

# Express Train to Nowhere: Class and the Crisis of the Modern Jewish Soul

by Samuel Biagetti

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One hundred years ago, on New Year's Eve, 1919, a small, newly formed Yiddish acting troupe staged the first performance of a comedy titled *Bronx Express*. The play opens on a summer evening as a grimy, bearded Jewish workingman named Harry Hungershtolts (meaning "Hunger-proud"), exhausted after a day at the factory sewing buttons onto garments, stumbles into a subway train bound for the Bronx. He clutches a Yiddish newspaper, which he expects will put him to sleep "from 14th Street to Harlem 160th" before arriving refreshed to supper with his family and the old rebbe at his Prospect Avenue apartment.

On this commute, however, Harry bumps into an old acquaintance, Jakob Flyamkes, who decades earlier crossed the ocean on the same ship as Harry, but who, unlike the garment worker, has made it rich in America. Jakob's last name, meaning "flames," alludes to the fires of ambition and desire, and the newly minted millionaire taunts Harry: "What are you doing in the Bronx with all the Jews? Why don't you go to Broadway, and Wall Street?" Jakob brags that he has become "a real American," while Harry, dozing on the Bronx express as it speeds past Midtown, has "been sleeping through America, and under America, your whole life."

Jakob urges Harry to get rich with a marketing "gimmick," but as he points to the advertising mascots for cough drops, pancake mix, and chewing gum that litter the subway car, rattling off each company's net worth, the aging factory worker is skeptical. For one thing, Harry is, like so many Jewish workers, a radical socialist—"all the way left," he boasts. This understandably surprises Jakob, since Harry

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is also an observant Jew, bragging at one point that his son would soon become a bar mitzvah—just after Yom Kippur. Most leftist leaders of the 1910s rejected religion altogether as an “opiate of the masses,” and Judaism in particular as a narrow tribal loyalty undermining the unity of the working class. “A socialist keeps bar mitzvah and Yom Kippur?” Jakob asks incredulously, and Harry responds with characteristic blitheness, “Well, Yom Kippur is Yom Kippur, even for the proletariat.” To Jakob at least, both Harry’s leftism and his Judaism hold him back from chasing a big break and climbing the social ladder.

The rest of *Bronx Express* can be seen as a meditation on Harry Hungershtolts’s three-way inner conflict—torn between his love of Jewish tradition and family life, his leftist politics, and the powerful allure of American wealth. A century later, the play may come across as hand-wringing over a crisis that never materialized: even as Jews have achieved unprecedented levels of social success and integration in the United States and western Europe, they have not lost their distinct identity. Modern Jewish life appears as one of the great success stories of Western liberal democracy. *Bronx Express*, however, dramatizes inner conflicts that were never truly resolved, and that are resurfacing today in the form of endless conflicts over Jewish identity and real or perceived anti-Semitism.

The play reflects how deeply the questions of Jewish identity are entwined with class and wealth. In the shocking second act, Harry breaks down, not only relinquishing his own attachment to Jewish law in return for material success, but even selling the Jewish people in the bargain. In a surreal scene of black comedy, Jacob Flyamkes lures Harry away from Shabbos dinner with his family and introduces him to the various brand mascots come alive, from Aunt Jemima to the square-jawed Arrow Collars man and the nubile Murad Cigarettes dancing girl, who seduce him into revealing a sinister marketing ploy: he proposes to “Americanize” the Jews by paying them triple to work on Yom Kippur. Not only will this extract a little more production on the most sacred day of the Hebrew year, but it will break down the final barriers to untrammelled consumption: if “Yom Kippur breaks down, everything breaks down. No holidays, no religion, no tradition. Everything one pot of schmaltz. . . . The iron grinder grinds them all up together. . . . A machine with no holidays, no language, no traditions—a great mass of workers that works and

buys, works and buys, and eats, chews, and swallows.” He reluctantly signs a contract selling his idea (and his soul, by implication), as the Murad dancing girl kneels at his feet. The next act sees the pair of them, now millionaires, vacationing in luxury in Atlantic City.

It is impossible to know how many theatergoers on that final night of 1919 may have sympathized with Harry Hungershtolts’s dilemma, but it must have struck a chord with some, because *Bronx Express* became probably the greatest commercial success in the history of Yiddish theater. After its debut at a playhouse in the unfashionable Madison Square, it was translated into several languages, and in 1922, a production in English was mounted, ironically enough, on Broadway. Respectable Yiddish critics argued that although the play was a “vaudeville,” it was nonetheless worthy of respect as it grappled with serious social subjects.

Still, Osip Dymov’s *Bronx Express*, like every other masterpiece of Yiddish drama, is today all but forgotten. Soon after the play’s debut, the immigration restriction laws of 1921 and 1924 nearly cut off the stream of Jewish migrants fleeing from persecution in Eastern Europe, thus beginning the long, inexorable decline of Yiddish theater in America; two decades later, the Holocaust decimated the Jewish population of Europe, putting the Yiddish language itself on the road to extinction.

If we look back at *Bronx Express* from the vantage point of a century later, we might see the play as an artifact of a peculiar and brief moment in time. At the start of the 1920s, the prosperity brought on by the First World War presented American Jews, still overwhelmingly poor and foreign-born, with enticing opportunities. Ever studious, Jews were mastering English, starting their own businesses, and learning white-collar trades. In New York, the newly built subways emancipated Jewish workers from the Lower East Side, opening up new neighborhoods in the outer boroughs. The war over Harry Hungershtolts’s soul can be seen to symbolize the ambivalence of Jews who embraced the promise of American wealth and integration, but feared that in the process they would lose their Jewishness. In this sense, *Bronx Express* might come across as a false alarm, as American society has proved to be the most adept of any in history at enfolding Jewish people and their traditions into an individualist way of life.

On the other hand, we can learn much more by turning the mirror around, and considering what Osip Dymov and the actors who first performed *Bronx Express* would think of American Jews today. For the play is not merely a comedy about Jewish identity and assimilation; it is also a meditation on class, wealth, and the spiritual hollowness of modern life. It runs counter to the conventional narrative, propounded by eminent Jewish authors from Oscar Handlin to Michael Walzer, who describe an “adventure” of Jewish immigration and advancement, culminating in successful integration—a retelling of *Exodus* in which the promised land is an American suburb. These commentators tend to “explain” modern Jews’ enduring liberal political views by reference to their need for a tolerant, pluralistic society in which to thrive. They ignore, however, the fact that the plurality of Jews—or at least the most vocal—of earlier generations were not liberal, but leftist radicals. Moreover, this narrative cannot account for the present-day mounting conflict over Jewish identity and assimilation in America and Britain, with bitter fights over Jews’ place in Western society erupting on a regular basis.

