a dispute among butchers in a town regarding their right to collectively regulate hours and apportion work. In what may in fact be the first record of a labor union in history, the collective agreement stipulated that "if [one butcher] works on the other's day, the skin of his animal will be torn." The case was then discussed of Reuven, who "worked on Shimon's day." As a result, Shimon tore the skin." While Rava determined that "Shimon must pay," Rav Yemar bar Shalmiya objected, citing the *braita* concerning the

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[13] *Bava Metzia* 83a
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Bava Batra* 8b

townspeople."[16] Regardless of other *halakha* that might ordinarily be pertinent, in such a case the collective bargaining agreement must be honored, especially by those who are themselves members of the trade. In this way, both benefits and sanctions are distributed fairly. The *Tosefta* offers some early illustrations of this principle:

> Textile workers and dyers may decide that all material brought into the town be processed collectively. Bakers may establish their work shifts, and donkey drivers may say, "To whomever [in this collective] a donkey dies, we will replace it for him." If it dies through negligence, they are not required to replace it . . . Merchant seamen may say, "To whomever [in this collective] a ship is lost, we will replace it for him." But if he went to a place where no one goes [and thus lost the ship by his irresponsibility,] they need not replace it.[17]

In response to those who would follow the literal definition of a "city," the Rashba explains plainly, "every association organized for one purpose is to be considered a 'city' . . . even if only members of one occupation." Regarding articles of association and work regulations, "their decisions are binding."[18]

Work Stoppages. The principle of establishing labor contracts is derived from Torah itself. Torah refers to the efforts of the Hebrew servant as "double the hire" of a hired worker[19]; by extension, since the maximum term of service allowed for the servant was six years, the life of an employment contract was limited to three. "More than three years removes one from the category of a worker," writes Rabbi Mordecai ben Hillel. "Though he is not a servant in all its

[16] *Bava Batra* 9a
[17] *Tosefta* on *Bava Metzia* 11:12.
[18] *T'shuvot HaRashba*, 4:185, 5:125
[19] Deuteronomy 15:18.

laws – since he has removed himself from the category of a worker, he has transgressed, 'for the Israelites are servants to Me.'"[20]

In keeping with their freedom of action and movement, individual workers were permitted by the rabbis to rescind the terms of their employment, "even in midday." What then of collective work stoppages – the right to strike? The Gemara records a striking job action taken on behalf of craftspeople associated with the *Beit HaMikdash* itself. The families that baked the showbread and sifted the incense (*Beit Gamru* and *Beit Avtinas*, respectively) refused to teach their craft to others.[21] The Rabbis attempt to hire immigrant replacement workers from Alexandria. When their work was found to be inferior (their bread quickly "grew moldy"), the families further refused to return unless their wages were doubled. When it became clear that the family was not using the showbread for its own purposes, the Rabbis accepted both families' conditions regarding their proprietary knowledge, and agreed to double their wages.[22]

Modern *poskim* hold divergent opinions. Rabbi Ben Zion Ouziel found no inherent right for workers to take unilateral action. Because of the damage that strikes may cause, he required that both sides in the dispute must appear before a mutually acceptable mediator.[23] Rav Abraham Isaac Kook agreed that mediation was preferable; however he maintained that if management failed to appear or uphold a subsequent ruling, a union would be within its right to call a

[20] Mordecai, *Bava Metzia* 460.
[21] *Yoma* 38a, and *Shekalim* 14a.
[22] *Yoma* 38a.
[23] *Mishpatei Ouziel* 42:6

work stoppage.[24] Rabbi Eliezer Judah Waldenberg suggests that if management violates its contractual obligations or even a long-standing employment practice, a union may call a strike without first submitting to arbitration.[25]

Perhaps most importantly, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein issued a remarkable *responsum* regarding the right to strike of no less vital a collective than yeshiva teachers. Citing both the *Shulchan Aruch* and the *Mishneh Torah*, the Rabbi argued that "the unions in our country have a source in Jewish law, for they are 'tradespeople' of a given trade, and they constitute the majority." As a result, "they have the right to decide not to work until they receive higher pay."[26] The union has the authority to enforce this decision even upon dissenting members.

Analysis regarding the right of the school to hire replacement workers is less clear to Rabbi Feinstein, the Gemara's experience with Alexandrian bakers notwithstanding. Though union agreements are, by definition, not binding on non-union employees, the Rabbi argues that it might be justifiable for union workers to "prevent the non-union workers from working according to Jewish law on the principle 'you are depriving me of a livelihood.'"[27]

Meanwhile, Rabbi Feinstein comes down squarely against hiring replacement teachers. He remarks that "everyone agrees in this country that it is a very shameful act for one to work in someone else's job . . . [thus, the union] has the right to force others not to work, and this is, after all, a matter of everyday

[24] Tkursh in *Shanah b'Shanah*, 241
[25] *Tzitz Eliezer* 2:23
[26] *Iggrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat* 59
[27] *Ibid.*

practice in this country." This claim is certainly less valid considering the setbacks organized labor has suffered in the intervening years. Nevertheless, Rabbi Feinstein clarifies his position on purely ethical grounds, regardless of any particular political reality. I believe it is worth quoting in its entirety:

> If matters are such that the teachers are not getting salary to get along, and it is therefore difficult for them to teach well, and it is a strong and clear presumption that if they don't teach a day or two the school board members [may] pay on time and raise their salary to a living wage, perhaps it is permissible on the ground that "now is the time to act for G-d, they overturned the law," since this will have the effect that they will be able to teach properly and would not have to worry and make the effort to look for an additional source of income.

Thus, Jewish law grants workers the right to abrogate labor contracts unilaterally.[28] We have seen that they are well within their rights under Jewish law to collectively bargain and, if they see fit, pursue a work stoppage.

❖ *A LEGACY FORGOTTEN?*

"All that is lenient for a Hebrew servant is extended to the laborer, a fortiori, for the Hebrew servant has transgressed, and nevertheless the Merciful One has been lenient" writes Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rottenberg. "Therefore, certainly a laborer who has not so transgressed has the same benefit."[29] Considering that a master was required to share the produce of both field and flock with his departing servant, the worker is entitled to the similar benefit of what we now call "severance pay." Similarly, the Talmud tells us that a Hebrew servant was permitted to miss as many as half the days of his indenture due to sickness an injury without being liable for the time lost; thus, "sick pay" is also extended to the laborer.

Nechama Leibowitz, in discussing the conduct of our Laban, argues that "one of the characteristic signs of a wicked man standing in the way of reformation is the flight from personal responsibility." Such a man, continues Leibowitz, "regards himself as forced into it because the community or some vague body to which he belongs compelled him to act thus." While our modern mores might view a worker injured for half his employment as "irresponsible," Jewish tradition, by contrast, reserves that label for the employer who refuses to compensate the injured worker. It is only the unethical individual or firm who seeks to evade the clear moral obligation incumbent upon Jewish employers.

Thus, Schnall writes that "Jewish authorities, over a period of some twenty centuries, were often called upon to adjudicate disputes between workers and management, applying biblical principle to everyday practice."[30] The right of the fairly compensated employee to a safe workplace governed by mutual respect was, in essence, a given. Moreover, those same authorities generally supported "the creation and operation of collective labor organization long before its advent and legitimacy in Europe or the United States."[31]

Indeed, that legitimacy was earned in the United States only by means of violence and bloodshed. US industry has not been above resorting to outright thuggery to challenge the most basic principles of labor rights, including the right to organize and collectively bargain. The US labor movement countered with a tendency to favor militant confrontation. While the Norris-LaGuardia Act

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[28] See also *S.A., Choshen Mishpat* 333:3-5
[29] Cited in Schnall, 21.
[30] Schnall, 149.

of 1932 and the Wagner Act of 1935 established a bedrock upon which the labor movement established its legitimacy, US workers continue to suffer setbacks. Government actions like the Taft-Hartley Act, and President Reagan's unilateral dismissal of striking PATCO workers from US airports in 1981, rescinded many hard-earned gains in the post-World War II era. Today, US industry's increasing reliance upon non-union and undocumented immigrant workers, particularly in the retail and foodservice sectors, has left the wreckage of decreasing real wages and lack of access to healthcare for increasing number of Americans. The middle class has increasingly become the working poor.

Given the millennial tradition of Jewish acceptance of basic labor rights, one wonders how this situation might have been different if Jewish texts had informed the primordial struggle of Jewish workers at the turn of the 20th century. Would workers have earned greater benefits and rights? On the other hand, one might argue that the Jewish Labor Movement would never have emerged at all in this country had it not been for the religious heritage of its members. Was the JLM hindered by the lack of religion within its ranks, or were its successes due to its nature as a Jewish movement? To what extent did Judaism inform the struggles of the JLM? We investigate this question in the following sections.

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[31] *Ibid.*

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Historical Context

To fully understand the Jewish Labor Movement in the United States, it is necessary to begin in the birthplace of the movement, the forbidding terrain of czarist Russia. Until the 19th century, Jewish culture in this region remained remarkably stable, characterized by limited communal autonomy within the Russian Empire and a steadfast rabbinate at the helm. By the end of the 19th century, however, this would all change. This change ultimately created the culture in which the Jewish Labor Movement was born.

❖ *Upheaval in the Jewish World*

Political and economic upheaval in Russia would undermine the established order within the shtetl, and erase all memory of a static Jewish world in the Pale. These forces inevitably lead to the establishment of a Jewish proletariat. As we shall see, they further serve to exacerbate existing but largely hidden divisions between Jewish learner and laborer.

Political Factors. While life in the Jewish shtetl is often portrayed as idyllic and tranquil, the truth of the matter suggests otherwise. With few exceptions, Jews were forbidden from living outside of the borders of the Pale. Furthermore, within the Pale, Jews were excluded from settling in the countryside, confined

instead to established towns and villages, regardless of fluctuations in population size or density. Restrictions on public school and university attendance, as well as land ownership, further reminded Jews of their low social status. Life in the shtetl, then, was a semi-urban experience, characterized by an uneasy proximity to the often hostile non-Jewish populace.

Despite this tenuous existence, the Russian Jewish community, as in neighboring Poland, maintained autonomy regarding internal executive and fiscal affairs. If the rabbi and the Jewish family were the stabilizing forces in the personal lives of Russia' Jews, the *kahal* was their political counterpart. Though Russian forces would periodically terrorize the community through expulsions and forced conversions, the *kahal* was given authority over, for example, which young men would be conscripted into the czar's army, and how the community would meet its fiscal obligation to the Empire.

Yet even this limited authority could not prevent the deterioration of Jewish security and safety. It soon became clear, for instance, that conscription was not merely a matter of military preparedness. Jews were drafted at the age of twelve, serving six years of preliminary "cantonment" before an unthinkable twenty-five year military service. Furthermore, the pre-conscription period turned out to consist of a program of forced conversion, carried out with brutal savagery. Because the czar conceived of Judaism as a divisive force within the empire, it would have to be removed, either by coercion or blood. "Once its children were conscripted," laments Sachar, "no Jewish family ever expected to see them again.

Either they would die, or they would be converted."[1] Thus, the use of the *kahal* to furnish Jewish recruits swiftly set it too against the Jewish masses.

By 1844, even the *kahal* had been abolished. Thus, Nicholas I deprived the shtetl of what little power it had previously exercised. As burgeoning political and economic movements like populism and socialism took hold throughout Europe, a younger generation of Jews began to consider how they might interact in the wider society – and how they might help shape it.

It was the ascendancy of Alexander II that gave Russian Jews a sense that a peaceful existence in Russia might be possible. The new czar reduced the length of military conscription to five years, opened the doors to Jewish university education, as well as greater travel opportunities for Jewish traders and merchants. Yet even this taste of emancipation was all too brief. Following the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, a wave of pogroms swept across Russia. It was clear that this land was not a safe place to be a Jew. Nevertheless, the worldly lessons learned during the period of emancipation would not be forgotten.

Economic Factors. It should be said that emancipation itself was not a uniformly positive experience for the Jews of Russia. Under the reign of Alexander II, Russia's forty million serfs had been emancipated as well. Those Jews who earned a livelihood as economic mediators between landowner and serf suddenly found their very survival called into question.

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[1] Sachar, 87.

The unpredictability of life in Russia made trade a dicey prospect. As a result, Jews were over-represented in the realms of skilled labor, such as tailoring and clothing manufacture. There was simply not enough work to support all such laborers. Meanwhile, a worldwide depression in grain prices in the 1870s crippled the agricultural sector. Growth in the Jewish population was cruelly matched by a decline in economic fortunes. By the 1880s, a Russian report estimated the poverty level in the Jewish shtetl at 90 percent. The relentless misery forced large numbers of shtetl Jews into European cities such as Warsaw and Kiev. Many such Jews began to conceive of themselves in terms of class, as part of a larger, non-Jewish, proletariat.

The economic crisis struck even the *shtetl*'s religious professionals. As prospects for rabbis, slaughterers and teachers worsened, many acquired artisanal skills. Ironically, trades like textile manufacture, as we shall see, were considered shameful in comparison to scholarly pursuits. One Russian émigré to the United States explained that, if he had remained in Russia:

> It would have shamed my family. My father-in-law used to say that if one finds a needle in the stomach of a chicken, the chicken is *treyf*. What can one say then about a tailor who holds in his mouth so many needles? And that was also the rule for other trades.[2]

Thus, at the same time Jews were adopting distinct identities in the new world of urban living and revolutionary politics, existing Jewish communities often reinforced forbidding social and cultural boundaries. For many Russian Jews, rejection by their own culture was the last straw. It was time to start again.

[2] Kosak, 22.

Mass Migration. Between 1881 and 1914, two million Jews emigrated from Europe to the United States, the largest Jewish migration since the time of the Inquisition. The reasons are clear. Hunger and poverty were relentless, casting a pall over all daily activities. Pogroms and other brutal persecution at the hands of gentile neighbors reinforced the feeling of urgency to leave shtetl life behind. Finally, and most troubling for our study, many Jews felt oppression not only from outsiders who condemned their religious community, but also from hostile forces within their religious community.

As was noted above, the Jews that arrived in the United States were a distinctive lot. As such, they were uniquely suited to take their place in the budding labor struggles emerging in US cities, particularly New York. Almost two-thirds of the Jews that left Russia between 1899 and 1914 were skilled artisans or craftspeople. Furthermore, the poverty that had forced many into the cities of Eastern Europe left them better prepared for the rigors and challenges of urban life. Finally, their exposure to the new political and economic philosophies then gaining popularity in Europe led them to emerge not just as participants but as leaders in the struggle for labor justice and dignity. That their role in this struggle seemingly grew out of secular rather than religious teaching had profound implications for the identity of Jewish immigrant and Jewish community alike.

Many accounts of the Jewish Labor Movement, both in Europe and in the US, decry the assimilationist tendencies among JLM leaders. Sachar, for instance,

refers to 19th century US labor organizers as "bookish theorists,"[3] their Social Democratic counterparts in Russia "mutants of *Haskalah* secularism."[4] Rarer are attempts to place the secular drive within a larger context.

Certainly there have been Jews who have looked back at this trend with regret. Yet it is imperative to remember that much of the culpability – should we look for it – resides in the persecution of the Russian culture noted above. Before "blaming victims," we are wise to look first to their victimizers.

Notable too is the responsibility of the Jewish community itself, both in Europe and the US. As economic and political pressures mounted within the Jewish world, social and political divisions – once, perhaps, overlooked – grew both in scale and kind. In this section, these factors will be investigated in greater detail.

❖ *JEWISH COMMUNITIES – EFFECTS AND RESPONSES*

The mass migration of Jews from Russia to the United States was experienced as a great liberation for many, despite the troubles they faced in the New World. For Eastern Europe's rabbis, however, the transition was a painful one. Countless generations had seen the rabbinate stand firmly at the center of Jewish society, secular culture essentially unthinkable. Yet as shtetl Jews became increasingly urbanized, Enlightenment thinking combined with the worldly movements of socialism, anarchism and Zionism to corrode the internal structure of Eastern European Jewry. And, of course, widespread pauperization led many Jews to question the wisdom of their previous religious loyalties.

[3] Sachar, 325.

Fueling this surge of skepticism was, sadly, the treatment that laborers often suffered at the hands of Jewish communities throughout the Pale. Jewish artisans faced not only the vicissitudes of a cruel market, but also an inferior social standing among their fellow Jews. The high valuation of Jewish scholarship meant that those unable to devote significant amounts of time to study were judged to be less successful and less desirable as potential husbands than their scholarly peers.