The customary narrative of Jewish integration fails to account for the current anxiety over Jewish identity because it ignores class. America is not now and has never been a homogeneous mass into which one could succeed or fail to integrate. In 1919, it was a stratified society, divided along lines of wealth and power, roiled by labor unrest, the suffrage movement, and the Red Scare. (When Jakob first runs into Harry on the subway, he does not recognize him, but instead insults the disheveled workingman as a “Bolshevik.”) Jewish integration has always depended upon Jewish people’s positions in the shifting class landscape, and for the wave of Eastern Europeans who migrated to America in the industrial age, that was the proletariat. Jewish workers organized with gentiles and often connected themselves to the long American tradition of utopian radicalism. Nearly all of the Yiddish publications and social clubs formed in the early 1900s were left-wing, and even the first Jews to achieve national prominence in America, such as Samuel Gompers, were labor leaders.

Jewish immigrants, who were accustomed to exile and uncertainty, secured a foothold for themselves in American society by identifying closely with the working class. In turn, even the most radical American Jews tended to be patriotic. In the winter of 1920, a leftist reporter from Chicago traveled to Russia to interview Emma Goldman, the

notorious Jewish-American anarchist agitator who had been deported just days before *Bronx Express* debuted; when he met “Red Emma,” he found an American flag prominently displayed in her hotel room. Goldman refused to apologize for the symbol, insisting, “I’m going back there some day, for I love America as I love no other land.”

In the schema of *Bronx Express*, the allure of American wealth threatens to break the hold both of left-wing socialism and of traditional Judaism, which together compose a particular way of being American. Though apparently contradictory, the leftist and traditional Jewish belief systems in fact show many parallels: group loyalty and an extreme sensitivity to injustice; an emphasis on discipline and self-sacrifice; a sentimental connection to the past and veneration of martyrs; intensive study and debate over canonical texts; and (in many strains at least) a belief in a future apocalypse that would usher in the age of peace and justice. While religion and leftist doctrine clash on the theoretical plane, among ordinary people in the 1910s they could coexist symbiotically. Although the synagogues in the Lower East Side counted only a small fraction of urban Jews as members, they were nonetheless packed to the gills on high holy days. (Indeed, in 1908, New York City intentionally held voter registration on Yom Kippur in an effort to suppress the turnout of socialist voters.) Thus, for much of Dymov’s original audience, Harry’s remark that “Yom Kippur is Yom Kippur, even for the proletariat,” must have rung true.

In an important sense, Harry Hungershtolts himself is already Americanized before the plot of *Bronx Express* begins: his family life, his pride of work, and his left-wing commitments give him a place in the American landscape of the time. The dream that seduces him is not, therefore, a vision of becoming American as such, but of integrating into a particular version of America, driven by greed, materialism, and envy for the inner circles of power—the people behind the “high windows”—in the Yiddish phrase. His phantasmic success depends upon his betrayal both of the Jewish people and of the working class; he is rewarded with a hollow and guilt-ridden life in a luxurious wasteland.

Indeed, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that we are living today in Osy Dimov’s nightmare. The bombardment with advertising that plagues Harry’s commute is now a constant, enveloping fact of life, with Big Tech’s algorithms targeting the minutest details of our existence. Additionally, the notion that one should strive for success in

business in order to escape from one's working-class environment, and should celebrate those lucky few who do so, is taken for granted. In this way, Dimov's play presages Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*, an ethnically sanitized version of the same fable (also following on the heels of a world war), in which the naïve hero, despairing of the loss of his traditional family and work life, receives a glimpse into a parallel world of crass, shallow greed that looks uncannily similar to our present reality.

### THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

Have the Jews of the modern West given in to precisely the temptations that alarmed Osip Dymov a century ago? On the political plane, Jews have overwhelmingly abandoned the left-wing views of their forebears, apart from an occasional visit to the Tenement Museum to reminisce about their nana marching on a picket line. During the Depression, most Jews readily joined the New Deal coalition; after the Second World War, many of them benefited from racially restricted government supports such as the GI Bill, opening opportunities to achieve success and move to middle-class suburbs. Their sensibilities became accordingly more conventional and even conservative, with many families obsessed with appearing as respectable "American Jews."

Since the 1960s, most Jewish voters' consistent support for the Democratic Party has fostered an illusion of continuity, obscuring changes in their relationship with the party's "left" wing. Jewish voters have remained predominantly loyal to the Democratic Party largely because the party has evolved along with them, focusing after 1970 on cultivating suburban liberal support based on sociocultural issues and jettisoning unions as a relic of the past. Most (though not all) Jews today embody the archetypal liberal persona: highly educated, white-collar, middle or upper-middle class, culturally tolerant, and paternalistic toward the lower orders. Meanwhile, small numbers of Jews entered early into rising white-collar industries such as finance and technology, thus vaulting to the top of the class structure and joining the people behind the "high windows"; philanthropy from a small circle of millionaires increasingly colors the views and sensibilities of Jewish institutions. From the vantage point of *Bronx Express*, it may seem shocking that in 2016, when a Jewish socialist from Brooklyn emerged as a serious contender for the U.S. presiden-

cy, most Jews did not support him. Considering the brute economic facts, though, this turn of events is unsurprising: although most contemporary American Jews are far from millionaires, no other religious group has a higher proportion (44 percent) of households with incomes over \$100,000.

The rise of American Jews into the middle and upper classes is not sufficient in itself to explain their political transformation, but it has presented a series of dilemmas that religious reform and political liberalism often serve to blunt. Traditional Judaism evolved in an environment of social restriction and intermittent persecution; incorporation into the elites of a prosperous and stratified society is almost entirely uncharted territory for Jews. Whereas other affluent religious groups such as Episcopalians have a long history of acknowledging and incorporating social inequality into their practices and teachings—class distinctions are literally built into the structure of colonial Anglican churches—Judaism tends to assume a basic social equality among households. Class stratification within old-world Jewish communities tended to lead to acrimony and rupture, while those few Jews that attained great fortunes before 1900 usually converted to Christianity, faced hatred and resentment from their gentile peers, or both.