These social divisions had already been exacerbated by communal responses to conscription in the czarist army. As we have seen, between 1827 and 1844, the authority to decide which Jews would be conscripted rested with the *kahal* of each community. Almost uniformly, rabbinical students and sons of tradespeople were exempt from service. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for wealthy families to use their influence to direct the *kahal* recruiters to poorer districts. As a result, there was no escaping conscription for poor artisans and laborers, save through self-mutilation. The *kahal*, seeking to protect the community at-large, went so far as to hire kidnappers to retrieve those who attempted escape. Folklore from the period reflects a growing resentment among those Jews outside of the circle of influence:

> Rich Mr. Rockover has seven sons,
> Not a one a uniform dons;
> But poor widow Leah has an only child
> And they hunt him down as if he were wild.
>
> It is right to draft the hard-working masses;
> Shopmakers or tailors – they're only asses!
> But the children of the idle rich

[4] *Ibid.*, 289.

> Must carry on, without a hitch.[5]

Any hope for reconciliation receded when opponents of the *kahal* resorted to reporting their enemies to Gentile authorities.

In extreme cases, communal control over artisanal guild and synagogue charters ultimately led dissidents to secession. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, guild-based synagogues sprung up throughout Eastern Europe. Though these shuls were often poorly constructed and inferior to their larger counterparts in terms of aesthetics and available *s'forim*, they further represented a democratization of the Jewish community.

What is notable is the fidelity these Jews showed to cultural and religious forms and symbols. As opposed to their revolutionary brethren, these Jews attempted to maintain their religious identity, albeit on their own terms. Sadly, religion sometimes agitated, rather than soothed, growing class differences. Kosak cites Levitats, explaining that in the Polish town of Keidany:

> A worker entered a synagogue on Rosh Ha'shana (New Year's Day) wearing a silk skullcap, a privilege reserved for the wealthy and the powerful. That evening, he was summoned before the communal elders of the community, who imposed a fine and ordered him to surrender his silk cap. In response, local artisans defied the edict by coming to the synagogue wearing silk caps, velvet gabardines, and fur caps. Thereupon, community officials denounced the undisciplined artisans to the local Polish noblemen, who imposed a sentence of flogging.[6]

A settlement was ultimately reached allowing artisans to wear silk and velvet, and including an artisan representative in the *kahal*. Nevertheless, such a

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[5] *Ibid.*, 87.
[6] Kosak, 25.

stunning collusion of Jewish leaders with state power increasingly came to characterize a world divided.

That the communities were not safe spaces for workers is key to understanding the erosion of the established religious structures. Even after the abolition of the *kahal*-system, B.M. Laikin, as quoted in Kosak, recalls a divisive atmosphere exacerbated by the religious world. Artisans were given minimal attention or ignored in religious study, with the exception, according to Laikin, of "a shoemaker who employed other workers and had some education. But even he was excluded from the 'respectable' group that met at the rabbi's house on the Sabbath."[7] In opposition to Jewish law, the hungry of many towns were subject to means-testing by local benevolent associations. Of course, economic and political oppression was at the root of much of these developments. Yet the communal responses often engendered resentment. Kosak cites a newspaper report from Berditchev asserting that communal Jewish leaders requested help from a Russian official to press an elderly Jew to pay the poll tax for both himself and his long-deceased son; when he failed to pay, the man was jailed. The author laments that such an esteemed community would "miscarry justice . . . emigration to America from our town has not abated, and three to four families leave every day."[8] If secularized political action promised freedom from religious persecution by non-Jews, for far too many Jews it also held the promise of freedom from persecution by members of their own religion.

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[7] *Ibid.*, 29.
[8] *Ibid.*, 28.

Migration to the US, however, did not end of the oppression of the Jewish worker at the hands of other Jews. If the Pale was plagued by an unethical treatment of workers by Jews of differing religious and class background, US Jewish immigrants faced the scorn of Jews of another ethnic background. German Jews in the US, better established and more fully assimilated into US culture, reacted to their Eastern European counterparts with a troubled combination of pity, fear and disgust. The US Jewish press, largely an arm of the German community, feared a persecutory backlash from gentile America. Thus, the new arrivals were condemned as "slovenly in dress, loud in manners, and vulgar in discourse,"[9] speaking a Yiddish that was characterized as "piggish jargon,"[10] Remarkably, it was the German Jews who, in referring to their eastern European cousins, who coined the slur "kike."[11]

Even in the realm of philanthropy, in which the German Jewish community conducted a campaign to offer education and direct assistance to the recently arrived eastern Europeans, class chauvinism proved a to be a troubling companion. The effort, though remarkable in both scope and level of commitment, pitted "downtown" (Russian) Jews against "uptown" (German) Jews. At Mount Sinai hospital, for example, where nine of ten patients was of eastern European descent, physicians of this ethnicity were not permitted on staff. Similarly, the "People's Synagogue" belied its moniker by forbidding the use of Yiddish. In the realm of direct assistance, immigrant Jews seeking aid from their German brethren could expect to find "strict and angry faces"

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[9] Howe, 230.
[10] Rischin, *Promised City*, 97.

populating "beautiful offices," where "every poor man is questioned like a criminal . . . just as if he was standing before a Russian official."[12] Though motivated by altruism at least as much as embarrassment, the German philanthropists cemented in the minds of many Russian Jews the antipathy of Judaism and Jewish community toward the needs of workers.

Not that Judaism, per se, was enjoying any great renascence in the United States. The breakneck pace of sweatshop work, as well as the oppressive poverty that necessitated it, meant that ritual practice necessarily took a back seat to basic survival. Orthodox rabbis, according to Goren, "served a dwindling public, their judicial activities increasingly limited to questions of ritual."[13] Social organization, too, was transformed in this New World, with the *Beit Midrash* increasingly replaced by the Benevolent Society or, when means allowed, the Theater or Music Hall. Rischin reports that by 1912, 75 percent of New York Jews work on Shabbat, with 60% of Jewish businesses open for trade.[14]

Schweid, in his discussion of the socio-political Judaism of Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn, argues that this was in keeping with a general trend in the Jewish world following the Enlightenment. With the development of "civil society," Jewish communities in both Europe and the United States adopted "a more limited religious identity for themselves while transferring their national identity to the states."[15] Others agree that the origin of this trend can be traced to Eastern

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[11] *Ibid.*, 98.
[12] *Ibid.*, 104.
[13] Goren, 198.
[14] Rischin, *Promised City*, 146-7.
[15] Schweid, *ix.*

Europe. One of Shuldiner's interviewees reports that in his childhood in Ukraine, "there were already great breaks in Jewish tradition . . . I know already I had an uncle who smoked on the Sabbath."[16]

Yet it can be said that Jews in the Diaspora, living a tenuous existence, had always clung to an unspecified "national" identity as a survival tactic. In Eastern Europe, in particular, Sachar claims that "there had always been a tradition of abstinence from political affairs, and of obedience to established authority."[17] Shuldiner goes further, claiming that "rabbinic leaders of traditional East European Jewish communities insisted upon . . . political conservatism, a conciliation with secular government authorities, in exchange for the right to preside over, and thereby preserve, a traditional life-style."[18]

Thus, a host of factors conspired to move Jewish Labor activists outside of the mainstream of Jewish life. Jews pushed into urban environments increasingly were exposed to a variety of intriguing political philosophies. Rather than assert an alternate Jewish view, communities in Europe and the US succeeded in oppressing and alienating Jewish workers. Religious leaders and communities, meanwhile, neglected the call to devise an alternate Jewish view of economic justice, overwhelmed as they were with physical survival. The result was a large class of Jewish workers and artisans, moderately educated, urbanized, disaffected and, increasingly, estranged from their Jewish tradition. They were, however, ready for a change.

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[16] Shuldiner, 71.
[17] Sachar, 287.
[18] Shuldiner, 55.

❖ *THE JEWISH LABOR COMMUNITY – ASPIRATIONS, IDEOLOGY & EXCESSES*

This is not to say that the growth of the Labor community did not produce its own excesses and foibles. Eighteenth century Jewish leaders on both continents failed to address the needs of the growing Jewish working class. Ironically, this failure often stemmed from a loyalty to a variety of socio-political ideologies whose stated aim was the liberation of those very workers who found it lacking. As we shall see, refusal to frame this ideology in the actual experience of the Jewish laborers threatened the gains that the movement came to celebrate in its maturity.

Class Struggle and Jewish Identity. The Jewish working class in the Pale represented, in a sense, an ideal mix for the creation of a radical movement. The route by which European Jews came to the American Labor movement certainly differed greatly from that of other immigrant groups. Primary in this calculus was the make-up of the Jewish labor force. In the years between 1900 and 1925, 64% of Jewish immigrants to the United States were skilled craftsman of some sort, compared to 8.5% of non-Jewish immigrants.[19]

These "petit-bourgeois" immigrants ironically were exposed to the theories necessary for class-consciousness by din of the "Russianization" movement. Designed by czarist regimes of the 19th century to mitigate the pull of Jewish identity, the effort had the additional effect of bringing large numbers of Jews in

[19] Feingold, 159.

contact with secular cultural and political movements. *Maskilim* in Russian cities were empowered to interact among secular thinkers at the same time that pogroms and other persecution solidified the Jewish identity of these young students.

Thus, the Jews who populated Russia in the late 1800s can crudely be grouped into two categories: on one hand, secularized students who eagerly consumed the popular political theories of the day; and a larger group of skilled but under-employed artisans with middle-class aspirations. Both groups, however, shared a common bond: a resentment of those Jews who had amassed any measure of wealth or power, represented in many a mind by the troubled *kahal* system.

It was the *maskilim* and their cohorts who emerged as the self-appointed spokesmen for this outlook. By the 1890s, almost every substantial Jewish community produced at least one Marxist "study group."[20] In the view of the early Jewish Marxists, Europe's "Jewish Problem" would disappear as soon as the class revolution destroyed czarist-bourgeois oppression. In the speeches and writings of these young men, one can discern a pattern that will repeat itself throughout the early Labor movement: a repudiation of Jewish religious identity, utilizing the very symbols and motifs of Jewish belief and thought. For example, Sachar quotes the following propagandist, speaking at a May Day rally in 1892:

> We Jews repudiate all our national holidays and fantasies which are useless for humanity. We link ourselves up with armies of Socialism and adopt their holidays . . . The Torah of Socialism will not descend from the heaven of Sinai in thunder and lightning, and the Messiah will not come riding on a white horse.[21]

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[20] Sachar, 288.
[21] *Ibid.*, 289.

It is this message of universal class brotherhood, steeped in Jewish symbolism despite itself, which crosses the ocean with the Russian emigrants to the United States.

The US ultimately proved to be the breeding ground where this ideology could take root. The Lower East Side of Manhattan provided a concentration of politically-aware Jewish thinkers, unmatched in scale and influence. By the turn of the century, over 300,000 Jews were employed in the garment industry; fifty-five percent of all cigar-makers and half of New York's tanners were Jewish.[22] Meanwhile, the American obsession with productivity led to a number of mechanical innovations which consolidated the work of the home-based sweatshops, which averaged only five employees per unit, into the increasingly-larger "inside factory." As a result, greater numbers of workers gathered under one roof. Meanwhile, as skills were transferred from artisan to machine, workers' wages declined in inverse proportion to the improving fortunes of managers, cutters and pattern-makers. Those radical intellectuals proclaiming a message of class-consciousness increasingly found a willing audience.

Jew as Ally, Jew as Obstacle. Viewing religion as a insidious handmaiden to state power, radicals targeted religion and religious leadership for specific criticism. Religion and its "accepted beliefs," according to Philip Kranz, was nothing more than "empty fantasies."[23] Yiddish was used to communicate with the masses of Jewish labor, though some, like the editors of *Zukunft*, considered it

[22] Feingold, 164.
[23] *Ibid.*, 154.

a "vulgar language."[24] Fiction and popular culture reflected the same bias. In his short story, "The Apostate of Chego-Chegg," Abraham Cahan utilized prophetic language in the lament of the simple Reb Nehemiah. "I had ears but could not hear because of my ear-locks; I had eyes but could not see because they were closed in prayer," admits the title character. "I am Rabbi Nehemiah no longer, they call me Nehemiah the atheist now."[25] Howe explains the quality of the anti-religious fervor:

> Rebelling against the parochialism of traditional Jewish life, the Jewish radicals improvised a parochialism of their own – but with this difference: they called it "universalism." In one leap they hoped to move from yeshiva to modern culture, from shtetl to urban sophistication, from blessing the Sabbath wine to declaring the strategy of international revolution . . . To show any sensitivity, let alone feeling, for the religious or cultural sentiments that immigrant workers had brought from Europe, was to open oneself to ridicule.[26]

Ironically, this rhetoric reflected the passion of a religious believer. A number of commentators and authors have noted the fervor that Jewish radicals brought to their efforts. Consider, for example, Edelstadt's poem, "To the Defenders of Obscanturism," which appeared in the *Fraye Arbeiter Shtimme* a few days before Yom Kippur 1890:

> Why complain, you orthod-oxen?
> Do you want Jewry to consist only of animals
> Ignorant and stupid
> Do you wish us to bow down
> To your archaic god,
> Lower our heads
> Before every pious idiot?
> Each era has its new Torah –
> Ours is one of freedom and justice:
> For us, the greatest transgression
> Is to be an obedient slave.
> Börne, Lassalle, Karl Marx;
> They will deliver us from exile,

[24] Rischin, *Promised City*, 153.
[25] Cahan quoted in *Ibid.*
[26] Howe, 291.

But not with fasts and prayer![27]

Feingold argues that socialist ideology, representing a path to enlightened modernism, "played for East European Jews the same role that the Reform movement played for Jews from Western Europe," despite the fact that it embodied the "ideology they now espoused."[28] Levin, meanwhile, suggests a psychological motivation, more beholden to Freud than Marx. "In their extreme vehemence," she wrote, "many Jewish radicals seemed to be shouting down their own doubts and guilt about their own rejection of Jewish observances."[29]

Notwithstanding the often heroic acts of many impassioned union leaders, gains were few and far-between. Ironically, some have tied these early failures to the very ideology propelling the movement. Jewish anarchists such as Emma Goldman, for example, rejected unionism as an appeasement of the bourgeoisie, rather than a call for outright revolution. Even for less hard-line radicals, it is clear from their writings that they viewed unions not as ends in their own right, but as instruments in the eventual class war. In opposition to the growing American Federation of Labor, and its president Samuel Gompers, New York's radical leaders hoped that unionism would free them of the confines of both historic Judaism and international capital.

This spirit of theory and debate, whatever its inherent value, arguably frustrated efforts to organize New York's Jewish workers. As late as 1904, a vast majority of New York's garment workers were unorganized, the few unions that did exist

[27] Cited in Levin, 133-34.
[28] Feingold, 166.
[29] Levin, 133.

no more than "skeletal groups."[30] Many Jewish workers, not necessarily as passionate about international socialism or the theories that birthed it, began to question the efficacy of the ideologically driven radicals. Other rank-and-file workers grew weary of the extended debates regarding the finer points of revolutionary theory, wondering if the intellectual combatants had "to get up early the next morning."[31]

The JLM Becomes a Jewish Movement. Their love of theory, combined with a preference for speaking Russian rather than the "vulgar" Yiddish, meant that radicals often showed the same contempt for the actual Jewish proletariat that the latter could expect from the czarists in the Old Country. Yet the belief that Jewish workers ought to eschew Yiddish as a cultural relic reflected a longing for the basic human dignity professed by socialism. If the US promised the end of czarism and its degradation, why hold on to Jewish ethnic identifiers such as Yiddish? Impassioned leaders increasingly took the opposite position. The eventual editor of the *Forvartz*, Abraham Cahan, challenged his contemporaries that the use of Yiddish was necessary in any effort to reach the Jewish worker.[32] The struggle surrounding Yiddish, often the only outward expression of Jewish-ness among Jewish workers, took on a great significance among partisans on all sides. Goren summarizes the debate this way:

> Was [Yiddish] a transitory phenomenon, a convenient way of communicating with the Jewish worker until the new society brought acceptance and then assimilation? Or did

[30] Howe, 290.
[31] *Ibid.*, 289.
[32] Feingold, 167.

> Yiddish represent the folk-genius of the ascendant Jewish proletariat and proof of nationality?[33]

This struggle stretches all the way back to Vilna, where a group of rabbinical students, "thoroughly disenchanted with the apparent irrelevance of their studies to the burning issues of the day," decided to preach the power of Marxist ideology to the Pale proletariat.[34] In a way, this primordial struggle is an analogue to all those that would henceforth emerge. Jewish workers rejected the idea of violent revolution, alien to their culture, snubbed Marxist philosophy in favor of collective bargaining, and insisted on maintaining a Jewish identity. By 1897, Vilna's Jewish socialists reluctantly decided to form an independent Yiddish-speaking labor group, known as the *Bund*. From that point forward, all the most consequential of Jewish labor's struggles would take place in a specifically Jewish context.

In the US, Michael Zametkin ingeniously combined the arguments on both sides. The relative openness of US culture was not an invitation to hide one's distinctiveness and melt into the mainstream, but rather to take part in the larger movement with ethnic pride. "Self-isolation in any form," Zametkin wrote, "is a sickness which can and must be cured. Only the carriers of an epidemic should be quarantined. Lepers are put in isolation."[35] Jewish laborers remained concerned with the fate of those with whom they shared not only economic but ethnic identity. While Daniel DeLeon, polemicist for the Socialist Labor party,

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[33] Goren, 192.
[34] Sachar. 290.
[35] Goren, 195.

dismissed Alfred Dreyfus as a "bourgeois" figure of little concern to socialists,[36] Jewish workers instinctively understood his power as a symbol of their own struggle to attain equality.

Others argued that "cosmopolitanism," as this "epidemic" of assimilation into larger society came to be known, was actually in the best interests of the politically powerful. Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky argued that cosmopolitanism, regardless of whether it originated in czarism or Marxism, was actually a surreptitious path for the subjugation of minority cultures.[37] Meanwhile, as Jewish intellectuals resigned themselves to the intractability of Jewish identity, Jewish workers were beginning to organize amongst themselves.

In 1888, following the departure of the anarchist faction of the Jewish Worker's Association, the United Hebrew Trades formed with the explicit goal of collective bargaining and maintaining solidarity among striking workers. Almost immediately, the UHT helped craft a victory for striking knee-pant workers. The attention they garnered from this victory brought a diverse group to their coalition – over forty locals by 1890 – from the staid Jewish actors union to the homespun shirtwaist workers, from tombstone engravers to chorus girls and bootblacks. Ironically, it was an understanding of the needs of actual Jews that brought the movement closest to the diverse coalition of workers that the radical idealists had envisaged.

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[36] Rischin, 159.
[37] Sachar, 291.

Despite a protracted battle for control led by DeLeon, the JLM eventually stabilized around a structure of three organizations: the UHT, the *Forvartz*, and the *Arbeiterring* ("Workmen's [*sic*] Circle"), a communal order that offered medical and insurance benefits. The *Forvartz*, the primary medium of communication among Jewish workers, often buffeted the dissention among the movement's leaders, and offered a counterbalance to the radicals' more extreme proposals. Rischin notes that the assassination of President William McKinley by Leon Czolgosz, an anarchist sympathetic to Emma Goldman, brought Jewish anarchists face-to-face with the potential results of their rhetoric.[38] It was a *Forvartz* editorial that mused that perhaps, as Jewish social activists, "we idealize the working class too much."[39]

If the JLM emerged as decidedly Jewish in character, to what extent was that a factor of religion rather than mere ethnicity? If the mockery of Judaism did not resonate with the majority of Jewish workers, what does its creation say about those who crafted such polemical forms? Finally, what exactly does Judaism as a religion offer this discussion? These questions will be addressed in the following section.

[38] Rischin, 161.
[39] *Ibid.*, 160.

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Points of Contact

Any study of Jewish life and culture must address the reality that Jewish identity is comprised of both religious and ethnic components. The study of the Jewish Labor Movement adds the additional factor of class. The interplay of these three factors can confound even the clearest of thinkers. When we investigate the religious character of the JLM, it is easy to conflate religious and ethnic motivations. Identifying and separating these discrete strands is a formidable challenge, but essential for our study of Judaism's role in this Jewish-led movement.

Some scholars have argued that the JLM was characterized by a traditionally Jewish "flavor," influenced by both text and tradition. Shuldiner, for example, writes that many investigations of the JLM embrace "romantic notions" that the ideology of its participants "flowed directly from the traditional customs, beliefs, and social organization" of their Jewish communities.[1] Yet, as we have seen, Jewish communal life was "historically conservative," populated by rabbis and officials "who felt besieged by modernity, and who saw radicals of any stripe as threats to their ever-tenuous position."[2]

Thus, Judaism as a religious path does not necessarily predispose its adherents to a commitment to social justice struggles. Such analysis, meanwhile, must

contend with the hostility characteristic of some quarters of the radical community. If efforts to "read" Jewish tradition into the character of the JLM are both important and compelling, they also ask for a more critical investigation.

In this section, we look at the instances where the activities of the JLM can be said to overlap with Jewish tradition. First, we examine the "Jewish flavor" argument: to what extent can nominally secular organizations be considered to have been borne of religious influence? Second, we look to the JLM's overt use of traditional Jewish forms and texts, including both parody and earnest religious statements. Third, we examine the interplay between the JLM and Jewish communal institutions, resources and texts. Finally, we discuss the religious leaders who directly aided and assisted the labor activists. Such investigation sheds light on the underlying forces driving the work of these Jews, and ultimately calls us to examine what we mean when we use the terms "Jewish" and "religious."

❖ *JEWISH "FLAVOR" IN THE JLM.*

Considering that the established Jewish world was not entirely welcoming to labor activists, it is perhaps remarkable that these individuals retained any identity with Judaism. Some scholars have argued that the workers, rebuffed by a religious community that offered their struggle little other than a burdensome meat tax, refocused their spiritual energy into the labor movement. For the

[1] Shuldiner, 28.

Jewish worker, labor radicals offered not just community and camaraderie, but a source of meaning and purpose.

As we have seen, it was disillusioned rabbinical students – in the town of Vilna, no less – who formed the Bund. (Cahan, a one-time resident of Vilna, described it fondly as "the city of the Gaon," populated by "skillful arguers, Talmudic athletes."[3]) Indeed, the labor vanguard took on the aura of the rabbinic masters back in Europe. Kosak notes that, in the US, non-Jews were baffled by the popularity of East Side speakers possessed of an "alien 'haranguing' oratorical style."[4] Large crowds packed meeting halls despite sweltering temperatures, the strikers huddled "in a manner similar to the traditional Jewish way of praying or studying."[5] Howe quotes B. Charney Vladek, in an unpublished autobiography, who boldly asserts that his imprisonment for sedition in a czarist jail "was in a way a repetition of the Talmudic Academy . . . the days passed in endless discussions of party programs and platforms . . . discussed in their relation to Karl Marx and Bakunin, Piekhanov and Lenin."[6] Rischin declares plainly, "for most Jewish socialists, although unaware of it, socialism was Judaism secularized."[7]

Socially, this arrangement represented a great leap forward for the lowly worker. In this new structure, the low-wage laborer stood not at the periphery, but rather the very center of the community. According to Feingold, for the workers:

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[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Cahan, I, 30.
[4] Kosak, 110; internal citation from the *New York Times*, July 22, 1901, 2.
[5] *Ibid.*

> The union hall became the secular equivalent of the Beth Hamidrosh . . . [The labor movement] came to serve, not only as social moorings in an alien world, but also as a new container for the old messianism which Jews traditionally possess in good measure. The assumption that progress toward a new and better order of things was possible, became an article of faith for many Jewish workers. It almost seemed as if they were acting out on the temporal scene the search for justice and righteousness implicit in the Jewish faith many had just abandoned . . . [The radical organizer] played a role analogous to the rabbi . . . One still needed to know the rules of the newly adopted faith and follow them undeviatingly just as one [once] did the *Halacha* . . .[8]

Indeed, such fervor was not hard to find among the labor faithful. Abraham Cahan remembers in his autobiography the first time he was offered a radical pamphlet. He took the item, and held it:

> In [my] hand as one touches a holy thing. I will never forget it. All of this became part of my new religion.[9]

Indeed, Cahan would later editorialize that the *Forvartz*, of which he became the editor, was "supported by the holy spirit, upon holy inspiration."[10]

Was this religion, in fact, new? We are again drawn to what role, if any, Judaism plays in this calculation. The exalted language employed by such literature has led some scholars to draw a comparison between radical labor activism and traditional Jewish messianism. Shuldiner cites historian A.L. Patkin as claiming that rather than replace messianism, the labor movement was an extension of it. To Patkin, "the inherited belief in the Messianic 'end-of-days,' in a new order of peace and brotherhood, was only intensified by new methods of socialist and revolutionary propaganda of the intelligentsia."[11] Rideout, similarly, declared that "the Proletarian Revolution was the true Messiah that would restore an ideal

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[6] Howe, 292n.
[7] Rischin, *Promised City*, 166.
[8] Feingold, 161.
[9] Cahan, Volume I, 393.
[10] Cited in Rischin, 159.
[11] Shuldiner, 37.

kingdom on this earth and bring world peace."[12] Even Jewish anarchists, like Germany's Gustav Landauer, intoned both self-reflective moral and messianic themes, as in this passage from 1907:

> [Only] idle talkers . . . regard the state as such a thing or as a fetish that one can smash in order to destroy it. The state is a condition, a certain relationship among human beings, a mode of behavior between men; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another . . . We are the state, and we shall continue to be the state until we have created the institutions that form a real community and society of men.[13]

This analysis, while intriguing, is mitigated by a number of factors. First, while one may see passion and commitment amongst Jews in the labor movement as an adaptation of Jewish zeal, there certainly existed non-Jewish labor organizers who exhibited similar passion. Any theological claim that this impulse is an unstated extension of Judaism must account for non-Jews fervently committed to secular labor struggles, not to mention the majority of Jews, even in New York, who did not identify with the JLM.

Such *post facto* analysis necessarily assumes that Jews have the need to express the "messianism which [they] possess in good measure," even though they are "unaware of it." To retroactively ascribe specific religious traits to an entire group of people disregards the plain fact that many of them would have flatly denied this motivation. The analysis, by nature, resists verification. One could argue that such analysis is, in fact, presumptuous, showing a fundamental disrespect for Jewish radicals, many of whom explicitly expressed a rejection of Jewish thought.

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[12] Rideout, *American Jewish Archives* 11 (1959), 158.
[13] Cited in Cohn, 4.

Shuldiner argues that, rather than view the JLM as an obvious outgrowth of Jewish tradition, it is more helpful to view "Jewish radicalism . . . as a culturally available means of validating the continuity aspects of Jewish tradition within the framework of an ethnic political movement."[14]

But just what is this "tradition?" Some scholars have noted the role that ethnicity played in the ultimate resolution of the era's labor struggles. Greenwald cites a *McClure's Magazine* account of a meeting between the principal negotiators appointed to resolve the 1910 New York City cloakmakers' strike. Though the group included such oppositional figures as socialist lawyer (later congressman) Meyer London and corporate attorney Julius Henry Cohen:

> Both groups were almost identical. They were overwhelmingly Jewish. The union delegation included middle-aged unionists, radical workers, East Side intellectuals, and socialists. And so did the management group.[15]

Even the radicals themselves, though stirred by a Jewish identity, were hard-pressed to identify the nature of that motivation. Though religion was shunned as counter-revolutionary, an indeterminate pull of Jewish ethnicity could stir even the most vehemently secular labor activist. In his essay, "Dilemmas of Messianic Conscience," Frankel struggles to define just what it is that pulls him to the cause that he has embraced.

> You know very well that I hate Juda-ism just like any other national or religious *ism* . . . but I am not ashamed of my Jewish origins and I love, among all the oppressed, also that section of mankind which the prevailing national and religious principles mark off as Jews.[16]

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[14] Shuldiner, 34.
[15] Greenwald, 320.
[16] Cited in Sorin, 29-30.

This same ambivalence is reflected in this somewhat tortured passage from a 1904 issue of the *Zukunft*:

> We do not turn away religious people, or even clergymen who wish to join us; but because of this we should not weaken by a hair's breadth, not only the class conflict, but also the anti-religious and especially the anti-clerical conflict.[17]

Yet condemnations of anti-religious speech were found in the pages of that very same publication. The writer A. Litvin scoffed at those like the Feigenbaum, who would dismiss religion outright, positing "nowadays any schoolboy knows . . . that religion has always and everywhere been an important factor in human progress." He continued his charge: "You, Mr. Feigenbaum, may say whatever you please; I am proud that I am not a descendent of the Hottentots or Chinese, but that I am a Jew."[18]

Similarly, Davidowicz directly credits religion with ameliorating labor struggles at that time, arguing that the "practice of Judaism, as well as its principles, helped bridge the gulf between worker and boss."[19] Citing an incident reported by Lillian Wald, Davidowicz tells of a meeting between railroad financier Jacob Schiff and a poorly-dressed union leader. The latter's meager appointments were forgotten when the two men "began to quote Bible and Talmud, trying to outdo each other;" according to Davidowicz, such "familiarity reduced the workers' awe for the boss and made discussion between them not only possible but even likely."[20]

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[17] Cited in Levin, 171.
[18] *Ibid.* It should be noted that the *Zukunft* Press Federation censured both Litvin and the editor for permitting "such a tone" in an article against Feigenbaum.
[19] Davidowicz, 129.
[20] *Ibid.*

Can we credit this exchange to Judaism? Again, the interplay between religion, class and ethnicity stymies any effort to draw a causative relationship. In a sense, this is a challenge to any analysis of exilic Jewish culture. Chronically at the mercy of non-Jewish authorities, Jewish communities at different historical moments respond not only to religious tradition, but also to the challenges of living as perpetual outsider. Secular Jews in the modern-day US, for example, are nonetheless known for a commitment to higher education. Can this be explained by a religious emphasis on text study? Can that still be true among Jews three generations removed from active religious study? Were Jewish immigrants merely navigating limited opportunities available in an anti-Semitic culture? Can this still be said to be true today? As in this example, the factors involved in explaining historical developments in modern Jewish life are elusive.

Some scholars persist in placing the religious connection at the forefront. Davidowicz makes an intriguing point in noting that while the principles of arbitration were often a challenge to both management and labor, they represented familiar territory for Jews

> Originating in Talmudic times, incorporated in the *Shulhan Aruch*, practiced for centuries in all Jewish communities, these principles of compromise, arbitration, and settlement were familiar to worker and boss alike . . . disputants frequently took their case to communal leaders who acted as arbitrators, *borerim* . . . Jews should settle their disputes within the Jewish community.[21]

[21] *Ibid.*, 129-130.

Whether religious or not, Feingold notes that Jews remained unique within American Labor, in large part due to the "social consciousness [they] brought to bear on every problem."[22]

Perhaps no single figure best represents the bewildering interplay between religion and ethnicity than Rabbi Jacob Josef. In 1888, cap manufacturer Joshua Rothstein met with a group of other affluent Jews and Orthodox leaders to establish the office of "Chief Rabbi" for the city of New York. Rabbi Josef, the renowned Talmud scholar of Vilna, was hired for the post at a considerable salary. His tenure was tempestuous, to say the least. Orthodox rivals refused to acknowledge his authority while uptown Reform rabbis dismissed him as irrelevant. Rabbi Josef's backers attempted to fund the Rabbi Josef's work with a *korobke*, a tax on kosher meat. The tax, odious even in the Europe, was virtually impossible to collect in the freewheeling Lower East Side. Jewish radicals organized agitations against the tax, joined by slaughterers and butchers who themselves would later be accused of defrauding the community. Rabbi Josef, a "genuine Old-World scholar,"[23] was apparently not much of a speaker, unable to answer or counter the myriad challenges to his authority. Abraham Cahan noted sadly that, to the new generation of immigrants, he was nothing more than a "greenhorn."[24]

Yet when Rabbi Josef died in 1902 an estimated twenty-five to fifty thousand Jews poured into the street to follow his coffin. How do we understand this

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[22] Feingold, 165.
[23] *Ibid.*, 191.
[24] Cahan, I, 396.

behavior? Howe explained the outpouring of expression as an "expiation."[25] Did the Jewish community truly "see the light?" The truth is elusive. Rabbi Josef's secular contemporaries indeed recognized the passing of the man. But did they remember him for the scholarship he represented? Or was he honored as the representative of an ethnic community?

❖ *"THE SHOFAR THAT PLAYED MARSEILLES:" JEWISH TEXT IN PARODY AND PROTEST*

"The Jewish parodist," writes Dr. Israel Davidson, "has invaded every department of literature and every walk of life." As we have seen, many labor activists saw Judaism as an enemy of labor progress. Not content simply to reject the faith of their forbears, many activists publicly attacked Judaism. Often, these activists parodied Jewish scriptural and liturgical forms to do so.

Jewish parody, according to some, stretches as far back as the ribald tale of Quuen Esther. Yiddish, from its inception as a folk language, proved to be particularly effective in pillorying Jewish communal leaders. Eleanor G. Mlotek reports that manuscripts from as far back as the 15th and 16th century include "songs of satirical and didactic content," as well as "criticism of the leaders of the Jewish community" and "condemnations of greed and the evils of money."[26]

In the milieu of modern labor, such tactics can be traced back to the activities of the anarchist movements that captured the imagination of young Jews, first in

[25] Howe, 123.
[26] Cited in Shuldiner, 95.

Europe and then the United States. In London, the Yiddish-language anarchist newspaper, *Arbeiter Fraynd* ("The Worker's Friend") regularly published Jewish liturgical parodies, such as a "prayer" whose refrain opined "the Lord CASH is King."[27] But it was the United States where support for anarchism found its widest base among Jewish immigrants. A great deal of this enthusiasm can be traced to the Haymarket Affair of 1886. As a result of a bomb explosion among a squad of policemen at an anarchist rally at Chicago's Haymarket Square, hundreds of socialists, anarchists, and other radicals were rounded up without charge, and seven anarchists – almost all immigrants – were condemned to hang.