It is not surprising, then, that as American Jews attained success and assimilated, their associational life evolved to resemble that of their new neighbors. As Jews dispersed from the old urban enclaves, splitting into nuclear families, the radical unions, the Bund, the *landschaftn*, and the Yiddish press and theater died out. Political associations and unions rooted in the urban working class also could no longer provide a place for Jews in the American landscape. The new Jewish groups that middle-class suburbanites formed centered almost entirely on the synagogue, which in turn was drastically reformed from the traditional *shul* of the Old World and the ghettos. The American Reform and Conservative movements, patterned on their predecessors in Germany, sought to accommodate Judaism to upper-middle-class tastes, mainly by adopting the practices and sedate worship styles of mainline Protestantism. This new respectability, moreover, could go hand in hand with a less threatening American mid-century liberalism.

Although Jewish groups showed numerical and financial strength at mid-century, they could not maintain the intense loyalty of earlier

generations. As early as the 1950s, Will Herberg saw the synagogues, like the suburban churches, as examples of a “cut-flower culture” bound to fall into decline. Today, the weakness and superficiality of modern Judaism is reflected in plummeting synagogue membership: Orthodoxy hangs on mainly due to a high birth rate, and Reform is held afloat by the stream of people leaving Orthodoxy; in between, Conservative Judaism collapses. Inter-marriage is common, and children of mixed unions rarely choose to observe Jewish customs. (As Irving Kristol famously remarked, the problem for American Jews is not that the gentiles want to kill us, but that they want to marry us.) Jewish congregations have the money to build new houses of worship, but cannot fill them. Outside the synagogues, Jewish tradition plays a shrinking and superficial role in most Jews’ lives, reduced to what the sociologist Herbert Gans has called “symbolic Judaism” in the form of a menorah or two on the mantle.

### OUR AMERICAN ISRAEL

In this light, it may seem strange that the Jewish identity has survived at all. If *Bronx Express* was correct in that the attainment of wealth and the adoption of mainstream norms make Jews indistinguishable from their neighbors of the same social class, then why does anybody continue to consider themselves Jewish? Why has Judaism in America not gone the way of Shakerism or the Henry George movement—as Herbert Gans forecast decades ago? This question in fact has two parts—one of motivation and one of means. Firstly, why do millions of people want to label themselves as Jews despite their tenuous connection to Jewish traditions? And secondly, what tools or strategies have sustained this group identity in the absence of a coherent way of life?

The answers to the first question should not be difficult to find if one considers the dismal environment of modern Western life. For all the material prosperity and personal freedom that liberal democratic societies offer, they are, increasingly, emotionally hollow and homogenized. As the dissolution of American social institutions has accelerated, opening up a widening abyss of loneliness and alienation, ethnic and religious identities can provide a sense, however artificial in some cases, of meaning and belonging. The idea of dropping one’s ancestral identity can evoke a feeling of unease or even existential dread—a condition that Murial Rukeyser called “the stone insanity.”



Anomie and self-reproach have haunted the psyches of modern, assimilated Jews since they first left the immigrant enclaves. Saul Bellow's 1964 novel, *Herzog*, traces the meandering inner journeys of a Jewish professor of literature who, having nearly attained success in the New York academic scene, suddenly halts work on his bloated magnum opus. Moses Herzog finds both relief and crippling sorrow in reminiscing on his childhood in the small Jewish enclave of Montreal: "Napoleon Street, rotten, toylike, crazy and filthy, flogged with harsh weather. . . . Here was a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find." Recalling the Hebrew prayers that he recited with his brother on foggy Canadian mornings, Moses asks himself, "what was wrong with Napoleon Street? . . . All he ever wanted was there." A deep stream of ambivalence, leading even to paralysis, casts a shadow over Jewish success.

Additionally, Judaism is unusual among ethno-religious identities, having a longer history and a highly developed body of myths and teachings. As contemporary Jews lose their ties to Jewish neighborhoods, a simple sense of guilt at abandoning three-thousand-year-old traditions keeps many tethered to Judaism. Joshua Harmon's 2013 play *Bad Jews* centers on a dispute between two cousins—one casually secular and the other sanctimoniously observant—over who will inherit their late grandfather's *chai* (a pendant in the shape of the Hebrew word for "life"), which survived the Nazi camps. The male cousin, Liam, wishes to present the heirloom as an engagement gift to his gentile fiancée, against the wishes of his cousin Daphna, who scolds Liam for his laxity: "And so now, when it's easier to be Jewish than it has ever been in the history of the world, now when it's safest, now we should all stop? I can't. . . . And if I know you at all, you don't want me to stop either. Because if I stop, if we all stop, it will be gone." Liam is unmoved, and pleads with his cousin, "I'm sorry, but I can't get worked up about preserving a totally watered down version of something that wasn't even true to begin with." Liam and Daphna's dispute over the *chai* symbolizes, on one level, the struggle between the secular and the religious over the future of Jewish life. On another level, though, the play hits a nerve for Jewish audiences (the *Forward* asked in a headline, "Is the play *Bad Jews* bad for the Jews?") because it captures the internal conflict taking place within individual Jewish souls. The bitter, hectoring, but sometimes eloquent Daphna stands in for the inner voice that Jews often glibly label as

“guilt,” which Liam can match with equally valid counterarguments, but cannot defeat. The result is a paralyzing stalemate (although one might find it puzzling that the other cousin in the room does not simply propose the obvious solution of cutting the chai in half down the middle).

The rancorous clash of *Bad Jews* illustrates a paradox: the emotional burden of carrying on Judaism in the modern world both attracts and repulses. Even as more and more Jews abandon their ancestral traditions, the relevance of Jewishness to contemporary politics only continues to grow; contemporary Jews are both Liam and Daphna at once. How can this be? Through what means have modern middle-class people continued to sustain their connection to the Jewish people and to the cause of Judaism even as they lose faith in inherited teachings?