In New York, a group of Jewish immigrants led by David Edelstadt, among others, began to sponsor rallies and raise funds to help their Chicago compatriots. Calling themselves the *Pioniere der Frayhayt* ("Pioneers of Liberty"), they began to spread anarchist propaganda among arriving Jewish immigrants. These activists saw religion as a force of conservatism, which supported the established order in content and form. While many revolutionaries chose thus to ignore religion, others found it necessary to expose the perceived reactionary force of faith. "Red" Pesach seders were led by Jewish anarchists, where attendees were served cake and bread, and treated to songs sung against religion.

Thinkers like Howe tend to view such activist with a modicum of disdain, characterizing such behavior as an example of anarchists' "insensitivity" and

[27] Tcherikover, 251.

"tomfoolery."[28] Yet Shuldiner notes that such activists actually "felt obliged to deride tradition publicly in order to wean potential activists away from those customs – and that communal [Jewish] authority – that held them in sway."[29] Seen in this way, the behavior of these activists emerges as a quasi- religious crusade.

Thus, we find the parodists slavishly aping existing religious forms. The Bund *Haggadah* of 1900 includes not only a parody of the four questions and the four sons, but also skewers *Hallel, Echad Mi Yodea,* the tale of the rabbis of B'nei B'rak and even the search for *chometz,* all in the quasi-rabbinic style of textual commentary and emendation.[30] Ridicule of the High Holidays also displayed a remarkable attention to detail. Yom Kippur balls were advertised publicly, as in the case of the ball of 1890, as taking place in "the year 5651, after the invention of the *Jewish idols,* and 1890, after the birth of the *false Messiah* . . . Music, dancing, buffet, "Marseillaise," and other *hymns against Satan.*"[31] To be saved from the forces of satanic Capital, Jewish workers had to be shown the folly of self-destructive religious idolatry, whether it be Christian or Jewish.

Jewish communities in New York, however, failed to see the religious significance in such events. Rabbis Maurice Friedlander and William Sparger went so far as to file affidavits with the borough of Brooklyn with the purpose of canceling the Yom Kippur ball at the Brooklyn Labor Lyceum.[32] While such a reaction from rabbis is, perhaps, not shocking, what surprised the nascent

[28] Howe, 106-7.
[29] Shuldiner, 122.
[30] Reproduced in Shuldiner, 155-164.
[31] Cited in Howe, 106. Emphasis added.

anarchists was the reaction they faced from many of their fellow workers. In 1903, the *Zukunft* could still surmise that "'Jewish Socialists' are quite a new species of humanity," taken only momentarily with the "temporary emotion" of their new identity.[33] In hindsight, such analysis was found lacking. Howe quotes Cahan as lamenting that:

> The saddest thing is to see an atheist turn his irreligion into a cold, dry, unfeeling, heartless religion – and this is something most of our unbelievers used to do. One must not sit at a *Seder*; one must extend no sympathy to the honest, ignorant mother who sheds tears over her prayer book . . . [such behavior] is just as fanatical, just as narrow-minded, just as intolerant as the religious fanatic on whom they warred.[34]

If most rabbis were delinquent in addressing the material needs of everyday Jews, then too many early labor leaders were guilty of mocking their spiritual and communal needs.

Increasingly, those who had initially rebelled against Jewish tradition found themselves attempting to integrate it into their political and economic work. Shuldiner notes that:

> The motivations for this were varied: the renewal [of] a sense of connectedness with their ethnicity; reconciliation with the religiously observant, among whom were potential recruits to the working-class movement; the realization that there were larger struggles that called for greater unity and a minimization of divisiveness; and the need to demonstrate their Jewishness to the mainstream community that had ostracized them.[35]

Shuldiner is correct, I believe, to note that the shift away from a combative posture cannot be attributed to one specific motivation. It is odd, however, that he seems to discount the possibility that labor activists may have discovered

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[32] See Tcherikower, 266.
[33] Kosak, 134-5.
[34] Cited in Howe, 112.
[35] Shuldiner, 128-9.

some genuine relevance within Jewish tradition. For, if many of the workers were "old-fashioned" Orthodox Jews, for whom secular orders held no ultimate authority, is it impossible to think that even the most hardened anarchist could be similarly swayed by the pull of an impassioned *drash*? As we will see, would-be secularists often made emotional appeals in explicitly religious terms.

Parody of this era, then, represents but a literary expression of a remarkably intricate interplay between the relevant political, social, religious and cultural forces.

One figure that singly personifies that shift is Morris Winchevsky. Born as Lippe Benzion Novakhovich in Kovno, Lithuania, Winchevsky has been called the "*zeyde* of Yiddish socialist literature." Encouraged by his parents both to study secular subjects and to attend yeshiva in Vilna, he became active in English socialist circles, founding both that nation's first Yiddish socialist newspaper, *Dos Poylishe Yidl* ("The Little Polish Jew"), and its successor, the aforementioned *Arbeiter Fraynd*. Winchevsky's frustrations with the oppressive class system led him to condemn Jewish capitalist and timid worker alike.

Winchevsky's work at this time was unabashedly anti-religious. In a blistering parody of the Ten Commandments, Winchevsky eviscerated the capitalists of his day, as in this excerpt from the fourth "commandment:"

> *Remember the Sabbath Day* . . . One day a week your employees shall do no manner of labor for you – and that includes your horse, your ox, your cow. If they protest, tell them to behave or you'll give them seven days a week rest. Get my meaning?[36]

[36] Cited in Marcus, 346.

"For me," Winchevsky would later lament, "disbelief and hatred toward all faiths reached a high point of fanaticism . . . My greatest delight was to prove that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, that Joshua did not cause the heavens to stand still."[37]

Yet even at his most biting, Winchevsky was never wantonly vicious in his parodic work. Historian Paul Buhle argues that Winchevsky was the "first immigrant radical to place ethno-cultural pluralism at the center of the socialist world view."[38] Setting the stage for others like Cahan and Zhitlowsky, Winchevsky began to call upon Scriptural and Talmudic forms in exposing the evils of Capital. His parody of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith is much more an indictment of capitalist civilization than of the Rambam, citing the book of Deuteronomy in a manner worthy of an accomplished *darshan*:

> I believe with perfect faith, that whoever profits by the labor of his fellowman without doing anything for him in return, is a willful plunderer.
>
> I believe with perfect faith that 'the poor shall never cease out of land' until each man shall work for the community as much as he can and the community shall provide each man with his needs.[39]

By the end of his life, Winchevsky would express his enormous debt and gratitude not only to "that poet-preacher Isaiah who entered my heart and mind with love for orphans and widows and other defenseless and oppressed people . . . with his hatred for everything that stands for robbery and murder and deceit under whatever mask it parades," but also "to Amos and Hosea before him and

[37] Cited in Howe, 106.
[38] Cited in Muraskin, 158.
[39] Cited in Davidson, 81.

Micah after him."[40] Thus, Winchevsky the parodist saw himself as transformed from Brazen Outlaw to Guardian of Tradition.

In all actuality, we may surmise that both instincts often resided in the same figure. As we shall see, activists like Chaim Zhitlowsky were arguing, as early as the late 1890s, the need to recognize certain Judaic values. In continuing to honor rituals like the Pesach *seder*, Shuldiner argues that Jewish radicals retained their relationship with tradition at the same time they devised ways to politicize communal holidays and celebrations. As we shall see, it was often the outlaws who held the torch of tradition highest.

This can be seen quite vividly in the Bund *Haggadah*, published by the United Jewish Labor Bund in Europe in April of 1900. The document deals a concerted blow to owner, rabbi and Heaven alike:

> Reb Turdus the Rabbi kneels, turns his eyes up to Heaven and says *"All the days of thy life include the nights as well."* Work, little fool, toil. Those who are besmirched; if Messiah comes, you'll be happy. You'll have a shining Paradise . . . How can a God give such laws, that all humankind should trudge toward toil and barely have enough to keep their souls, and that a small part of them shall take all of what the rest have and waste and squander and live in a sea of pleasure?[41]

Though the text is clearly parodic, claiming of the Jews that "we freed ourselves from the slave-houses, from Egypt,"[42] there is a messianic, pointedly religious faith expressed in the concepts of "freedom" and "progress." We are instructed that, despite unbearable working conditions, G-d "did not see and . . . did not

[40] Cited in Muraskin, 158.
[41] Shuldiner, 157.
[42] *Ibid.*

hear."[43] Yet what are we to make of the following "secular" textual commentary?

> *Praise him, the L-rd.* Praise him, you honest folk, proclaim his name – "freedom!" The name will be blessed from now unto eternity! . . . *Blessed are you.* Praise unto you, holy idea, which has never stopped awakening people, may it awaken and throw off the chains of shame, from suffering and humiliation, and which will finally bring us to *times of peace and holidays, others that come unto us in peace* to good and happy times, and we will praise it. *And our salvation and the redemption of our souls.* For our bodily and spiritual deliverance. Blessed are you. Praise unto you, deliverer of humankind![44]

In addition to the (ironic?) reverence this work shows for its source, can the faith it holds in the "holy idea" of "freedom" be seen as anything but religious? By the time the *Seder* participant reached the passage:

> The soul of everything, the spirit of all flesh. You are the soul of all who live, the breath of all lives![45]

would it not be difficult for all except the most hardened atheist to remember that one was *not* referring to the one G-d, the Ruler of Heaven and Earth?

Shuldiner questions whether this *Haggadah* was actually used during a seder, or if it represented "simply a clever exercise in political propaganda."[46] Regardless, we find that the hostility toward tradition it represented did not last long. One of Shuldiner's subjects, "Morris N.," reports that *Arbeiterring* celebrations of Passover soon shifted from atheist to merely "secular." Atheists, Morris explains, are intent on "preaching atheism." Instead, Morris' *chaverim* developed celebrations that included:

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[43] *Ibid.*, 159.
[44] *Ibid.*, 161.
[45] *Ibid.*, 163.
[46] *Ibid.*, 133.

> New songs, modern songs that interpreted the struggle for freedom, the struggle for life, [against] exploiting [which], *even according to Jewish religion was against it*. And slowly, we got together a group of songs [depicting] a way of life where people could be free, rather than slaves, and got together that *seder* – that order – where we conducted what we called the third *seder*.[47]

Indeed, there were some who emphasized the link between Jewish worker and Jewish past. Esther Frumkin, increasingly known simply as "Esther," made impassioned speeches to Jewish crowds on behalf of the Bund about the crisis among both Jewish proletariat and Jewish education. While Marxist was a core principle of her progeram, Esther indicated that Jewish education would certainly stress Judaism as well "When we speak of education in a proletarian spirit," she implored, "we do not mean that children should recite part of the Erfurt Program instead of the *Shema*, or a chapter of the *Communist Manifesto* instead of the *Modeh Ani*."[48] Esther emphasized the power inherent in the social justice message of the Jewish prophets, and wrote in a brochure about the necessity of religion in properly raising a "folk-child," and extolled the virtue of customs such as blessing Sabbath candles. Levin notes, significantly, that there was no effort on the part of the Bund to expel her for her national-religious "deviation;" neither in Russia nor the US, "the Bund could not escape its Jewish character."[49]

❖ *Shul and Shop Floor: Communal Spaces in Cooperation and Conflict*

Jewish public spaces and institutions – like the Jews that create them – reflect the religious, cultural, and social forces that comprise any Jewish community. We

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[47] *Ibid.*, 132-3. Emphasis added.
[48] Levin, 340.

have seen that synagogues were often hostile to the radical social forces implied by the coffeehouse and union hall; the latter, in turn, emerged as spaces where open expressions of religious belief would be met with scorn.

Yet the existence of distinct spaces did not mean the two worlds never met. On the contrary, regular *shul* attendees often shared streets, shops, and even living quarters with their couisins in the JLM, particularly in the densely-packed thoroughfares of the Lower East Side. The recently arrived immigrants, exposed to a panoply of ideas and influences, did not divide as neatly into ideological factions as some would have hoped. This overlap of influences is illustrated by the readership of the then-burgeoning Yiddish press. Michels notes that:

> Most people read more than one newspaper. It was not unusual to see people at socialist rallies with copies of the [Orthodox Jewish] *Tageblat* in their back pockets or, conversely, religiously observant Jews reading [the radical Marxist] *Dos abend blat*.[50]

Furthermore, combative rhetoric often concealed the informal social ties and, at times, tacit cooperation between seemingly opposing forces. Glenn, for instance, notes that when 250 Jewish tailors struck in July 1910, their union took the conciliatory step of closing their headquarters on Saturdays, out of respect of the Jewish Sabbath. Such gestures were sometimes mirrored within religious institutions. Though *Tageblatt* was published by Kasriel Sarasohn, an Orthodox rabbi who once denounced socialist activists as "professional agitators,"[51] the paper nevertheless "reported on union meetings and strike votes taken on the Sabbath," according to Glenn, "without a hint of disapproval."[52] Of course,

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[49] *Ibid.*, 340-41.
[50] Michels, 103.
[51] *Ibid.*, 55.
[52] Glenn, 202.

sometimes religious and labor demands coincided, especially among Orthodox workers. In these cases, synagogue and worker sometimes found common cause. In 1894, a group of Orthodox rabbis formed the Jewish Sabbath Observers Association (later the Jewish Sabbath Alliance), with the intention of strengthening the immigrant community's waning adherence to work restrictions. In addition to lobbying politicians to reschedule school and government examinations that occurred on Shabbat, the rabbis worked with unions to add Saturdays off as a demand during contract negotiation. Some Orthodox rank-and-file members took the same step on their own. Following the resolution of the cloakmakers' strike of 1910, Orthodox members of the union, "with backing of local rabbis," founded a "*Shomer Shabbes* Organization."[53]

Indeed, for many Jewish immigrants, buffeted by the economic and social vagaries in their new home, "religion was one of the few sources of security."[54] Despite the antipathy between labor radicals and rabbis, they often came together in shared spaces. Because so many synagogues served as community centers – only sixty to seventy of the hundreds of Lower East Side synagogues were housed in buildings specifically designated as houses of worship – it was only natural that some union activity would occur in these confines. Some synagogues even doubled as places of work. "On Friday we would move the machines aside and cover them," explains Benjamin Rabinowitz in a turn-of-the-century memoir, "and the *shames* . . . would set up the benches and sweep the

[53] *Ibid.*, 203.
[54] Tcherikover, 269.

shop, and we used to come and pray."[55] If, as was often the case, a particular synagogue drew its membership from one occupation, the worshippers might come from the same locality in Europe, be employed in the same trade – and be members of the same union. UHT secretary Bernard Weinstein remembered a union meeting, held in a Norfolk Street synagogue, populated entirely by elderly, *kippah*-wearing pressers, all members of the Children's Jacket Makers' Union, and all belonging to the same congregation.[56]

The role of ethnicity, as we have seen, cannot be understated. An ethnic bond augmented the physical proximity of synagogue and labor union. But is it ethnicity that explains why, during periods of economic crisis, union leaders would put aside their revolutionary rhetoric and appeal to employers for assistance? Or is it the teachings regarding *tzedakah*, the requirement to provide sustenance to all members of one's community?

One may argue that ethnicity was the force that predominated when, during the Russian revolution of 1905, mainstream leaders actually worked in concert with Jewish radicals, without apology or explanation on the part of either. Many an anarchist's dreams of international brotherhood vanished with the reports from Kishinev. "My previous cosmopolitanism, internationalism," wrote the anarchist I. Kopelov, "vanished at one blow, like the contents of a barrel with the bottom knocked out."[57] Mainstream philanthropists like Lucien Wolf in the UK and Jacob Schiff in the US favored measured responses from world Jewry, but saw

[55] Cited in Kosak, 89.
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] Cited in Levin, 172.

the folly of ignoring the influence of the Bund. Remarkably, the aid collected by communal organizations for Jewish victims of pogroms was sent directly to the Bund for distribution. In a 1905 interview, Wolf spoke of the Bund with open admiration. "Nobody is more feared by the forces of autocracy in Russia today than this organization," he told the Westminster Gazette, "but few realize the enormous sacrifices involved in its maintenance by a section of the population so desperately poor and mercilessly oppressed in every possible way."[58]

It was, of course, the high proportion of German Jews amongst garment industry ownership that led to Eastern European Jews being hired in such large numbers. Organizations like the Eight Street Jewish Charities encouraged Jewish manufacturers to hire the new immigrants when they first arrived in the 1880s, describing the newcomers as "people who obey the law, are G-d-fearing, patient, industrious, and satisfied with little."[59] They would not remain satisfied with little for long. Perhaps, then, one might argue that, rather than religious tradition or ethnic ties, it was time-tested Jewish guilt that led German Jewish owners to comply so readily with their communal obligation for *tzedakah*, even in the face of ongoing labor strife. Regardless of the reason, the cooperation between these forces challenges conventional characterizations of two mutually exclusive and oppositional groups.

It should also be noted that, when possessed of the opportunity and resources, Jewish Labor continued this tradition of communal responsibility. While Shapiro, in his history of the *Arbeiterring*, describes religious institutions like

[58] *Ibid.*, 173.

synagogues to be "inadequate," it is remarkable how true the organization remains to traditional Jewish values. Shapiro explains the desire on the part of the founders to retain "the many essential features of such associations – mutual aid, protection against death and disability, health and welfare services, and above all a circle of friends."[60] Far from a mere trade organization, the *Arbeiterring* put into practice specific Jewish values, within historical Jewish forms:

> It was stated in the Charter, for example, that when a member was ill and required attention through the night, the officers appointed three members, in alphabetical order, to spend the night in the member's home. A pregnant wife was assured the help of other wives in the organization, in the care of children and the household chores. It was expected that all members who were in the city at the time of death of a fellow-member "would accompany the hearse to the ferry."[61]

Dawidowicz explains that, almost from the beginning, Jewish unions had set aside a small portion of union dues for *tzedakah*. While non-Jewish unions would not sponsor labor education until the New Deal-era, in the early part of the century both the Amalgamated and the ILGWU were giving low-cost or free classes in English, economics, history and philosophy. Throughout the 20th century, Jewish Labor expressed its values and allegiances through financial assistance. Union dues have been earmarked for both Jewish and non-Jewish causes, labor organizations, civic and political causes, educational as well as cultural institutions. During the *Shoah* and in the postwar period, "the unions distributed colossal sums of money for relief and rescue, mostly for Jews, but also for non-Jewish labor leaders and unionists."[62] Jewish religious ethics,

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[59] Cited in Sachar, 319-321.
[60] Shapiro, 30.
[61] *Ibid.*, 31.
[62] Dawidowicz, 126.

ironically, evolved under a coalition of forces that identified itself as secular. Scholars who deny the role of religion within Jewish Labor rarely address this issue, and one imagines that they would be hard-pressed to explain the phenomenon outside of the heritage of Jewish ethics.

Considering that the Lower East Side had its class divisions, just as had existed in the old country, the JLM might have rejected any connection with Jewishness or Judaism. Yet the community itself often stepped forward when religious leaders were hesitant to do so. Glenn notes that, during strikes and other periods of labor strife, community and neighborhood groups often contributed of their own *tzedakah*. Informal collections of food and clothing were taken up, and grocers and shop owners extended higher lines of credit than they would normally.

Goren sees much of this behavior as religious in origin, arguing that it served as a reinforcement of "the communal thrust of rabbinic Judaism – its faith in collective redemption, the emphasis it gave to the study of the sacred law and of charitable works," giving generations of Jews "an acute sense of common fate and a group discipline . . . [as well as] a unifying intellectual tradition."[63] Such a thesis is difficult to prove. Nevertheless, it seems that many labor leaders, though disappointed by established Jewish institutions, saw their Jewish heritage as an antidote to the greed and materialism of American culture. "Loss of

[63] Goren, 6.

Jewishness would not be tolerated," concludes Shapiro,"nor would the status quo in America be accepted,"[64] explicitly linking the two forces.

Owing to this tradition, perhaps, labor grievances were often aired in an unlikely forum: the synagogue itself. While some saw the union hall as superceding the synagogue, numerous reports show that communal prayer – particularly the moments on Shabbat morning just preceding the pubic reading of Torah – was a time when individuals and groups might call attention to grievances and civil disputes. Sachs explains that:

> This weapon was most frequently resorted to when it became a question of personal grievance or insult because the arm of the law had failed in its effort. It was also employed, however, in the case of laborers who had grown weary of their employers' ill treatment for which, being within the law, there was no other remedy. Indeed, the delay of the Reading may properly be considered as the very first weapon seized by the Jewish workers in the struggle with their masters.[65]

The targets were not limited to employers. The *New York Sun* reported that, during the 1894 cloakmakers' strike, workers followed two scab workers into their synagogue to publicly denounce their actions.[66] By 1896, it was not uncommon for police to establish a special patrol near synagogues where disputes had been more than verbal. In 1907, cloakmakers striking against Simon and Co. harassed the employer to the point that he required police protection to attend High Holiday services.

Perhaps the most dramatic use of these confrontational tactics was in the case of cloak manufacturer Max Dorf and his brothers. While Max attained the position of synagogue vice-president, in his shop he continued to pay his brothers

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[64] Shapiro, 30.
[65] Cited in Shuldiner, 46.

starvation wages, despite their support in the bid for his board position. When they joined their fellow workers in striking against him, Max fired them. On one Shabbat morning, the two brothers, along with a cousin (also an employee), staged a walkout and public protest. Though they ultimately joined another congregation, the two brothers continued to torment Max by holding the occasional noisy vigil outside his synagogue.

Unlike in the case of the "Yom Kippur ball," there is no record of protestation or sanction from rabbinic quarters. On the other hand, tolerance is not the same as endorsement. Likewise, merely airing a grievance in a synagogue does not equal piety. We look further for more explicit connections between Jewish Labor and Jewish religious texts.

❖ *MOSES THE LABOR DELEGATE: JEWISH TEXTS AS REVOLUTIONARY TEXTS*

"Synagogues," argues Kosak, "represented a natural base for labor organizing," due to the "cultural context of shared Biblical and historical heritage."[67] Given the real and perceived hostility shown by Jewish Labor toward traditional Judaism, it is remarkable that Kosak makes this unqualified statement so forcefully. Yet her research, as well as the historical record as a whole, has yielded convincing evidence supporting this conclusion.

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[66] *Ibid.*, 156.
[67] Kosak, 112.

Exodus as Liberation Theology. From its inception, the Jewish Labor Movement utilized Jewish spaces, metaphors, holidays and texts to establish its legitimacy among rank-and-file Jewish workers. In his history of Jewish Labor in the US, Melech Epstein reports that early trade unionists "adopted the chanting and the turn of speech of the *beth-medresh* (congregational house of worship) near and dear to every Orthodox Jew."[68] Even more revealing is this report from Bernard Weinstein, secretary of the United Hebrew Trades, from a meeting of Galician pressers, meeting at a Lower East Side *shul* to discuss their woes:

> The brother president [of the local] smoothed out his kapote, looked around him and began his speech:
>
> "Brothers," he began in a loud voice, "do you know who was the first walking delegate? . . . The first walking delegate among the Jews . . . was Moses, and the Sanhedrin was the first executive board."
>
> The scholarly chairman went on with his speech, overflowing with wisdom from the Torah and Talmud. His parables went straight to the hearts of his listeners.[69]

Newspaper reports from the period show that union leaders often used Egyptian slavery as a metaphor for the oppression of garment workers. In his 1894 address to striking cloakmakers, Joseph Barondess greeted them with the salutation, "fellow slaves!"[70] Coatmaker organizer Meyer Schoenfeld compared his compatriots to their ancestors, enslaved by taskmasters and likewise called to throw off the yoke of subjugation. John Swinton declared, in a public classified ad, "in the house of bondage, WANTED, A MOSES."[71] Swinton employed Exodus-themed metaphors as well in imploring the workers to persevere under particularly trying circumstances. Like the Israelites suffering forty years in the

[68] Epstein, 173.
[69] *Ibid.*, 174.
[70] Cited in Kosak, 110.
[71] *Ibid.*

desert, he lamented "there are very few lentils to eat at present . . . The men must have patience."[72]

Commentators within the Jewish press increasingly drew similar comparisons, first in the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, and later in the *Forvertz*. The former, founded in 1890 and published under the auspices of the UHT and the Socialist Labor Party, reflected the radical doctrine of its founders, men like Abraham Cahan, Morris Hilquit and Bernard Weinstein. But Jewish religious symbols remained prominent. The Yiddish press, Rischin notes, specifically tailored its appeal "to ordinary folk for whom prayer had been numbed by ritual reiteration, yet who yearned for rejuvenated reaffirmation of social justice uttered in the name of G-d and Moses and the prophets."[73] For instance, in 1890, as Yom Kippur approached, [the editors?] employed Exodus metaphors, looking to the day when "the terrible storm will begin that will destroy the rulers with their ugly cart and liberate the harnessed slaves." While the "angel of death of capitalism stands poised," nevertheless "on the threshold waits the angel of light."[74] Four years later, during the brutal depression of 1894, the editors took the occasion of May Day to invoke the spirit of Elijah, sounding a *shofar* that played a new set of notes:

> It is five years now since the new prophet Elijah, the May Day fete, has appeared on the world scene with his grand *shofar*, with the rousing revolutionary song, the Marseillaise. It is five years since the prophet Elijah has come forth to proclaim to the world that very soon the day of liberation, the judgment day will come, the day that will straighten out

[72] Cited in Kosak, 129.
[73] Rischin, *Promised City*, 157.
[74] Cited in *Ibid.*, 158.

> all that is crooked, that will raise the despised, wipe the tears from the miserable, refresh the languishing.[75]

With its prophetic references and exalted language, once again we have a text that one would be hard-pressed to label as secular. Rather, it reads as a prototype for Liberation Theology texts that would appear 80 years later.

The ideas were simultaneously new and old. Writing like this, particularly when written in Yiddish, placed socialism within a framework that new immigrants could understand – in large part, a historically Jewish framework. Upon reading the Arbeiter Zeitung for the first time, one newcomer explained that, "although till then I never heard about socialism and its doctrine, still I understood it without interpretation . . . its ideas were hidden in my heart and in my soul long ago; only I could not express them clearly."[76]

"The old Jewish Oath." Predicated on the values of loyalty and solidarity, the labor movement was particularly drawn to the textual tradition of oath-taking. Verbal affirmations and promises take on great significance throughout Jewish texts, the subject not only of the an entire *masechet* of the Talmud, *Shevuot*, but of one of the most widely recognized Jewish prayers, *Kol Nidre* ("All Vows.") As far back as the book of Genesis, Abraham asks his servant to take an oath that the latter will find a wife for Isaac from Abraham's homeland.

Given this context, the events that transpired at the United Hebrew Trades shirtwaist workers meeting of November 22, 1909 take on greater significance. In response to the myriad calls that evening for moderation, a teenage girl named

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[75] *Ibid.*

Clara Lemlich famously took center stage at the Cooper Union auditorium. Lemlich, already a participant in a local strike, is reported to have declared:

> I am a working girl, one of those who are on strike against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to discuss whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be called – now.[77]

The raucous applause that followed was interrupted by B. Feigenbaum, chairman of the union, asking for a second to the resolution. Following another emotional outburst, Louis Levine reports that:

> The chairman cried, "Do you mean faith? Will you take the old Jewish oath?" And up came two thousand hands, with the prayer: "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise."[78]

If the report is accurate, the exchange draws not only upon the traditional Jewish oath, but also on the fidelity to Jerusalem expressed by the Babylonian exiles in Psalm 137: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning."

Four years later, in the midst of the apparel strike of 1913, Jacob Panken similarly demanded that the workers vocalize their allegiance: "Swear under G-d's blue sky that none of you will return to work until the union has been recognized."[79] Panken, like Feigenbaum before him, explicitly recalls the language of Psalm 137:

> Let your hands, which you have just raised become paralyzed if you touch a needle or machine under non-union conditions! Let your tongue which uttered "yes" be cut off if you ask your boss for work under non-union conditions.[80]

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[76] Cited in Kosak, 139.
[77] Cited in Shuldiner, 48.
[78] *Ibid.*, 49. According to Shuldiner, the internal quotes are cited by Levine as eyewitness accounts published in the *New York World*, November 23, 1909, and statements appearing in the commemorative Souvenir History of the Shirt-Waist Makers' Strike (1910).
[79] Goren, 205.
[80] *Ibid.*

Goren posits that such language infused the strike debate with a "secular eschatology." Other scholars like Menes and Patkin have discussed the use of the oath in social or ethno-historical terms. "The 'Oath' for the Jewish worker," claims Patkin, "meant an act of service and aspiration, *almost* a religious act of devotion and prayer."[81]

That these scholars deem these developments, clearly drawn from religious texts, as "secular" and "almost [but not quite?] religious" may say as much about their own relationship to Judaism as it does about that of the strikers. We have certainly seen that any effort to isolate either ethnic or religious motivations among Jews is problematic in any given time period. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine any group other than secular Jewish scholars considering talk of the kind recounted above as "secular."

Indeed, Patkin himself references an 1897 meeting of 300 strikers in the Russian town of Krinki, in which the workers pledge "to observe all the decisions of the meeting by administering a formal oath, *each holding a pair of phylacteries*."[82] Sorin documents a Polish newspaper's account of similar meeting in Galicia of 200 striking *tallit*-makers, five years later. The interplay between Jewish and radical influences is seamless. The paper notes that the workers, makers of sacred ritual objects, were "assembled in the house of the rabbi," who is remarkably identified as "Comrade Zetterbaum."[83] The workers resolve that they "will beat up [scab

[81] Cited in Shuldiner, 213n93. Emphasis added.
[82] *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
[83] All quotes from *Naprzod*, July 24, 1892, cited in Sorin, 34-35.

workers] . . . even if they have to pay for it with months in jail." And once again, the assembled "demanded an oath" – in this case, sworn "on the Holy Torah."

Degel HaTorah: ***the Use of Text as Rallying Cry.*** Torah was not only useful as a touchstone upon which to swear allegiance. We have seen that there is an extensive body of labor law in Jewish text, most of it favorable to the concerns of labor. This fact did not escape the attention of Jewish Labor. Despite the conventional view of labor activists as a group hostile to traditional study, we find numerous instances of activists citing traditional texts as evidence that their cause was just.

As we have noted, by the turn of the century, Jewish labor activists showed an increasing willingness to discard Marxist notions of class-based struggle, hostile to ethnicity, and identify explicitly as "Jewish Unions." For the rank-and-file, the immediate effects of this shift were felt in decisions such as that made by United Hebrew Trades to conduct business in Yiddish. This openness often extended to an identification with Judaism in religious terms. Sachar notes that delegates at UHT rallies, even before the DeLeon split, sometime waved banners with Talmudic and Bible quotes. In describing plans for a coatmakers' strike in the summer of 1899, Yiddish press pioneer Abraham Cahan told his readers that workers were considering striking on a particular Sunday. Wolf Misselsky, "a gigantic old presser with a shaggy beard and hair," explained to his fellow workers the reason for the date:

> Because next Sunday will be the ninth day of Av, when the faithful sit on the floor of the synagogue barefooted, bewailing the fall of the temple in the days of Titus, the fiend of Rome. We shed tears on that day, we lament the loss of our independence and glory, we

> sigh over the fate of the women and children who were outraged and tortured by the brutes of Rome. Well, it often happens that while we are at it we also weep over our own misery and utter groans for our own wives and children, who are straved and tyrannized by those brutal bosses of ours. Mark my words, the great strike will break out on the day of the fall of the temple. This was the case three years ago and several times before.
>
> All our great unions have been born of strikes, and many of these strikes broke out suddenly on the ninth of Av.[84]

Tcherikower explains that UHT chair Benjamin Feigenbaum, raised in a traditional Jewish household, possessed the ability to make "a socialist concept graphically clear" using Torah or Talmudic passages.[85] He was not alone in this endeavor. According to Howe, Joseph Barondess, the famed cloakmakers' leader, quoted text liberally, "win[ning] the hearts" or workers with lessons drawn from the Talmud.[86] If Howe is correct, this implies that religion may have played a much greater role in the success of the JLM than is usually acknowledged. If the fidelity of a segment of the working population depended on an explicit connection between labor struggles and traditional text, it can be said that, at least for these workers, the JLM was a religious movement.

For some, however, the connection was more blatant. In a periodic feature called the "Talmudic Socialist," *Arbeiter Zukunft* offered glosses on well-known rabbinic teachings. The teaching from *Pirke Avot*, "All Israel has share in the world to come," was interpreted such that "all Israel" meant "the fighters who were struggling for the destruction of oppressors," while the "world to come" was interpreted as "progress."[87] In an even more striking example, at a celebration of striking vestmakers in March 1900, the *Forvertz* reported that the assembled

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[84] Rischin, *Grandma . . .*, 380.
[85] Tcherikower, 303. See also Howe, 243.
[86] Howe, 113.
[87] Cited in Rischin, 158.

conducted a collective study of Talmud, after which the following commentary was added:

> Saith the law of Moses: "Thou shall not hold anything from the neighbor nor rob him; there shall not abide with the wages of him that is hired through the night until morning." So it stands in Leviticus. So you see that our bosses who rob us and don't pay us regularly commit a sin, and that the cause of our unions is a just one.[88]

Were we to come upon this text without context, we would certainly impute a religious belief to the periodical. We need not "read" a religious motivation into the above analysis. It is plain on its face. Was, then, the *Forverts* a religious publication? Given the religious language used – "just," "sin," the direct quotation of Torah – one may argue that the motivation is secondary.