In order to better understand how modern Jews have threaded the needle, maintaining a version of Jewishness while living as assimilated Westerners, we must turn once more to *Bronx Express*. In particular, the scene of the shabbos dinner at the Hungerstolts’s home presages the strategies that have enabled Jews to avoid confronting the hard choices of class and assimilation. Two hangers-on (schnorrers, in the proper Yiddish) show up for the festive meal: the rebbe, Smarozhanski, who taught Harry in the old country; and Moyshe, the shy young sweetheart of Harry’s daughter, Reyzl. If the brash and greedy Jakob Flyamkes stands in for the play’s Ghost of Jewish Present, these two dinner guests represent the past and the future. The old rebbe sees the world through the eyes of a traditional European Jew—erudite and deeply curious about the world, but at the same time fiercely tribal. He asks Harry’s young son, Yosele, to read him headlines from the English newspapers, and he chews over reports of earthquakes, foreign coups, and local budget disputes, asking after each one, “Is it good for the Jews?” When Harry’s son translates an item about the royal family of Siam being expelled from their palace, the rebbe comments gloomily, “if they kick out a king it’s bad for the Jews.” “And if they don’t?” the boy asks, to which the rebbe replies, “It’s worse.” The old-world Jewish sense of dark irony reflects centuries of accommodation to life in exile at the mercy of the gentile world.

The rebbe’s opposite appears in the person of the sensitive, idealistic young scholar, Moyshe, who is trying to work up the courage to propose to Harry’s daughter. Moyshe is clever and ambitious but also

cripplingly timid—as Harry remarks, “he’d make good speeches if he could only open his mouth.” He is also a Zionist. Written just two years after the Balfour Declaration, *Bronx Express* reflects a moment when the hope of a Jewish state still appeared as one of a series of quixotic and utopian ideas capturing the imaginations of young Jews: “Nowadays is a new generation,” Harry explains to Jakob, “crazy with love, suffragism, Zionism, psychologism.” Politically, Zionism presented less of a geopolitical force than an internal challenge to Jewish tradition and its system of accommodations to life under gentile rule. Rather than waiting for a divinely appointed messiah to redeem them from exile, Zionists urged Jews to seize control of their own destinies. They reviled the stereotype of the weak, passive Jew, fatalistically resigned to endless suffering, and strove instead to imitate the ambition, courage, and masculine prowess of their gentile counterparts. The present-day archetype of the strong, sexy Israeli “sabra” is largely a product of the Zionists’ intentional effort to transform the Jewish self-image.

Mumbling and fumbling, Moyshe falls so desperately short of the Zionist ideal of the new Jewish man—he doesn’t even have the nerve to look the woman that he loves in the face when she tries to flirt with him—that it is hard to avoid the suspicion that he has taken up the Zionist mantle to compensate for his inadequacy. The character may represent a simple satire of the Zionism of the time, pointing out the movement’s roots in Jewish self-loathing and insecurity. Still, the fact that Osip Dymov chose to satirize Zionism specifically, among the multiple new movements roiling Jewish life in 1919, suggests that he sensed the importance of the Zionist project to the play’s dilemmas of class, wealth, and assimilation in America. Although Moyshe’s weakness contrasts with the tenacity of the old rebbe, nonetheless both dinner guests agree in their indifference to class solidarity: “What do I care about class? What do I care about consciousness? It isn’t good for the Jews,” the rebbe insists in a confrontation with Harry, and Moyshe tacitly agrees.

While Zionists presented their movement as the uncompromising self-assertion of young Jews, it was noncommittal with regard to the clash between capital and labor. Nationalist movements tend to subsume class struggle into the cause of ethno-national liberation, and Zionism is no exception. Zionist groups in the early 1900s adopted a wide range of social ideologies, but they typically separated Jewish

liberation from that of the working class in general; even the most left-wing viewed socialism as a template for a classless Jewish state, not as an agenda for an interreligious workers' movement. Hence, when in *Bronx Express* Jakob asks Harry Hungershtolts if he is a Zionist, he responds, "I'm a socialist," reflecting the implicit distinction between the two camps.

In the years between the two world wars, despite the opposition of traditional clergy, American Zionism grew and developed as Jews became more assimilated. Since Judaism is not a credal faith in the mold of Christianity, but a collection of laws, customs, and teachings, it is normal to feel anxiety about one's Jewishness, and Zionism provided a non-socialist answer, remedying Jewish insecurity not only about their perceived powerlessness and emasculation, but also increasingly about their weakening attachment to the Jewish collective. (Incidentally, the most impactful leader of Zionism in America, Louis Brandeis, was a secular, assimilated Jew who celebrated Christmas and never joined a synagogue.) In 1937, despite opposition from traditionalist voices, the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted an explicitly pro-Zionist platform.

Although it may not have seemed so at the time, the creation of the state of Israel in 1947–48 turned out to be a profound watershed in the assimilation of American Jews. Most Jews were by this time fervently attached to the United States, which had defeated the Nazis with the help of Jewish soldiers and sailors. (Leftist playwright Tony Kushner recalls his Louisiana family ending Passover seders during his childhood with "America the Beautiful.") When Israel emerged from partition and war, key Jewish organizations such as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations distanced themselves from the new state, hoping to avoid suspicions of dual loyalties. Nonetheless, in the late 1950s and '60s, at the same time that American Jews broke through university quotas and other obstacles blocking their entry into the American middle class, more of them rallied around Israel. Growing Zionist organizations such as Hadassah became clichés of mid-century middle-class sensibilities, while the novel *Exodus* became the country's greatest bestseller since *Gone with the Wind*. Zionism moved to the center of American Judaism perhaps because it offered Jews emancipation, not only from the rule of the gentile, but from a sense of weakness rooted both in their old-world persecution and in their background in the working class. The fictional Ari Ben Canaan,

the tall, blue-eyed, kibbutz-raised hero of *Exodus*, presented a new Jewish persona, liberated from the Judaism of the ghettos in both the Old World and the New. Through their support for Israel, Jews could have their cake and eat it too, affirming their Jewishness while indulging in the fruits of American wealth and power. According to sociologist Nathan Glazer, by the 1960s, Holocaust remembrance and support for Israel had become the twin pillars of American Jewish identity, even to the exclusion of traditional observance. (It is not surprising that Daphna in *Bad Jews* boasts of her time spent in the Holy Land and of her sabra IDF-soldier boyfriend.)