The paradox can be seen in a figure such as Benjamin Feigenbaum. A foe of Orthodox Judaism, the first general secretary of the *Arbeiterring* nonetheless championed the laws of Torah and Jewish ethics, even those involving marriage and sexuality. He penned *Kosher un Treif*, a volume exploring the value of the Jewish dietary laws, according to Levin, "so that every enlightened Jew could have accurate knowledge of the subject."[89] Rischin argues that Feigenbaum identified both as Jewish and secular, "reacting fanatically against his narrow Hasidic Warsaw youth, " but "champion[ing] Pentateuch's social laws."[90]

Analysis of the level of "Jewishness" in such work raises the issue of intentionality. If a text sends a religious message, and utilizes religious scripture, how much does the intention of the speaker affect the religious message? We may similarly ask: if a rabbi were to lead a service despite a lack of belief, would

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[88] *Ibid.*, 182.
[89] Levin, 168.

it still be a religious service? Perhaps not for the rabbi. But for the congregation, just as for the rank-and-file workers, it seems clear that the message conveyed and received is a religious one.

It can be argued, perhaps, that one who at first appears as rebel may, in fact, be that most Jewish of figures, the iconoclast. Cohn cites the example of Bernard Lazare, the French-Jewish anarchist whose 1896 book *Antisemitism: Its History and Its Causes* is actually quoted on the websites of several Jew-hating organizations. His book opens with the declaration that "the Jews were themselves, in part, at least, the cause of their own ills . . . unsociable . . . exclusive," due to the fact that the Jew "held fast to his political and religious cult, to his law."[91] Cohn argues that Lazare wrote the first part of his work – which effectively refutes anti-Semitic pseudoscience – before coming to terms with his Jewish identity. And yet, it may be that the introductory paragraphs serve as an opening salvo on the part of a Jew who cares deeply about the mission of Judaism. Throughout his book, Lazare exalts the "revolutionary spirit"[92] implicit in the this-world emphasis of Jewish tradition. Because the "Jew does not believe in the Beyond" – a debatable assertion, to be sure – the Jewish soul "cannot accept unhappiness and injustice in earthly life in the name of a future reward." Anxious then for equity in this world, Lazare posits that the Jews have "sought justice, and never finding it, ever dissatisfied, they were restless to get it."

Significantly, Lazare attributes this attitude to G-d, and to the Jewish

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[90] Rischin, *Promised City*, 155-156.
[91] Cited in Cohn, 8-9.
[92] All quotes cited in Cohn, 11-12.

> concept of divinity . . . . [which] led them to conceive the equality of men . . . all Jews are Y-hweh's subjects; He has said it Himself: "For unto Me the children of Israel are servants." What [earthly] authority can, then, prevail by the side of the divine authority? All government, whatever it be, is evil since it tends to take the place of the Government of G-d; it must be fought against, because Y-hweh is the only head of the Jewish commonwealth, the only One to whom the Israelite owes obedience.

This is radical, yes, but it is radical Judaism. Can it be that Lazare the anarchist is actually at the service of Lazare the Jew? Seen in this way, it is the Jewish rebel who may point the way toward Jewish rejuvenation.

If the Jew is the eternal iconoclast, smashing idols in whatever form they may be found, the term "Jewish rebel" may be a redundancy. In 1901, James Reynolds of the University Settlement identified in Jews an "extremist idealism, with an utter disregard for the restraining power of circumstances and conditions."[93] Judaism is, first and foremost, a dreamer's path. Identifying with the Jewish people means to declare that the way things are is not the way they always will be. It means believing in redemption.

In the next section, we shall look at those individuals – both radicals and rabbis – who drew upon the Jewish promise of redemption to help make it a reality. Despite their varying identities, we see in them a commitment to social change that ties them one to the other – and to Jews throughout history.

[93] Cited in Michels, 2.

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Bridge Builders

"The Jew," a 1918 letter to the *New Republic* stated, "has, of course, been always a radical leader."[1] While the stereotype of the radical Jew was a common one, it was not universal. Many Jews viewed labor socialism as a grave threat to Judaism, while radical Jews often viewed Judaism itself as a stumbling block on the path to liberation. While such fears have led many to view Jewish Labor and Judaism as natural enemies, as we have seen, the history is far more complex. The JLM was, from its birth, leaned upon Jewish religious institutions and texts.

The integration, however, was never a complete one. Synagogues and labor halls were usually separate institutions. But some figures in both camps acted as bridges between the two worlds. In this section, we shall look at those figures in greater depth, both in terms of their achievements, and their role within the larger culture.

❖ RADICALS AT THE CROSSROADS: ZHITLOWSKY AND CAHAN

Among the thinkers and activists who came to New York, two figures stand out as individuals who outlined a direct connection between Jewish textual tradition and the Jewish Labor Movement – Chaim Zhitlowsky and Abraham Cahan.

[1] Michels, 2.

Though estranged from Judaism in his native Russia, philosopher Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky became increasingly concerned with Jewish interests as a result of the pogroms of the 1880s. Zhitlowsky began to think in terms of the Jewish people and its destiny but, unlike the Zionists, believed that a full Jewish national life could be lived in the diaspora. He ultimately developed a theory of "*galut* nationalism," a non-Zionist Jewish movement infused with socialist ideals. As early as 1887, he published an impassioned study on Judaism's destiny, arguing that in its struggle for survival, the Jewish people had become estranged from the "historic ideals which had justified it existence."[2]

For Zhitlowsky, the loss of his Jewish identity was nothing less than "psychologically impossible . . . . What then? Must we Jews disappear? What an insult to me and those I love and cherish!"[3] Zhitlowsky sought a synthesis between the ideals of "cosmopolitanism" and Jewish nationalism, fusing the two seemingly contradictory forces in a concept called *yidishe kultur*. The international brotherhood sought by socialism was not incompatible with Jewish peoplehood – nor, for that matter, with Jewish text – but rather complemented both. The true meaning of internationalism, Zhitlovsky maintained, was not the denial of differences among nations, but rather a cooperation among individual but culturally developed nations. "It is the principle of Community of Nations introduced by modern Socialism," declared Zhitlowsky, "and which was long ago proclaimed by the Jewish prophets, Isajah and Michah."[4]

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[2] "Chaim Zhitlowsky," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1010.
[3] Zhitlowsky, "The Jewish Factor . . .," in Howe and Greenberg, 130.
[4] Cited in Shuldiner, 38.

It was in the US where Zhitlowsky had his greatest impact. Arriving in 1904, Zhitlowsky made his first public appearance on November 12 at a reception at New York's Cooper Union on behalf of the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (PSR), best known up until that point for its assassination of Russian interior minister Vyacheslav Plehve. Zhitlowsky himself was barely known in the US, spending the preceding sixteen years mainly in Switzerland. Nevertheless, he was in fact the author of the PSR platform. While most of the audience arrived in anticipation of hearing legendary Katerina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, the grandmother of the Russian revolution fondly known as "Babushka," it was Zhitlowsky who drew universal praise for his eloquence.

Significantly, while everyone else on the platform spoke in Russian, Zhitlowsky delivered his powerful speech in Yiddish. "Intellectuals had thought that the more Russian or generally European one was," notes Michels, "the less Jewish." Zhitlowsky directly defied this notion. "And here comes a man who speaks excellent Russian (and it is said that he also knows other languages very well)," remembered anarchist and event co-organizer Yisroel Kopelov, "a delegate of an authentic Russian party – by his side sits a pure-blooded Russian woman – and he begins to speak, like a Jewish preacher delivering a sermon, in Yiddish. Wonder of wonders."[5]

He soon sealed his reputation as a superb thinker and orator with a series of lectures delivered on the topic of Marxism's inability to appreciate the power of idea and free will along with social evolution. That he did so as a proponent of

[5] Cited in Michels, 139.

both high learning and Yiddish-language Jewish nationalism electrified both the anarchist intelligentsia, who flocked to his lectures even when they vehemently disagreed with his program, as well as newly arrived immigrants who heard an affirmation of their native language and culture. Jews who had been alienated by rigid socialist dogma urged Zhitlowsky to stay in the US. "His crusade against the outworn, the shrill, the plebian, and the vulgar in radicalism," writes Epstein, "had the effect of a refreshing breeze."[6]

Zhtitlovsly also arrived in the US at an opportune moment. As we have noted, the Kishinev pogroms had led many Jews to discard the socialist belief in "internationalism." Furthermore, the failed Russian revolution if 1905-6 would leave many former radicals disillusioned and heartbroken. Through a series of lectures, debates and articles, Zhitlowsky stirred many Jewish immigrants to abandon the melting-pot ideology of their new home, and become Jewish socialists – rather than simply socialists who happened to speak Yiddish. With visionary titles like "Jew and Man," and "The Future of Peoples in America," Michels notes that Zhitlowsky's oratory "sparked something of a revolution in American Jewish life."[7] Ultimately making New York his permanent home, Zhitlowsky brought his philosophy to the Socialist Territorialist weekly *Dos Folk* ("The People"), where he served as co-editor, and the monthly journal he founded in 1908, *Dos Naye Lebn* ("The New Life"). He would go on to publish the two-volume *Di Filosofye*, the first serious history of philosophy written in Yiddish.

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[6] Epstein, 311.
[7] Michels, 126.

Throughout – though self-identifying as a non-believer – he remained steadfast in his Judaism. For Jews, he would write in 1935, "religion was the only source of life which gave us the spirit to exist as a people."[8] Twenty years earlier, he had called for a "poetical rebirth" of the Jewish religion. In an essay of the same name, Zhitlowsky lamented that while the "modern congregation is decadent," the fact remained that the "modern Jew has not ceased to oppose religion, but he is beginning to find in it profound human symbols."[9] He was particularly drawn to Chasidism, noting the effect that Peretz was then having on radical youth. "The beliefs of a despised sect," Zhitlowsky wrote, "were revealed as a gem of beauty and humanity . . . Chasidism is holiness, a deeply sensitive religious symbol."

Zhitlowsky's religious thinking increasingly combined with his established nationalist identity. What emerged was a sense of mission. Epstein relates a conversation told to him by J. B. S. Hardman, when the latter was walking past a public school with Zhitlowsky, just as school was letting out:

> Zhitlowsky asked, "What would you do with these children?"
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> "I would like to make good socialists out of them," said Hardman; to which Zhitlowsky replied, "I would like to make good Jews out of them."[10]

Zhitlowsky had become disillusioned with many of his radical colleagues. By 1912, he would argue that the "Jewish intelligentsia" had actually "completely abandoned the Jewish people."[11] The philosopher increasingly saw his

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[8] Zhitlowsky, "The Jewish Factor . . .," in Howe and Greenberg, 133.
[9] Cited in Epstein, 313.
[10] *Ibid.*, 312.
[11] Zhitlowsky, "Moses Hess . . .," in Howe and Greenberg, 178.

colleagues' anti-religious stance, once seen as revolutionary, as simple nihilism. Here, the "non-believer" sounds remarkably like anything but:

> More and more, one accepts the idea that religion is an eternal branch of human culture, that the existence of a *divine principle in the universe cannot be disputed, either by science or philosophy* . . . True, [religious beliefs and rituals] have lost their meaning, and we, the educated and the free, cannot accept them. We are searching for other paths to link our soul with the "divine." However, the precepts of the past are still of value to us because they have expressed the religious development of mankind. [12]

Zhitlowsky began a series of essays on the prophets and Job – never finished – in which he began to fully realize his philosophy of Judaism, what might be called "prophetic socialism." Note the explicit religious claims the following argument makes, spoken by Zhitlowsky in the voice of a mythical contemporary "prophet of the old style:"

> "Ye foolish Jews! Know ye that G-d expects of ye socialism, international socialism, that this is the alpha and omega of the innermost substance of all that we prophets have been preaching in His name?
>
> "Know ye that a Jewish section in the International is in a deep religious sense a more thoroughly Jewish organization than all the religious orders put together, because the International is the only organization that seeks to realize the word of the prophets, to achieve a life of brotherhood among the people of the same nation and to unite all nations into one humanity?
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> "Know ye that the Jew who is not a socialist is not a Jew in a religious sense, that a Jew who battles against socialism is an evil-doer, that a Jew who permits the condemnation of his son, because his son is a Trotzky, is an ignoramus and a traitor?"[13]

Shuldiner questions whether such rhetoric inspired "observant Jews to embrace nationalism." It is probable that this is the wrong question. Zhitlowsky did not necessarily find a great audience with "observant" Jews. His appeal was primarily among intellectual secularized immigrants. As such, Zhitlowsky served as a figure of supreme importance: among immigrants who might have otherwise been lost to Judaism, Chaim Zhitlowsky provided a Jewish-oriented

[12] *Ibid.*, 313-14. Emphasis added.
[13] Cited in Hindus, 368-369.

barrier to assimilation, succeeding where the religious Jewish establishment had failed.

But Zhitlowsky's Jewish universalism was not universally praised. Emma Goldman, perhaps the best-known American anarchist, rejected Zhitlowsky in his appeal that she should devote her attention to Jewish suffering. "An ardent Judaist, he never tired urging upon me that as a Jewish daughter I should devote myself to the cause of the Jews," she remembered, adding, "Social injustice was not confined to my own race."[14] In a public debate with Zhitlovsky, Yankev Gordin took the uniquely Jewish stance of arguing that Jewish tradition demanded that Jews not focus on specifically Jewish needs. "The highest ideals of the Jewish people," he maintained, "were never national but international."[15]

Yet in his own writing, Zhitlowsky argued that it was precisely that concern for universal peace and prosperity that motivated the Jewish spirit. In his 1912 essay on early Zionist Moses Hess, Zhitlowsky lamented that radicals could not see the Jewish roots in their struggle:

> Sacred prophets could emerge among the Jews because Jewish love takes a long-range view of the future. Judaism is a historical religion, its chief tenet being a development looking toward the achievement of a historical goal, the Messianic kingdom of social and international justice. Modern socialistic theories and tendencies are the offshoot of concepts inherent in the Jewish historical process. If modern Jews had been aware of this, they would not have allowed the currents of modern thought to carry them away from the consciousness of belonging to a Jewish nation.[16]

Sadly, this synthesis would not be embraced by many of the philosopher's colleagues. But Zhitlowsky's most notorious battles were with *Forverts* editor

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[14] Goldman, 370.
[15] Michels, 142.
[16] Zhitlowsky, "Moses Hess . . .," in Howe and Greenberg, 176.

Abraham Cahan. If Chaim Zhitlowsky was the star philosopher of the immigrant Jewish community, its *rebbe* was Abraham Cahan.

Cahan rejected the ideology of Zhitlowsky's *Dos Naye Lebn* as catering to an "intellectual aristocracy,"[17] seeking instead to reach the *volk* by providing practical information in their native Yiddish. Zhitlowsky, for his part, viewed Cahan as something of a fraud, leading the Jewish people astray with digestible but inaccurate summarizations of important matters. "To be able to popularize," Zhitlowsky had publicly admonished Cahan, "one must first know something."[18]

Yet in terms of readership, Cahan emerged as the hands-down victor. While it reached a larger audience than Cahan cared to admit, *Dos Naye Lebn* was never a match for the mass circulation Cahan would achieve as a publisher. At times, to be sure, Cahan seemed primarily concerned with addressing his Jewish heritage in order to supercede it. The following piece, written in 1895 to celebrate the fifth anniversary of *Di Arbeter Tseitung*, is typical of Cahan's early relationship with Judaism:

> The little Jewish soul, which five years ago was shrunken and pressed down in the narrow confines of the old, moldy little Jewish world, is today as broad as the entire world. It used to be engraved in old, faint letters: "The little Jews are my people, the Land of Israel is my small sliver of a world, and the Five Books of Moses is my religion." But now honest, large, golden letters sparkle: "Humanity is my people, the wide world is my fatherland, and helping everyone to advance toward happiness is my religion!"

But, from the beginning of his labor activism, Cahan's appreciation for religion shone through. As far back as 1886, Cahan and Charles Rayevsky co-founded *Di Neie Tzeit* ("New Age"), publishing the first issue expressly to debut just before

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[17] *Ibid.*, 145.
[18] *Ibid.*, 146.

Shavuot. Cahan included an essay entitled "The Worker in Our Teacher Moses' Times," and reinforced the connection with an editorial. "I played on the idea," he remembered, "that in the holiday season marking the giving of the Law we were issuing in this Shavuoth a paper which, with its explanations of socialist ideas, would become a new Torah for the Jewish workers."[19] It would not be the first time that such a public declaration, in the words of Levin, "earned him the jibes of fellow socialists."[20]

While Philip Krants, his comrade at *Di Arbeter Tseitung*, believed that a socialist paper should promote "socialist ideas at every opportunity," Cahan appealed to his readers from the perspective of Jewish text. Understanding that for the everyday Jewish laborers ("those gray haired, misunderstood sweatshop hands,") there were so few joys "that their religion is to many of them the only thing that makes life worth living."[21] Cahan wrote a weekly column under the title "The *Sidra*," authored by *Der Proletarishker Maggid* ("The Proletarian Preacher,") using the weekly Torah portion to comment on current events. Consider this example, from March 14, 1890, interpreting the events of local strikers in light of the book of Exodus:

> Today our Torah portion is about strikes: The cloakmakers still have a little strike to finish up, the shirtmakers are on strike, the pantsmakers are striking, even our teacher Moses called a mass meeting to talk about a strike. *Va-yakel Moyshe*: Moses assembled the children of Israel and said to them, *Sheyshes yomim t'asu m'lokho*, you shall not work for the bosses more than six days a week, the seventh day you shall rest . . . But what is actually the case? The children of Israel work eighteen hours a day . . . and have no Sabbath and no Sunday off. Ay, you may ask, can't they die from exhaustion? Indeed, die they do. But there is one commandment they do fulfill: Moses tells them in today's

[19] Cahan, I, 309.
[20] Levin, 117.
[21] Howe, 112.

> sedre that on the seventh day they shall not light fire. This they observe an entire week: there is nothing to cook, thank G-d, and no fire to cook with.[22]

The response to the first issue of the newspaper was overwhelming thanks, in large part, to Cahan's Torah commentary. "In the ensuing days the *Arbeiter Tzeitung* became a prominent subject of discussion on Lower East Side," writes Sanders, "the *Sidra* the feature most frequently discussed and praised."[23]

While some have dismissed his rhetoric as purely strategic in nature, for Cahan to speak authoritatively he had to consider the issue seriously in terms of Jewish text. He also had to be willing to listen, in and of itself a quality understood by great leaders, religious and otherwise. Cahan himself recalled visiting a *mishnah* class held among striking vestmakers, and hearing one of them declare:

> Ours is a just cause. It is for the bread of our children that we are struggling. We want our rights and we are bound to get them through the union. Saith the Law of Moses: "Thou shalt not withhold anything from thy neighbor nor rob him; there shall not abide with thee the wages of him that is hired through the night until morning." So it stands in Leviticus. So you see that your bosses who rob us and don't pay us regularly commit a sin, and that the cause of our union is a just one.[24]

The mere existence of a *mishnah* class conducted by striking workers challenges prevailing notions of the relation between religion and the JLM. It gives credence to the notion that Cahan's combination of Jewish text and radicalism, rather than an odd coupling, was just the sort of thing Lower East Side Jews had hungered for. Michels writes, tellingly, that such exegesis was Cahan's way of bending "willingly toward popular tastes."[25] As we have seen, it was often the rank-and-file Jewish worker who, in contrast to his "radical" brethren, sought to maintain a connection with *Yiddishkeit*. Cahan had an instinctive sense of the

[22] Cited in Sanders, 77, and Michels, 99.
[23] Sanders, 88.
[24] Cited in Howe, 112.
[25] Michels, 99.

radicalized Jews "permission" to partake in a family *seder* or say *kaddish* to assuage the feelings of a mother. "Free Thinkers," he admonished his readers, "Don't be Fanatics!" In the volatile arena of Lower East Side tenement polemics, these were no small matters. "The iconoclastic moves of both men, though greatly different in their aims," Epstein writes, "were daring for their time and environment."[29]

❖ THE PROPHETIC VOICE OF THE RABBI: MORAIS, MAGNES AND WISE

The allure of immigrant Jews to socialist lectures and meetings was a source of great consternation to Orthodox Jewish leaders. Rabbis like Tsvi Hirsh Masliansky, keenly aware of the poor level of education among Jewish immigrants, eyed with jealousy the time and effort expended in the name of socialism. "In the time when the heart of every right-thinking Jew ached . . . considering how corrupted and crippled Jewish education was," the rabbi wrote in his memoir, "he became even more incensed and agitated from hearing and seeing the various mass meetings for the youth in the large halls and on the street corners."[30] Masliansky's concern was not that the goal of organized labor was unfounded, but rather that the movement would create divisions within the Jewish community. Interestingly, the rabbi protested that Jewish texts provided sufficient context for labor to exercise its rights. Consider this claim, made by

[29] *Ibid.*
[30] Cited in Michels, 90.

Rabbi Masliansky in one of his Friday-evening sermons, given before his congregation of mainly older Orthodox Jews:

> Our Jewish workingmen may be proud of our Torah and our religion, which are exceedingly considerate of them, and are much more solicitous of their welfare than any so-called "friends of labor," who, without knowledge or understanding of Judaism's teachings in this regard, are casting slurs upon the Torah and mock at the many thousand-years-old traditions of the Jew.[31]

Such oratory showed that rabbis were not indifferent to the plight of Jewish laborers. In 1887, Rabbi Moses Weinberger decried the state of affairs among Jewish immigrants in the US, not only regarding levels of learning and ritual observance, but also in terms of treatment of workers and teachers:

> Many teachers have issued a handbill in which they agree to teach any Jewish child, however he may be-rich or poor, bright or dull-for only ten cents a week, or forty cents a month. Obstinate householders tell themselves that just as the price has fallen, it will fall again . . . We have already heard *melamdim* whispering that if they cannot improve their lot they will abandon teaching completely and return to sewing clothes, tanning leather, or making shoes-each to the type of job he performed in his native land.[32]

This analysis, while accurate on its face, did little to address the day-to-day needs of Jewish workers. Instead, Weinberger directed his comments to those still in the old country "To our brothers in Russia, Poland, and Hungary," the rabbi implored, "listen to us: tough it out and stay home."

Socialism, on the other hand, spoke of redemption, promising deliverance from the misery that characterized everyday life in the ghetto. "The socialist speakers used to build new enchanted worlds for the workers," remembered pantsmaker and union leader Max Pine, "[explaining] how the workers of the whole world were rising to struggle against their enemies and that every strike, every conflict

[31] Masliansky, 198.
[32] For a more detailed discussion of Weinberger's writings, see Green, 76-79.

with capital, is of the greatest significance for the coming revolution, which will redeem humanity from economic slavery."[33]

More encouraging was the support from figures like Rabbi Sabato Morais. Born in Italy, Rabbi Morais was known throughout his career for taking principled but often-controversial positions on matters of public and social policy. Up to and during the US Civil War, Morais gave an impassioned sermon decrying the evils of American slavery. Despite the location of Congregation *Mikve Israel* safely within the bounds of free-state Pennsylvania, the board of the Philadelphia synagogue passed a resolution in December 1864, declaring that "henceforth all English lectures or discourses be dispensed with, except by particular request."[34]

Rabbi Morais was not to be deterred. Upon the return of his homiletical privileges, Morais continued to speak on political matters, controversial and otherwise. He defended the practice in an 1884 essay published in the *Philadelphia Enquirer*. As usual, the rabbi cited scriptural antecedents:

> If [speaking about political matters] be not allowed as a preacher's high mission, the impassioned oratory of the son of Amoz was demagogism. Prepare the hot iron and brand the fearless Tekoa shepherd. He was an insufferable interloper. Stigmatize Jeremiah, and let all the school of the prophets bear a badge of ignominy, because it presumed to interfere with national politics.[35]

Morais distinguished himself by virtue of a willingness to address issues that did not directly involve Jews. Indeed, it is quite likely that in delivering an impassioned sermon in 1892 against the restriction of Chinese immigration to the US, Morais raised anxieties among Jews, many of whom were none too eager to

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[33] Cited in Michels, 91.
[34] Cited by Charles J. Cohen in Congregation Mikveh Israel, 11-12.
[35] *Philadelphia Enquirer*, November 28, 1884.

remind other Americans of their own immigrant origins. Yet Morais was always quick to stress the universality of Jewish ethics:

> Whenever injustice bears sway, a Jew must take his stand in active participation among the defenders of right against might. A Jew dares not forget the admonitions of his prophets and his sages; dares not imagine that national iniquity is less detestable in the sight of G-d than individual sin, that a lie by a whole people is not so execrable as a personal lie. Let him see that all moral and merciful precepts given to his ancestors, and as in the lesson of the week, have come down to posterity with this significant accompaniment, *Ani Ado-nai*, "I am the L-rd," meaning, I am the All-seeing Creator who will not suffer injustice and inhumanity to go unpunished.[36]

It is scarcely surprising, then, that Rabbi Morais would ultimately take up the cause of the laborer. While on a much smaller scale than New York, Philadelphia also was host to profound labor struggle, both in and out of the Jewish community. Morais strongly favored the workers in these struggles, devoting his 1894 Yom Kippur sermon to the issue. The rabbi drew a direct connection between contemporary labor struggles and the warnings of the prophet Isaiah, finding it:

> utterly incredible that in this century of undoubted progress, in this century and specially in this country . . . man's morals should be so shamelessly low that an Isaiah would repeat, with righteous anger, his denunciatory address against those who rule in marts of trade and commerce; our merchant princes. "Ye have in your houses what you have robbed from the poor." "What mean ye that crush My people and grind the face of the poor?"

Morais continued, referring directly to the Torah's labor regulations, both in Leviticus and Deuteronomy:

> Not alone the denial of rightly-earned wages Moses condemns as wicked, because it is a theft, but even the delay of payments he declares a sin: "The wages of a hired servant shall not abide with thee until the morning." The saintly lawgiver who in the Book of Leviticus asked that we shall not let our journeyman go home at night without his daily earnings, repeated the same in Deuteronomy with greater emphasis, shortly before his death: "Thou shalt not defraud a hired man, a poor and needy one;" – that is, thou shalt not take advantage of his unfortunate condition . . .

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[36] *Public Ledger*, May 9, 1892.

And finally, Rabbi Morais issued a direct challenge to the employers within his own congregation:

> How the soul of our immortal teacher would kindle with wrath at the thought of such scenes as recently witnessed in Philadelphia! Families thrust by destitution into pestiferous holes, made poisonous by man's mercilessness; whole families, young and old, stitching and stitching, and stitching, twelve or fourteen hours a day, to receive what does not suffice to procure a scanty meal . . .
>
> Let those who are guilty of a heinous crime go now and testify against their pitilessness and bring there an atonement offering, which will change disease into health, hunger into full satisfaction, gloom into light. That will be a veritable Kippur, most acceptable to the L-rd.[37]

That a man whose community had removed his very right to give a sermon would upbraid his own congregants in so bold a manner is a testimony to his moral courage.

The oration inspired the *Jewish Exponent* – which had reproduced the sermon on its front page – to pen a spirited editorial of its own:

> Rev. Dr. S. Morais's burning invective against the sweating system . . . is in line with the directness and force with which the ancient Israelitish [*sic*] prophets denounced the evils of their day. Nor will it suffice for Jewish manufacturers to declare that they are no whit worse than their non-Jewish rivals in business. Israel of old was also in advance of the idolatrous nations by which it was surrounded, but this did not induce the prophets to desist from pointing out the straight line of duty, the righteous conduct, to depart from which was sin and crime . . . Responsibility, union, fair play – these are principles that must be invoked and carried out.[38]

Morais biographer M.S. Nussenbaum calls the rabbi's ensuing work on behalf of laborers to be the "brightest jewel in the crown of Morais' royal achievements."[39] Morais spoke publically of the injustices suffered by Jewish garment workers, particularly when their bosses were Jews. He decried the "blood-curdling knowledge that eight cents for a dozen of children's kneepants were paid a poor

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[37] Quoted in the *Jewish Exponent*, October 18, 1894, 1.
[38] *Ibid.* It should be noted that among the *Exponent*'s founders was Morais' son, Henry Samuel Morais.
[39] Nussenbaum, 149.

woman," asking what greater wrong could be done her, "except to murder her?"[40]

In addition to his stirring oratory, Rabbi Morais supported labor through his actions. When Jewish cloak manufacturers stonewalled the anarchist Cloakmakers' Union in the latter's demand for recognition and higher wages, Morais personally intervened. On July 19, Morais, Marcus Jastrow and Geirge Ransdorf arranged a meeting between the clothing manufacturers and the striking union. "In that meeting and subsequent negotiations," writes Kiron, "Morais introduced a distinctly moral and religious tone to a bitter and uncompromising dispute."[41] As the strike continued through the summer, Morais continued to seek a settlement, at one point inviting representatives from both factions to his home. Not content with a temporary remedy, Morais continued to press the firms to recognize the union; when they refused, Nussenbaum reports that Rabbi Morais "broke out in a rage," personally encouraging five scab workers to join the union.

By August, Rabbi Morais was personally dispensing *tzedakah* to the strikers' families. Yet Morais' sympathy for the workers' struggle did not mean he supported the union unequivocally. Morais also visited union members at their homes, expressing his reservations when he felt that the union was sacrificing worker health and well-being for anarchist posturing. In a letter to the cloakmakers' union, Rabbi Morais conveyed not only his sympathy with the

[40] *Ibid.*, 151.
[41] Kiron, 384.

union cause, but also his frustration at his inability to quickly resolve the impasse, and his honest assessment of their situation:

> Brethren:—Pained, but not angered, at having failed hitherto to put an end to the "strike," which brought great misery upon innocent creatures, I let this writing present to view once more a few of the thoughts that I expressed in words – unfortunately without avail – at your meetings and in some of your houses . . .
>
> Precious time was lost because of that unhappy difference between yourselves and the "bosses," [the union had demanded that scabs either be fired or forced to join the union; the owners refused] and meanwhile both sides became provoked to a degree which prevented an amicable settlement.[42]

The letter describes the remarkable compromise which he had negotiated with the manufacturers – a term of settlement which surely could have only been negotiated by a man respected by both labor and management:

> Your former employers will leave to your choice either to work in their factories in an entirely separate department, where you will not come in contact with cloakmakers who filled your vacant places, or they will supply you with work outside of their establishments.

Throughout, he maintained his authority as a religious leader to speak against economic injustice. "May the day never dawn," he wrote, "when the disciples of prophets and sages, to whose keeping practical religion has been entrusted, shall be muzzled, that they may not denounce social inequalities."[43] But perhaps the greatest tribute to Morais came in late 1890, when the Jewish anarchists of Philadelphia called off their Yom Kippur Ball – which, like those planned in other cities, was to feature "pork-eating" – out of respect for the role played by Rabbi Sabato Morais in mediating the cloakmakers' strike earlier that year.

In New York, Rabbi Judah Magnes' career as a leader in Jewish communal affairs similarly reflected a lifelong drive to serve his people. Born in San Francisco in

[42] *The Jewish Exponent*, August 15, 1890.
[43] Nussenbaum, 151.

1877, Magnes studied rabbinics at the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, and moved east to become the guiding force behind the "Kehillah," an attempt to form a democratic community for the Jews of New York City. Rabbi Magnes served as president from its beginning in 1908 until its demise in 1922.

In addition to dealing with Jewish religious and educational issues, the Kehillah was also involved with labor relations. Magnes' charisma played a large role in the success of the Kehillah's mediation, and also helped bridge the gap between America's German and East European Jews. At a time when the influence of Orthodox rabbis was dwindling, Magnes brought together prominent Jewish lay leaders and rabbis to form the "Committee on Conciliation," including Rabbis Moses Z. Margulies and Philip Klein. In the fall of 1909, the committee's intervention prevented a threatened strike of poultry *shochtim*.

Magnes' bold experiment continued to bear fruit. On June 20, 1912, New York's Furriers Union – representing 9,000 Jews and 600 shops – called a general strike. Conditions in the industry were awful. Workloads and compensation varied greatly, due to the seasonal nature of demand for fur. Numerous small sweatshops contracted with large firms to do finishing work, relying on low overhead to make a profit. The fur itself, a source of respiratory illness particularly in poorly ventilated buildings, exacerbated the trial of working under a sweating system.

Because virtually all employers and roughly three quarters of the workers were Jewish, it served as a fitting arena for the work of the Kehillah. In an atmosphere reminiscent of that faced by Morais in 1890, employer representatives refused to

sit in the same room with union officials. Throughout the twelve-week strike, Rabbi Magnes personally shepherded all parties through the arduous negotiations. As was the case with Rabbi Morais and the cloakmakers' stike, Rischin writes that "only Rabbi Magnes' intercession brought a settlement."[44] When news of the deal spread in the early hours of September 8, the terms represented a remarkable victory for the union. The terms included a 49-hour workweek, a prohibition of "home-work", a semiannual wage adjustment (revolutionary in a time when employers negotiated pay rates at their whim), the creation of a board of sanitation, and ten paid holidays. Significantly, the holidays could be exchanged for Jewish holidays.

Subsequent negotiations brought committees for negotiations and grievances (the former chaired by Magnes), an agreement on the part of the employers to use only contractors who abided by the contract standards, and the ability of shop stewards to hold union meetings and collect dues during lunch hours.