The Jewish organizations that shied away from embracing Israel in 1948 failed to perceive that Zionism and attachment to Israel could not only coexist with American patriotism, but could actually flourish hand-in-hand with the ideology of the American middle class. Born out of a war triggered by a UN mandate and quickly recognized by the Truman administration, Israel could appear as the first fruits of the emerging liberal international order as envisioned by Wilson and Roosevelt, confirming America's benevolent world hegemony. Jewish statehood was, in the view of mid-century Zionists, merely an expression of the principle of self-determination propounded by the victors of the world wars. Postwar internationalism was rooted, in turn, in the sensibilities and assumptions of American middle-class liberals, which cast each citizen as a self-supporting autonomous individual, free to choose his own life path, albeit within set boundaries that separate him from his fellows. Projected onto the scale of peoples, liberalism presented the world as a jigsaw map, neatly divided into discrete sovereign nation-states, each free to govern itself within its boundaries as long as it respects those of its neighbors. And just as the liberal state acts as the enforcer of barriers between individual persons' spheres of action, so the United States would enforce and guarantee the liberal world order. In order to fit Zionism into this scheme, Jews had to be reimagined not as the chosen bearers of a sacred messianic mission, nor as a socially marginal tribe tied to the working class, but as an ethno-national group like any other, seeking its rational self-interest.

What is more, the creation of Israel could appear as a providential echo of the American founding, with both nations serving as fulfillments of the Biblical commandments to take possession of the Promised Land. The analogy between Americans and Israelites was of

course not new, dating at least to John Winthrop's imagining of the new Puritan colony as a "city upon a hill," even before his ship had landed in Massachusetts Bay. The scholar Amy Kaplan chose the title of her recent book on the U.S.-Israel alliance, *Our American Israel*, not from an AIPAC press release, but from an eighteenth-century New England sermon celebrating the Revolution. The prophetic analogy between the two countries enables Americans to celebrate themselves indirectly as they celebrate the success of Israel.

In 1967, Israel's victory against great odds in the Six Day War, which paved the way for the country's capture of the West Bank, confirmed Israel's prophesied role as the site of the Jews' redemption from their former weakness and emasculation. Endorsement of the Zionist cause became almost unanimous among both American Jewish groups and the U.S. political class. Universities, once largely off-limits to Jews, now became a major site of the shaping of young Jews' mentalities, and by the end of the century, nearly every large campus featured a Hillel house hosting gatherings under banners reading, "wherever we stand, we stand with Israel." The slogan emphasized not only the transnational but also the bipartisan reach of Zionism, even while Jews themselves grew divided over Israel policy. The majority liberal-Democratic camp was composed mainly of the white-collar middle class and favored negotiated settlements with the Palestinians and Israel's neighbors. The minority conservative camp, in contrast, was composed mainly of business interests and lawyers who applied a zero-sum logic to the Holy Land. But American politicians of both parties learned to mouth the same set of pro-Israel catchphrases.

The post-1967 Zionist message has always been rather contradictory, presenting Israel on the one hand as a safe haven for Jews and, on the other, as a tiny, embattled foothold surrounded by enemies and at constant risk of annihilation. Still, the two faces of Israel form an emotionally coherent picture—that of, in Amy Kaplan's words, "the invincible victim"—that gratifies the common human desire for tribal solidarity. Yet as Kaplan further points out in *Our American Israel*, the country could also fall victim to its own success, especially as its triumph came at the height of the global trend toward decolonization. The prolonged occupation of the captured territories and the growing settlement movement undermined Israel's image as an embattled underdog, and critics began to take advantage of the contradiction

between the liberal internationalist ideology that had originally legitimized Israel and the country's indefinite occupation of conquered lands; the anti-war and anti-colonial movements in Europe and America saw a gradual infiltration of anti-Israel dissent.

### A FRAYING CONSENSUS

As anyone who has followed the news over the past five years surely knows, debates in the West over Israel, the occupation, and anti-Semitism have metastasized into a constant, consuming public battle. Millions of dollars from the Israeli government and from both Jewish and Christian Zionist groups flood the media and colleges, the bimahs and altars with propaganda aimed at shoring up support for Israel. At the same time, a small but growing opposition movement, represented by new Jewish organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now, calls for boycotts of the country, likening Israel to Apartheid South Africa. In response, the Israeli state issues its own rounds of travel bans and blacklists against participants in the boycott movement.

The United States has a long history of bitter internal conflicts over how it should relate to foreign nations, from the failed invasion of Canada in 1812 to the occupation of the Philippines at the turn of the century to the attempts to reverse the Cuban Revolution in the 1960s. Additionally, rancorous disputes among Jews about ethics and politics are nothing new (“two Jews, three opinions,” the clichéd saying goes). Still, the seemingly unending blow-up about Israel in the West has several remarkable features: first, the debate has drawn in not only Jews, but also gentiles in the media and the general public, at many points engulfing public debate in both the United States and Britain; it has expanded beyond the matter of proper policy towards Israel to encompass questions of anti-Semitism, Jewish loyalty, and Jewish identity; and it has hinged to a great degree upon supposed hidden or coded meanings imputed to political utterances.

All of these remarkable features of the current conflicts reflect the fact that more is at stake than Israel policy or even the current rise in anti-Semitic hate crimes. In my view, the controversy stems not so much from fear for the safety of Jews as from fear for the safety of modern Jewishness—in other words, anxiety at the growing disillusionment with the liberal world order and the doubtful future of the modern Western Jewish identity that has been shaped to fit within it.

The modern Jewish identity has been yoked to the liberal middle-class view of the world and the two, it seems, will stand or fall together. As displeasure mounts over the tight concentration of wealth and of social power, and the legitimacy of various elites comes under attack, Jewish angst intensifies. Populist attacks on powerful white-collar industries such as finance, the media, and academia evoke existential fear, and are countered with accusations of anti-Semitism—accusations often rooted less in fact than in deep self-doubt (even self-loathing) that the accusers project onto others.

Through the years, Jews have often been used as proxies for one or another social class. In the 1920s, big employers used Jews as stand-ins for militant labor, which they wished to undercut by curtailing Jewish immigration. In the 1950s, anti-Semites restricted neighborhoods, schools, and businesses, regarding Jews as embodiments of the vulgar, new-money lower-middle class. And of course, for ages, crude populists have attacked Jews as stand-ins for elite financiers. American Jews since the 1930s, however, have consciously cultivated an image as respectable members of the professional middle class. Hence, when the white-collar industries and the new upper strata of the modern West come under attack, their defenders can deflect those threats as veiled attacks on Jews.