The great success of the fur settlement moved Rabbi Magnes to the forefront of the mediation movement. From January to March 1913, nearly 150,000 garment workers abandoned their workplaces. The number dwarfed the scale of the fur strike, and included laborers from disparate and poorly organized sectors of the workforce. Support from the Jewish street was broad and deep, as strikers' families were assisted with food, clothing and financial support. Concentrating on the men's clothing industry, Magnes arranged a settlement with one group of owners by early 1913, but the union at large held out for better terms. Few labor

[44] Rischin, 254.

organizations, meanwhile, expressed any interest in formally affiliating with the Kehillah.

The final settlement, reached in March of that year, marked only a modest improvement over the prevailing conditions, and the relationship remained unstable. Magnes continued to tinker with the details of the agreement, but frustration led him to propose, before the Kehillah's annual convention, a "committee on industrial relations," a permanent body "looking to the adjustment of all industrial disputes brought to our attention."[45] The body, which ultimately came to be called the "Bureau of Industry," featured a supervisory body known as the "Board of Managers."

A number of civic leaders and arbitrators were involved, as well as Dr. Leo Mannheimer, a rabbi who graduated with Magnes at HUC. Rabbi Mannheimer had served a congregation in Paterson, New Jersey, a nationally known center of silk and embroidery work. His attempts to mediate a labor dispute within the silk industry drew anger from the temple board. His continued efforts to make peace between labor and management led the board to fire Rabbi Mannheimer in the spring of 1913.

The Kehillah's Bureau of Industry was remarkably effective through 1917, successfully averting strikes of 80,000 garment workers in the summer of 1915, 120,000 millinery workers later that year, and 40,000 more garment workers in in January 1916. Furthermore, the Bureau was invited to mediate in disputes in Rochester, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago.

[45] Cited in Goren, 207.

Yet Magnes was concerned with matters besides labor relations. His interest in the burgeoning Zionist movement in Palestine led him to ultimately move to *eretz Yisrael*. Without the visionary rabbi's leadership, the tumult that would characterize the garment industry proved too great a challenge. By 1922, the Kehillah had folded.

Stephen S. Wise, another rabbi in the Reform tradition, sought to rejuvenate the prophetic tradition through his congregational pulpit. Emulating Henry Codman Potter, the "People's Bishop," and Edward McGlynn, the "People's Priest," Rischin argues that Wise envisioned himself as the "People's Rabbi." Born in Budapest, Wise's family had moved almost immediately to New York. Upon returning from graduate and rabbinical studies in Europe, Rabbi Wise found a pulpit at the Madison Avenue Synagogue. Almost immediately, Wise spoke out on the subject of labor conditions. During a street-car strike called due over wage and hour dispute, several street-car workers had been shot down on the picket line. The following Shabbat, Rabbi Wise delivered a sermon decrying violence against laborers seeking redress of legitimate grievances. In his memoir, Wise remembers being rebuked by the synagogue treasurer, a member of a banking and investment firm. After recounting the issues involved, Rabbi Wise declared, "I shall continue to speak for the workers whenever I come to feel that they have a real grievance and a just cause."[46]

In 1900, Wise accepted the offer of the pulpit of Temple Beth El in Portland, Oregon, where he also completed his thesis for a doctorate in philosophy. While

[46] Wise, 56.

in Portland, Wise became enmeshed in the "Good Government" movement, working with a small group of activists to push for, and eventually help enact, child-labor legislation. By 1903, Rabbi Wise had been appointed Commissioner of Child Labor for the State of Oregon.

Wise declined an invitation to become the rabbi of New York's "cathedral synagogue," Temple Emanu El and pioneered in forming a new type of synagogue with both a "free" pulpit and an active division of social service: the Free Synagogue of New York. The free synagogue concept allowed Rabbi Wise to take a number of unpopular stances regarding labor and other issues. It is hard to imagine too many other rabbis defending the labor leaders suspected of detonating explosives within the Los Angeles *Times-Herald* building in 1911, particularly in such a forceful manner:

> As long as labor organizations are denied a hearing save just before election seasons; as long as they are treated with scorn and contumely; as long as they are cast out and denied, it is not to be wondered at that the leaders, finding themselves and their organizations outlawed, should in turn be guilty of outlawry; that being cast out, they should resort to the weapon of the outcast; that being denied a hearing after the manner of orderly and reasoning friends, they should make themselves heard after the manner of destructive and unreasoning foes.[47]

That same year, Wise was invited to speak before the annual banquet of the New York Chamber of Commerce, a group that included Andrew Carnegie, J.P Morgan and Charles Schwab. As Morais had excoriated his congregants in his 1894 Yom Kippur sermon, Rabbi Wise challenged his audience to live up to their ethical obligation:

> I have ventured to observe that the important thing is not so much to bring religious ministration to the toilers, – the soldiers of the common good, – as to bring it to the captains of industry and commerce, which you are. For the conscience of the nation,

[47] *Ibid.*, 57.

> after all, will be that which you make it, – yours is the high and solemn duty not only of registering, but in large part of determining the character of the conscience of a nation.[48]

In the course of the address, Wise took the audacious step of challenging the assembled civic leaders, many of whom were known for their generous philanthropy, to practice justice as well as charity:

> Let us not imagine that we can shift to the shoulders of over-worked charity, but the daily meat and justice . . . The conscience of the nation is not real unless the nation safeguard the workingman, safeguard from the peril of overwork, as well as from the occasional accidents of industry . . . We have not the right to speak of the importance of conserving the opportunity for initiative on the part of the individual as long as masses of individuals are suffered to perish without the opportunity of real life.[49]

But it was the "hideous tragedy" of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, in which young women were burned to death because the doors of their sweatshop had been locked by their employers, that brought labor rights into the forefront of the New York political scene. At a rally held at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 22, 1911, Rabbi Wise spoke to the role of religion in the midst of the tragedy. To Rabbi Wise, religion had not failed; rather, humanity had failed to live up to its religious responsibility:

> This ought to be a fast day of the citizens of New York, our day of guilt and humiliation . . . It is not the action of G-d, but the inaction of man that is responsible. I see in this disaster not the deed of G-d, but the greed of man. For law is divine, and this disaster was brought about by lawlessness and inhumanity . . .
>
> If the church and the synagogue were forces of righteousness in the world instead of the forces of respectability and convention, this thing need not have been. If it be the shame and humiliation of the whole community, it is doubly the humiliation of the synagogue and of the church which have suffered it to come to pass . . . the life of the lowliest worker in the nation is sacred and inviolable, and, if that sacred human right be violated, we shall stand adjudged and condemned before the tribunal of G-d and of history.[50]

In 1912, the same year Rabbi Magnes was negotiating a settlement of the furrier strike, Wise was called upon to mediate a dispute between workers and

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[48] *Ibid.*, 60.
[49] *Ibid.*, 61.
[50] *Ibid.*, 63-64.

employers in several textile mills in Pennsylvania. As a result of his prior work on behalf of labor, Wise had concluded that "no basic change could be made in the life of workers until they had won the right to organize and bargain collectively."[51] The this was due, in large part, to the corporate model of business governance, "with its substitution of directors representing scattered, absentee shareholders for the personal employer of bygone days;" in the face of such a system, "the individual worker was indeed helpless."[52]

Given such a condition, and with charges of coercion and communist tendencies being leveled against union organizers, Rabbi Wise chose to discuss strife in the steel industry in his first sermon following the High Holidays in 1919. In it, he charged the board of US Steel of "terrorism and outlawry" in their dealings with the union, "resorting to every manner of coercion, intimidation, and violence . . in order to avoid the organization of the workers."[53]

Rabbi Wise suffered severe penalties for his principled stance. A million-dollar capital campaign planned for the Free Synagogue had to be put on hold after the cancellation of several large gifts. Invitations for speaking engagement at synagogues around the country were withdrawn. Wise was advised by a rabbi in Pittsburgh, a center of steel production in the US, "that the Gentiles are putting us in a bad light as a result of Dr. Wise's talk and that it will hurt the Jewish cause in this section."[54] A "minister of religion" in New York spoke against Wise in his own sermon, charging the rabbi with "prostituting the

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[51] *Ibid.*, 65.
[52] *Ibid.*, 65-66.
[53] *Ibid.*, 68-69.
[54] *Ibid.*, 69.

pulpit," and discussing political matters for "personal notoriety and sensationalism."[55]

Though not all of his arguments were couched in overt religious terms, Rabbi Wise was a key figure in a battle then being waged over the right of clergy to speak on political matters. It was the belief of many – ministers and lay leaders alike – that public utterances of ministers were subject to review and restriction by church officers. Wise quotes one minister as giving the following response to a question on the subject:

> I am employed by a community of people who pay me my salary. They give me their pulpit and their following. If I have the gift of free speech so much that I can say what I please regardless of who or what is involved, I am dishonoring my position.[56]

In going against the prevailing wisdom – and in taking aim at a target of such high visibility as US Steel – Rabbi Wise showed considerable daring. "Although I have frequently been attacked for speaking the truth on many issues," he remembered, "I was never attacked more viciously than for speaking out in regard to the rights of workers and making my attack specific against the exploitation of steel workers and the denial of their right to organize."[57] As Rabbi Morais had learned when he spoke against the slave-holding Confederacy, synagogues too were wont to exercise their "right" to restrict the subjects that pulpit rabbis were to address. That Rabbi Wise was willing to challenge this condition is a part of his legacy that cannot be overstated.

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[55] *Ibid.*, 70.
[56] Cited in *Ibid.*, 72.
[57] *Ibid.*

❖ **REFLECTIONS**

There is a common theme in the narratives of Rabbis Morais, Magnes and Wise. Whether in the role of arbitrator or pulpit preacher, all three spoke in the manner of the prophet, challenging dominant powers to do right by the laboring class. It is clear that countless industrial workers were represented by the work of these three men.

What is less clear is the connection that any had with labor leaders themselves. While the rabbis are quite courageous in speaking to well-heeled congregants or captains of industry, they seem to do very little direct work with workers themselves. Rabbi Morais is the exception, offering direct assistance to striking cloakmakers, but interestingly his pulpit is in Philadelphia rather than New York.

It is possible that New York, spread over five boroughs and countless neighborhoods, is simply too sprawling and fragmented for community organizing. Religious leaders, to this day, bemoan the balkanized nature of New York; organizers, too, find themselves working on similar projects in separate neighborhoods. Yet men like Abraham Cahan worked effectively in speaking to the masses of Yiddish-speaking laborers in New York. Seen in this light, men like Cahan and Chaim Zhitlowsky, rather than represent a rejection of Judaism, offered immigrant Jews a tether to the cultural and religious legacy of their people.

Ultimately, it would be left to clergy in the Christian world, particularly in Latino and African-American communities, to utilize the inherent power in Jewish text as an organizing tool. It is a testament to such power that the texts have been so readily applicable to struggles in different cultures and locales. One can only wonder what could have been achieved if the US rabbinate had seen fit to offer working-class Jews a path to liberation via their own textual heritage.

~ *Conclusion* ~

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loosen the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free?

– Isaiah 58:6

In many respects, the history of the Labor Movement in the United States is a history of Jews. A large number of the gains which labor organizers celebrate – the 40-hour work week, child labor laws, grievance procedures – were achieved by Jewish labor leaders. Yet, as we have seen, the relation between organized labor and the Jewish community was a complicated one. Despite inspiration from texts like the one above, Jewish labor and Jewish religious organizations were not often able to work in concert with one another.

Much remains to be written on the matter, but I believe that the following conclusions may be drawn from the study of the role of religion in the Jewish Labor Movement:

"Religion" did not adequately serve the needs of the labor movement. The institution of the synagogue was buffeted by the upheavals of the 18th and 19th centuries. More often than not, the synagogue served as a force for conservatism. The journey across the Atlantic, difficult in any event, only exacerbated that tendency to resist change. Faced with the dual challenge of Enlightenment thought and the untamed wilderness of life in the United States, the synagogue closed ranks. As a minority within a hostile host culture, rabbis and synagogues

were loathe either to take on large employers or to confront unscrupulous Jewish business owners.

Radicals were too willing to trust the "brotherhood of labor." The Marxist notion of a historical progression toward proletarian community was repeatedly threatened by anti-Jewish rhetoric and violence. Those Jews who felt that religious and cultural differences would ultimately fall away were often proved painfully wrong. Meanwhile, many of the Jewish activists most enamored of the notion of universal brotherhood were negligent in their commitment to their own community, favoring rhetoric over definite ethical action. Those radical Jews who did feel a call to serve the community, once faced with the prejudice and discrimination in the larger radical community, often found themselves drawn once again toward their Jewish roots.

There was more cooperation between religion and labor than is commonly acknowledged. Rather than separate and belligerent spheres, Jewish labor and religious institutions often found common ground. Labor groups and institutions frequently utilized Jewish resources, and called upon powerful textual traditions. Some (albeit few) rabbis were willing to speak out forcefully against labor exploitation, and went to great lengths to engender conciliation between workers and their employers. Ethnicity formed a stronger bond than many imagined; religious themes often fortified that bond.

The Jewish community would be well served by an expansion of the term "religious." Part of the reason labor activists are considered to be anti-religious is that our conception of religion remains limited. If rabbis of the period were

willing to speak to organizers in religious terms, giving credence to their status as justice-workers in the prophetic tradition, perhaps the gap that existed between the two forces could have been breached. The Reform movement, which would not have been so disturbed by the radicals' rejection of *kashrut* and ritual garments, was also removed from the activists often due to class differences.

These issues still challenge the Jewish world. Though small, different factions within the US Jewish community often are unwilling even to seek common ground. Many Jews, particularly young and single members of our communities, show little interest in connecting with the Jewish world, even as they may act out Jewish ethics in the public sphere. Jewish institutions, such as Federations, community centers and synagogues, all too often act as reactionary forces.

Some synagogues, like B'nai Jeshurun, Kolot Chayeinu and Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in New York, and Ikar in Los Angeles, have sought to answer the call for social justice in Torah. Yet many Jews still view Judaism primarily in terms of ritual. Such a view is reinforced by an emphasis in the yeshiva world on ritual aspects of our tradition over ethical mandates; while *Choshen Mishpat* is relegated to specialized study by *dayanim, talmidim* are increasingly obsessed with the minutiae of ritual observance beyond the strictures outlined in *Orach Chayim* and *Yoreh De'ah*.

Were we to balance these competing worldviews, we very well could triumph over the dichotomy between traditional "religious" Judaism and modern,

"liberal" Judaism. I believe that each can serve the needs of the other. Traditional ritual can bring Jews of varying backgrounds together, all the while heightening our awareness of Judaism's moral core, just as, say, an honest and open discussion of the history and significance of ritual objects might lead to their increased use. I believe it is shortsighted for traditional Jews to disdain the obvious ethical mandates within our tradition, just as it is for progressive Jews to eschew the most basic ritual traits of our faith, such as *kashrut* and the recitation of *brachot*. Such behavior alienates potential Jewish allies from the start, and ignores the very real transformative power within the both ethics and ritual. What is needed – by Jews and the troubled world we inhabit – are rabbis and communal leaders whose sense of purpose leads them to honor both ethics and ritual.

Synagogues – and rabbis and cantors as their leaders – can do much to foster this sense of purpose, particularly in the realm of labor rights:

- *Recognize the need for wage equity among our own congregants.* As unchecked globalization continues to erode employee security in the US, our congregants will increasingly find their own employment situation to be insecure. Even in "well-to-do" neighborhoods, we will face a rise in layoffs, stagnating wages, and defaulted pensions. Claiming the mantle of defender of labor is thus not only good Torah, but also a prudent move in terms of practical rabbinics.

- *Educate ourselves.* On all levels, this subject of inquiry is under-investigated. Few of us know the history of Jewish Labor, nor are we

particularly familiar with the texts. Furthermore, the noisy marketplace of broadcast and print journalism often obscures the behavior of multinational firms. Stories of labor strife are often placed in the Business section, where they will be overlooked by most of the reading public. Rabbis and cantors demand, rightly so, that congregations show the proper regard for our economic well-being. We owe our congregants the same respect.

- *Take action, in and out of the shul.* Having acquired the facts, clergy ought make it our business to act as advocate for working families. Punitive legislation, unfair labor practices, and bad faith contract negotiations are all areas in which rabbis and cantors can take the moral high ground. And, perhaps most controversially, we should ask that our congregations live up to the high standards set by our texts in fairly compensating synagogue staff, such as teachers, secretaries and janitors. It is the voice of the member of clergy that will ring out loudest in asking that our communities do not fall into the trap of hypocrisy.

Yet, if the strife between labor and "religion" teaches us anything, it is that a passionate sense of purpose can act as a double-edged sword. It can bring Jews together via a shared mission, or it can drive a wedge between principled but shortsighted ideologues. Historically, Jews have been the teachers of humanity. Wherever we have wandered during our history we have brought a spiritual message to every land in which we settled: the Jewish commitment to learning, justice, and compassion. It is the Jews' unique and precious gift to the world. It

remains to be seen whether we can take up that cause once again, seeking peace and righteousness for all peoples – from a uniquely Jewish perspective.

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