Still, the intensity and the acrimony of the recent controversies can only be understood in light of the Jews' own anxiety over their place in the contemporary world. Public accusations of anti-Semitism began to appear in mass media several years before Trump or Charlottesville were anywhere on the scene, and stemmed instead from fear of opposition to wealthy elites. For example, in October 2011, as the Occupy Wall Street movement began to inspire protests beyond New York, the *Washington Post's* Jennifer Rubin published a column alleging, based on third-hand hearsay and purported quotes from unnamed marchers, that the Occupy movement was anti-Semitic. Despite reports from several Jewish journalists who had actually visited the park encampment and saw no sign of anti-Semitism, but instead a group of Jews celebrating the festival of Sukkot in a *sukkah* (ritual hut), the column fueled several weeks of media furor, even drawing in the *New York Times*. The accusation of Jew-hatred continued to hover around the Occupy movement for the remainder of its life, and as late as April 2012, the Anti-Defamation League released



a report entitled, “Incidents of Anti-Semitism Continue to Mark Occupy Movement,” again using a handful of unsourced quotations.

The dust-up over the supposed anti-Semitism of the Occupy movement was a sign of things to come. For instance, over the past year, French commentators such as Bernard-Henri Levy have similarly characterized the Yellow Vest protests in France as anti-Semitic. While one might see in these controversies a cynical attempt to “exploit” the charge of anti-Semitism for political gain, they reflect a deep insecurity and inner conflict over the place of Jews in the contemporary West. Ironically, the critics that accuse the protest movements of anti-Semitism themselves rely on certain long-standing anti-Semitic assumptions, including the notion that Wall Street and international finance are Jewish domains, and they often attribute anti-Semitism to precisely the same sort of left-wing populist rhetoric that used to be Jews’ own stock in trade.

These ironies are not accidental: they reflect the sense of self-doubt stemming from the tensions of being an assimilated Jew in an unequal society. These psychological forces can be seen at work most dramatically in contemporary Britain. In 2015, a traditional “hard Left” socialist, Jeremy Corbyn, won a surprise victory in the British Labour Party’s leadership contest. Critics, including many more conservative MPs of his own party, proceeded to lambast Corbyn for his socialist views, for his opposition to nuclear weapons, and for his long history of sympathy for Irish Republicanism. Labour MPs twice tried to oust Corbyn but were overruled by voters. In 2016, though, Corbyn’s critics alighted on a new controversy: because Corbyn was a long-time sympathizer with the Palestinian liberation movement, his rise to leadership inspired an influx into the party of opponents of Israel, some of whom expressed vicious anti-Semitic views thinly veiled as criticism of “Zionists.” Corbyn and his inner circle moved slowly and cautiously to combat the problem, apparently wary of gagging long-stifled criticism of the Israeli state. Despite surveys showing that, overall, anti-Semitic views are more rare among Labour members than among other British parties and have diminished since Corbyn took up leadership, his political opponents seized upon the crisis. Unfriendly press and politicians trolled through Corbyn’s thousands of speeches, letters, and online posts in search of any statement, on Israel or any other topic, that could conceivably be construed as anti-Semitic.

The long hunt for Corbyn's supposed anti-Semitism yielded weak results, with critics imputing veiled anti-Semitic subtexts to several statements, some of which made no reference at all to Jews, Israel, or Zionism. Revealingly, in 2018, Corbyn released a video criticizing the finance industry, tweeting, "Ten years ago today the financial crash began. The people who caused it now call me a threat. They're right. Labour is a threat to a damaging and failed system rigged for the few." In response, Stephen Pollard, the editor of Britain's *Jewish Chronicle*, commented, "Been hesitating to tweet this because I keep thinking it can't be, surely it can't be. But the more I think about it, the more it seems it really is. This is 'nudge, nudge, you know who I'm talking about don't you?' And yes I do. It's appalling." When many observers rejected Pollard's insinuation, he clarified, "I accept all the criticism of this tweet, and that I may be way off beam. But this is what happens when antisemitism is allowed to flourish—and when an antisemite leads a party. You start to read his every word through that prism. Even if the words aren't about Jews." Whether or not Pollard was sincere in his suspicions, his comments illustrate the perfect circularity of the controversy over Corbyn and similar figures: statements that would previously be taken as acceptable, and that often do not even relate to Jews, are held to be anti-Semitic, because the person uttering them is already judged to be an anti-Semite on the basis of those same statements.

The Corbyn fracas is driven in part by Jewish Britons' anxieties over their own changing class status. As many affluent Jews turn away from the Left, abandoning the loyalties and commitments of their forebears, the accompanying sense of guilt cannot be acknowledged, but instead projected onto vague, shadowy anti-Jewish forces. For proof that Corbyn inflamed and encouraged anti-Semitism, the leader's critics often pointed to the exodus of Jews out of the Labour Party, purportedly the "natural political home" of Jewish Britons. Yet that exodus was already complete before Corbyn ever ran for leader. Britain's small Jewish community (numbering around three hundred thousand) strongly favored Labour in the postwar period, but already by the 1970s many were flirting with the Liberal and Conservative camps. Many Jewish voters joined the centrist Social Democratic Party that split from Labour in 1981, while Margaret Thatcher, whose home constituency of Finchley had the largest Jewish community of any in Britain, attracted increasingly affluent Jews to her message of

hard work and accountability. (One prominent Jewish journalist later penned a book titled *Margaret Thatcher: The Honorary Jew*.) By the end of the century, a large portion of Jews had left Labour and those who remained mostly favored the anti-socialist “New Labour” program of Tony Blair. Ironically, the remaining Jewish bloc in Labour was finally decimated under the leadership of Ed Milliband, Jeremy Corbyn’s predecessor, who was himself Jewish, but who moved the party platform somewhat to the left and who condemned Israel’s tactics in the 2014 war in Gaza. By the time Corbyn replaced Milliband, Jewish support for Labour was in the teens, where it has remained since.

Painting Corbyn and his supporters with a broad brush of anti-Semitism thus serves to obscure the uncomfortable class and economic causes for British Jews’ political reversal. Regardless of whether one considers Corbyn himself to be an anti-Semite, imputations of hidden anti-Semitic intent serve to deflect or suppress feelings of guilt and self-reproach at adopting views and habits that would be unrecognizable to one’s own grandparents. In 2018, Dave Rich, a leader of the British-Jewish organization Community Security Trust expressed consternation regarding the current Labour Party’s hostility toward “capitalists” and the faceless moneyed “elite,” asking “can you have all that and not have anti-Semitism in there somewhere?” It is nearly impossible to think that Rich does not realize that such terms are precisely the language that Jews of previous generations habitually used.

Just as Britain’s small but long-established Jewish community has been somewhat ahead of American Jews in moving to the political Right, so British politics led the way in erupting with charges of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, year by year, the Corbyn treatment is increasingly applied to Americans, particularly on the growing left wing of the Democratic Party. In September, 2018, the New York State Democratic Committee sent out a mailer attacking one of their own candidates, falsely accusing her of supporting the Israel boycott movement and of opposing public funding for yeshivas (Orthodox Jewish schools), warning, “With anti-Semitism and bigotry on the rise, we can’t take a chance.” Naturally, the mailer did not note that its target, Cynthia Nixon, belongs to a synagogue and has two Jewish children. While the controversy over the New York mailer was confined to the local press, American national media turned their atten-

tion to the controversy over Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, who, like Corbyn, was accused of anti-Semitism on the basis not of any substantive actions or explicit views, but of purported anti-Semitic “tropes” or “connotations” that one must read into her utterances. As Omar herself complained early in 2019, before she appeared in headlines, current accusations of anti-Semitism are unfalsifiable: “It’s almost as if every single time we say something, regardless of what it is we say . . . our advocacy about ending oppression, or the freeing of every human life and wanting dignity, we get to be labeled something, and that’s the end of the discussion.” Ironically, later in that same town hall, Omar expressed frustration at the political pressure she felt to support Israel without according equal sympathy to Palestinians, remarks which Rahm Emanuel quickly condemned in *The Atlantic* as invoking “ugly tropes about Jews.” This past December, some conservative American outlets even began to accuse Bernie Sanders of anti-Semitism, despite the fact that the senator himself is Jewish.

On the one hand, the fact that the current conflicts about Israel and anti-Semitism contain little substantive policy debate and instead focus on the divination of “dangerous” meanings hidden, like the secret messages in Beatles albums, within otherwise normal statements, should not be surprising considering the contemporary liberal obsession with purity of speech. The observance of strict boundaries of polite speech has long served as a marker of upper- and middle-class respectability; in the new century, with the loosening of old norms regarding gender, sex, and race, the enforcement of speech taboos becomes ever more critical to maintaining the boundaries of the respectable classes, while conveniently obscuring matters of wealth and brute military power. Nonetheless, the speech taboos shaping the current Jewish controversies are remarkably vague and expansive, covering utterances relating to the entire range of Jewish life, whether connected to Israel or not.

No other political topic matches Judaism and Israel in provoking internal emotional conflict, which must then be externalized or deflected. While the imputation of anti-Semitism is easy to deploy against gentiles, any Jew who criticizes Israeli policies, let alone who rejects Zionism altogether, is accustomed to being called a “self-hating Jew.” (Amazingly, Rahm Emanuel complained about the Israeli government calling him a “self-hating Jew” in the very same *Atlantic* article in which he accused Ilhan Omar of anti-Semitism.) This

rhetorical strategy provides another clear example of projection, with defenders of the Zionist project externalizing their own inner conflict. In the often bitter campus debates among Jews themselves, the imputation of self-hatred was applied to critics of Israel for decades before it emerged in the mass media in 2019; it first became a common accusation (one might say a “trope”) with regard to non-Zionist Jews beginning in 1930, with the publication of Theodor Lessing’s book, *Jewish Self-Hatred*. Brilliant and deeply humane, Lessing was also tormented by self-loathing. Born to a wealthy, assimilated, and severely unhappy German family, he only learned that he was Jewish from taunting by anti-Semitic schoolmates. As an adult, he converted to Christianity before finally embracing his Jewishness and Zionism; he went on to write screeds denigrating the weakness, greed, and deformity of Jews in the diaspora.

Irrespective of the validity of Lessing’s arguments, his story illustrates that diagnosing purported self-hatred in others is first and foremost a comment on oneself. Therefore, it is not sufficient merely to say that some Jews are “crying wolf” with their accusations of anti-Semitism, nor is it necessary to impute “cynical” or “bad-faith” motives; rather, the crisis is an expression of internal angst. Jewish organizations that reject Zionism or call for boycotts of Israel represent a small minority of the Jewish population, and the panic and anger that they evoke from fellow Jews shows that their mere existence, however small, is in and of itself a threat to their self-understanding. Organized Judaism that refuses to identify with Israel undermines the idea that Jewishness and Zionism are intrinsically linked, and hence leaves the modern Jewish identity unmoored and adrift.

For several generations, pro-Israel identification has served as an ideological fig leaf, covering over the deep and unresolved tension between Judaism and modern life. Liberal individualism is inimical both to working-class solidarity and to Jewish tradition, undermining the social bonds that once shaped Jewish clans and neighborhoods. Connection to Israel has allowed many Jews to square the circle, acting out a modern Jewish identity while enjoying the rewards of assimilation and moving away from the working class—or even adopting positions inimical to its interests. To separate Zionism and Judaism, even on the conceptual plane, is to raise the uncomfortable question of what one’s Jewish identity would consist in absent the

connection to the state of Israel. (Even Daphna, the fervent Jeremiah of *Bad Jews*, cannot seem to describe a Jewish life without reference to the Israeli state.) This question, in turn, evokes doubts as to whether, like Harry Hungershtolts, one has sold one's soul, giving up a deeper and more demanding way of being Jewish in favor of material rewards.

For many or even most Jews, the thought that Jewishness may entail material sacrifices or commitments that conflict with modern middle-class norms is deeply uncomfortable. In the third act of *Bronx Express*, we see Harry Hungershtolts perusing the Atlantic City boardwalk with his new wife, trying and failing to enjoy his fortune. "Believe it or not," he confides to Jakob as they order lunch at an upscale restaurant, "since I've been a millionaire, food doesn't taste good to me." When Jakob suggests that he order stewed prunes like his Jewish wife, Sara, makes, he refuses: "you can only eat stewed prunes with a clean spirit. And my spirit is soiled." Harry is tormented by guilt and by phantoms of his old family and friends: "from everywhere, even out of the ground, memories creep out like shadows and follow me around. The rebbe, the bashful bridegroom, Reyzele, Yosele. . . . They're pushing me into the crazy house—into the last stage of Americanization." Is modern Jewry experiencing its own last stage of Americanization, haunted by the phantoms and associations of a world it has left behind? Harry Hungershtolts's dream finally turns fully into a nightmare when he orders his wife's gefilte fish; angry gentiles deduce that he has a hidden Jewish family, condemn him as a bigamist, and form a mob around him; he pleads with the mob to allow him to return to the Bronx, as the Pluto Mineral Water Devil puts a rope around his neck.

The current crisis of the Jewish soul reflects much of the guilt and fear that Dymov captures in the terrifying climax of his play. Nor is it going away soon, as the social and political edifice in which modern Jews have so long placed their confidence begins to crumble. The American-Israeli alliance, once a bipartisan sacred cow, has increasingly become a partisan tinderbox, supported not by a strong consensus of Jews but by a strategic alliance of conservative Jews and right-wing evangelicals. What is more, the acrimonious debate about Israel is inseparable from the embattled state of the Western liberal order in general. On the global level, eroding support for Israel reflects a disillusionment, spurred on by disasters like the Iraq invasion and the

financial crash, with the United States and Britain as global stewards. Meanwhile, the concentration of wealth steadily saps social cohesion and confidence within the Western democracies, with the proletarianized middle class (many Jews among them) leading the way towards a new, respectable radicalism. The Occupy movement, the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, the emergence of Israel boycotts and of new left-wing Jewish groups, the expansion of the Democratic Socialists of America and the election of many of its members to political office—all of these developments are signs of collapsing faith in the postwar liberal order. With the decline of the liberal middle class, the age-old fear, expressed in *Bad Jews* just as in *Bronx Express*, of being the last generation of Jews, of finally failing to pass on the legacy of thousands of years and hence of dissolving into an Esperanto world, only intensifies. This crisis, and its roots in changing class dynamics, must be faced in earnest. Hand-wringing and allusions to Jewish guilt will not do.

### A RETURN TO RADICALISM?

A new division among Jews has emerged, conditioned by wealth and generation. The people behind the high windows and their allies often attack the new dissident movements or their leaders as anti-Semitic not because they threaten Jews in a substantive sense, but because they threaten the ideological ground in which the modern Jewish identity is rooted. We have come full circle from a century ago: socialism is no longer a Jewish conspiracy, but an anti-Semitic plot. The bitterness with which some commentators lash out reflects their fear of being forced to choose between being Jewish and being successful and assimilated Westerners—between their ancestral identity and their class respectability.

Meanwhile, as the economic underpinnings of the twentieth-century middle class collapse for the younger generation, a new Jewish radicalism struggles to be born. Vivian Gornick's *The Romance of American Communism* captures the sense of high purpose and importance that the Party offered to otherwise obscure working-class New Yorkers in the 1940s; perhaps their grandchildren, seeing the doors to prestigious careers closed to them in an environment of inequality and precarity, find a similar appeal in today's leftist revival. Among the new politicians that have emerged on the American left-wing scene is the chameleon-like Julia Salazar, who in 2018 defeated

the incumbent state senator representing the rapidly gentrifying northern end of Brooklyn. Salazar describes herself as an anti-Zionist, Jewish, working-class, socialist immigrant. During her campaign, several articles in *Tablet* sparked a small firestorm by pointing out that the life narrative by virtue of which she lays claim to all of the above identities is dubious. Regardless of the precise facts of her biography, though, Salazar's success and popularity reflect a longing, especially among the young, downwardly mobile middle class, for a new Jewish persona.

It may be tempting for many to merely try to revive the left-wing Jewish ethos of more than a century ago, and references to Marx, the Bund, and other Jewish radicals of the Gilded Age abound in the literature of the new Jewish Left (the British leftist organization Jewdas uses a photo of Emma Goldman for its Twitter profile). These allusions, though, tend to have an air of camp, and while looking to the age of Yiddish radicalism can surely help to respond to the present crisis, it is not sufficient. Jewish life must be reformed again if it is to survive the coming upheavals.

The relationship between traditional Jewish life and left-wing politics was never clearly articulated, much less developed into a coherent philosophy or way of life; this is surely a major reason why the appeal of wealth and assimilation broke the link between them. Harry Hungershtolts refused to grapple with the tension between his love of Judaism and his socialist politics, and the younger generation moved towards Zionism as a resolution; today, the older generation of Jews refuse to face the tensions between their liberal humanism and their Zionism, but the answer does not lie in merely disavowing Zionism and reverting to the contradictions of Harry's world. The dialectic must continue in search of a fuller, stronger Jewish life for the world to come.

Beyond anti-Zionism and invocations of the old Jewish Left, then, a new Judaism must cultivate practices to connect Jews, both religious and secular, to the past, to one another, and to gentiles, embracing the best of modern life while rejecting its materialism, its atomism, and its superficiality. American Jews, in particular, must avoid the appealing trap of viewing America as a mere neutral ground, a blank canvas defined by liberal political principles, rather than as a society shaped by traditions, shared bonds, and commitments, of which Jewish life forms an important strand. Can such bonds and commitments take



the place of the connection to Israel? In order to survive, will the new Judaism have to revive the old sense of messianic mission, of Jews as a specially chosen light to the nations? Would such a Judaism have any meaning to the rapidly growing number of secular or non-believing Jews? These questions and the task of sustaining and reforming Jewish life must be taken up by new generations, guided, one hopes, by a deep love of humankind as well as of our sacred traditions.

In the final scene of *Bronx Express*, the subway conductor awakens Harry from his slumber just as the train pulls into its final station at 180th Street. His escapade in marketing and his marriage to the Murad Cigarettes girl, it seems, were merely a dream. His son and daughter, together with Moyshe and the old rebbe, enter the subway car, carrying a bouquet of flowers that they have gathered in the park. "Today makes twenty-five years you've worked at the shop," Reyzl explains, handing him the flowers. Moyshe even points out the notice that he prepared in the Yiddish newspaper to mark his "jubilee."

Harry is naturally moved, but the wistful reunion is accompanied by an ominous note: Harry's children have taken shelter in the subway because in the park they were caught in a frightening storm. "There was lightning and thunder," Yosele warns. Why did Osip Dymov make reference to the storm in the play's final scene? Could it represent the looming dangers, the labor and political unrest troubling the minds of workers and immigrants, as the United States reacted to the World War and the Russian Revolution? Or perhaps could it allude the centuries-old Jewish tradition foretelling the coming of the messiah amid storm clouds? One century later, should we not brace for our own looming tempests, surrounded by mounting clashes over identity, loyalty, and power, as the Western liberal world awakens from the postwar dream? Regardless of the possible meanings of this troubling omen in the play's final act, Reb Smarozhanski is sanguine: he has seen worse in his time, and he takes heart in a summer storm. "A fine rain," the old teacher assures Harry. "Good for the Jews." <sup>A</sup>